

Tracing the Tensions:  
An Examination of Tillie Olsen's Social  
Philosophies in the Drafts of "Tell Me a Riddle"

Presidential Research Grant Proposal  
Grand Valley State University  
Rachel L. Curtis  
Fall 2013

## Introduction/Background Material

---

Thank you for your time and for your consideration of this research proposal. I am requesting a Presidential Research Grant in the amount of \$1,000 in order to analyze the Tillie Olsen Papers located at Stanford University. Currently, I am writing my M.A. English thesis on Tillie Olsen's "Tell Me a Riddle," which many scholars consider to be her most notable work. I will be presenting some of my foundational ideas at the Jewish American & Holocaust Literature Symposium in November. Additionally, Panthea Reid, Olsen's biographer, has agreed to serve as an outside reader of my thesis. Prior to delineating the value of a research trip to Stanford to my overall project, I will explain why Olsen scholarship remains a relevant, rewarding, and necessary endeavor.

As a highly esteemed American author and activist, Tillie Olsen's social contributions have impacted various movements throughout the twentieth century, including the Feminist and Civil Rights Movements. Olsen lived from 1912 to 2007. In addition to being intensely political, Olsen's literary contribution demonstrates a significant artistic genius. Her texts remain relevant and rewarding, as they poignantly explore human nature and the complexity of life for various underrepresented people groups.

Despite the relevancy of her subject matter and the artistry of her form and language, Olsen's texts have not received adequate scholarly attention. In addition to the small amount of critical material on Olsen, the quality of the material remains contested for various reasons. Scholarship to this point has largely idealized Olsen, as many Olsen scholars are ardent devotees who neglect various aspects and contradictions in her life and philosophy. As a consequence, critical responses often disregard contradictions rather than provide divergent explanations for their presence. Additionally, up until shortly before her death in 2007, Olsen had been active in the formation of much of the scholarly criticism on her own texts and life. For instance, Deborah Rosenfelt actually allowed Olsen to comment and approve her article, "From the Thirties: Tillie Olsen and the Radical Tradition," which appears to be considered by many to be a seminal work on Olsen. Such scholarship – where the author in question is intimately tied to the major scholarly output – is inevitably lacking in objectivity.

Several authors have noted the need for further scholarship. Mara Faulkner, in her book *Protest and Possibility in the Work of Tillie Olsen*, references the disparities between Olsen's philosophies, texts, and actions; however, Faulkner excuses herself from furthering the debate. Myles Weber in *Consuming Silences: How to Read Writer Who Don't Publish* notes the need for scholarly attention to be paid to these blatant contradictions. He presents an argument that rails against Olsen devotees who have not objectively approached Olsen and her work; however, he does not draw further implications. He merely states that such work must be done. Consequently, further Olsen scholarship is needed for a multiplicity of reasons, rendering this an intensely fruitful area to presently conduct research.

My desire to visit the Tillie Olsen Papers stems largely from the fact that much of the present scholarship omits reference to various aspects of Olsen's life and work. Many of the articles rely on Olsen's own testimonials regarding her past – a past which through recollections and interviews she has consistently altered to suit her purposes, rendering much of that information questionable in regard to its accuracy. Given scholars' glorification of Olsen, much of her published reminiscences have not been questioned until recently. Panthea Reid's biography introduces a much more nuanced portrait of Olsen's life; however, Reid has synthesized and summarized relevant life experiences, not provided commentary or specifically delineated the support for many of her claims. Furthermore, Reid's text fulfills her purposes, and although I intend to draw from much of her material, her text does not adequately address the questions specific to my project. Original research seems a necessary step in attaining the material necessary to critically evaluate Olsen's life and "Tell Me a Riddle" and to subsequently build a credible, accurate argument.

"Tell Me a Riddle" is an intricate piece of literature, which allows a nuanced glimpse into the lives of an aging woman, Eva, and her husband, David. Stifled by years of motherhood amidst an exploitative patriarchal society, Eva refuses to relinquish her home – her private, personal sphere –

despite David's demands that they move to a retirement home. Eva's actions starkly contrast the many years in which her needs and desires have been superseded by the needs and desires of family. When David learns that Eva has terminal cancer, he urges her to undertake cross-country visits to their children – visits that too often awaken old hurts rather than provide joy. These trips become indicative of external pressures that have consistently forced Eva toward serving family to her own detriment. For Eva, once a political activist and orator in early twentieth-century Russia, the circumstances of American motherhood have seemingly eradicated all remaining remnants of her previous self. However, Eva's journey toward death brings opportunity for expression of dormant beliefs – beliefs that have been repressed but not relinquished. Eva retains a radical vision of collective humanity despite the social atrocities of the twentieth century. Her delirious, near-death mumblings include recitation of book passages, questionings regarding the horror of human brutality, and reminiscences on the demands of motherhood and financial hardship. These mumblings unveil her inner reality – a reality that testifies to both her distortion by – yet defiance of – oppression. While the text is poignant in its social critique, it achieves a level of artistry and aesthetic beauty that propels it above the status of a mere political statement, rendering it a multifaceted piece of American literature deserving of ongoing critical examination.

In my thesis, I intend to explore activism, artistry, and motherhood as they pertain to communal responsibility and individual fulfillment by examining Eva as a construction through which Olsen investigates the circumstances and results of the patriarchal nuclear family and, consequently, exonerates her own controversial treatment of family. Instead of examining "Tell Me a Riddle" through the context of Olsen's work (which seems to be the way most critics have approached the text in order to assuage various contradictions within the corpus of Olsen's work), I intend to read this story through the context of her life and to demonstrate the various ways in which Eva emerges as Olsen's foil. My provisional thesis statement is as follows: "By reading 'Tell Me a Riddle' against the text of Olsen's life, it becomes apparent that although external circumstances thwart humanity from full potential, the journey to self-realization demands the removal of both external and internal constraints. As an activist, Olsen understood communal responsibility and the need for social change; however, the furthering of her work requires that attention also be given to the need for individualistic introspection and the active hierarchizing of the various components of one's self."

## Specific Research Questions/Hypotheses

My main research question is listed below along with an explanation regarding its significance:

1. In what ways did Olsen's original vision of "Tell Me a Riddle" evolve in regards to its strong patriarchal critique?

Olsen is notorious for her many changes to texts. She has confessed to perfectionism, making her marked-up documents excellent repositories of information regarding her evolving intentions. None of my extensive research to date has referenced Olsen's changes to the developing manuscript of "Tell Me a Riddle." Given the lack of scholarly attention to many aspects of Olsen's work, this in no way implies that the developments are not notable and revelatory. Olsen has claimed that "Tell Me a Riddle" is a tribute to her mother and that Eva, the main character, is inspired by her mother. However, I am arguing that the text becomes largely a social critique, as it strays in very notable ways from biographical details about Olsen's mother. In several instances, Olsen adapted something actually experienced by her parents, recasting the situation in a more adverse light and presenting a negative ending in stark contradiction to the resolution experienced by her parents in their own situation. I will be specifically looking for ways that Olsen adapts and modifies originally benign details in order to present a more extreme picture of patriarchal oppression.

If time permits, I intend to gather data pertaining to the following research questions as well:

2. Through select correspondence and interviews, how does Olsen present her actions and philosophy during 1932-39 (the years directly following the birth of her first child, Karla), 1940-45 (the years in which her husband was deployed for service in World War II), 1946-1950 (the years typically construed as Olsen's most extreme foray into traditional motherhood and domestic activity)?

Although many sources cite these years as times when Olsen engaged in traditional domestic activity, other sources provide oblique references to intensely political activities. Crucial to my argument is determining to what extent Olsen has retrospectively falsified accounts of these time periods. My analysis of these years does not need to be exhaustive; rather, I hope to find contextualized, concrete evidence of political activity, which will be more useful than the random allusions scattered throughout various scholarly articles. The incredibility of the articles themselves calls into question the credibility of the poorly articulated references, making the use of them even more problematic.

3. How does Olsen's personal commentary, select miscellaneous writings, and personal journals reflect the tension between various expressions of selfhood and the tension between collective and individual interests?

While this information would be essential to my argument, I have no way of anticipating the amount of relevant material I may uncover. I intend to allot some time to pursue proof of these tensions; however, given my time and financial constraints, I will not be able to undergo an exhaustive study. Since these tensions are widely present in most of Olsen's writing, I remain hopeful that they will continue through much of her unpublished and personal material.

## Methodology/Design/Data Collection/Data Analysis

In an effort to efficiently gather data pertaining to the above research questions, I intend to:

### **Day 1 (approximately three hours)**

1. Examine Box 1, Folders 5-8 of the Tillie Olsen Papers (TOP). These folders contain the typescript, originals, and revisions of "Tell Me a Riddle." *This data pertains to Research Question 1 (outlined above).*
  - a. As I have a limited amount of time, I first intend to survey the quantity of documents and to determine which documents deserve priority, adjusting my pace and timeline as seems necessary. Reproductions via digital camera are allowed by appointment only, so I intend to keep a running list of documents that warrant further analysis and to then create digital reproductions on days two and three.
  - b. My research is primarily a qualitative analysis of documents; however, as described below, I will attempt to document some objective information. This attempt at acquiring quantitative data has a level of inherent subjectivity that cannot be avoided.
    - i. Quantitative: I will note each change that affects the overall patriarchal critique by 1) recording the page number and 2) assigning a numeric value (1-3) as to the significance of the alteration on the overall tone and message of the text. (Note: Given the subjectivity inherent in my numbering system, I intend to record at least two examples of each numeric level for illustrative purposes.)
    - ii. Qualitative: This will consist of making a record of the most prominent changes. I will organize each excerpt according to keyword and provide a few sentences describing the importance of the passage and how I intend to use it in my paper.

2. Summarize the day's work, adding notation of the characteristics of the data sample, such as the amount and relevancy of the analyzed documents.

**Day 2 (approximately seven hours)**

1. Complete any unfinished work from the previous day.
3. Examine Box 2, Folders 9-11 of the TOP. These folders contain the makings, corrections, and proof of "Tell Me a Riddle." *This data pertains to Research Question 1 (outlined above).*
  - a. Survey the amount of material and formulate a manageable timeline.
  - b. Continue my pattern established in the previous day:
    - i. Quantitative: I will note each change that affects the overall patriarchal critique by 1) recording the page number and 2) assigning a numeric value (1-3) as to the significance of the alteration on the overall tone and message of the text. (Note: Given the subjectivity inherent in my numbering system, I intend to record at least two examples of each numeric level for illustrative purposes.)
    - ii. Qualitative: This will consist of making a record of the most prominent changes. I will organize each excerpt according to keyword and provide a few sentences describing the importance of the passage and how I intend to use it in my paper.
4. Examine Box 12, Folders 6-7, which contains transcripts of conversations with Olsen regarding *Silences*, a collection of essays. *This data pertains to Research Question 3 (outlined above).*
  - c. Survey the amount of material and formulate a manageable timeline.
  - d. Add specific documents/pages to reproduction list or take notes if relevant material is minimal.
    - i. Organize each excerpt according to keyword.
    - ii. Provide a few sentences describing the importance of the passage and how I intend to use it in my paper.
5. If time permits, examine Box 16, Folder 22, which contains Olsen's writings from 1956-57, a time considered her withdrawal period. *This data pertains loosely to Research Question 1 (outlined above) since these few years precede the publication of "Tell Me a Riddle." The available description of this material is vague, which means that its usefulness is difficult to approximate.*
  - a. Survey the amount of material, determine relevancy, and formulate a manageable timeline.
  - b. Add specific documents/pages to reproduction list or take notes if relevant material is minimal.
    - i. Organize each excerpt according to keyword.
    - ii. Provide a few sentences describing the importance of the passage and how I intend to use it in my paper.
6. If time permits, examine Box 4, Folders 1-3, which contain initial reviews of "Tell Me a Riddle." *This data pertains loosely to Research Question 1 (outlined above) because information on the text's initial reception reveals how it was historically interpreted and the extent to which critics acknowledged the text's patriarchal critique. Given that the text was published prior to Olsen's more positive reflections on motherhood, it seems likely that these reviews will recognize the critique more strongly than readers of subsequent years.*
  - a. Survey the amount of material and formulate a manageable timeline.
  - b. Add specific documents/pages to reproduction or take notes if relevant material is minimal.
    - i. Organize each excerpt according to keyword.

- ii. Provide a few sentences describing the importance of the passage and how I intend to use it in my paper.
7. Create digital reproductions of selected material.
8. Summarize the day's work, adding notation of the characteristics of the data sample, such as the amount and relevancy of the analyzed documents.

**Day 3 (approximately five to seven hours)**

1. Examine Box 16, Folder 34, which contains some of Olsen's miscellaneous writings, including her commentary on the qualities of a writer. *This data pertains to Research Question 3.*
  - a. Survey the amount of material and formulate a manageable timeline.
  - b. Add specific documents/pages to reproduction or take notes if relevant material is minimal.
    - i. Organize each excerpt according to keyword.
    - ii. Provide a few sentences describing the importance of the passage and how I intend to use it in my paper.
2. Examine Box 17, which contains Olsen's journals and notebooks from 1930-1960. *This data pertains to Research Questions 2 and 3.*
  - a. Survey the amount of material and formulate a manageable timeline.
  - b. Add specific documents/pages to reproduction or take notes if relevant material is minimal.
    - i. Organize each excerpt according to keyword.
    - ii. Provide a few sentences describing the importance of the passage and how I intend to use it in my paper.
3. Examine Box 19, Folders 1-9, 18, and 20, which contains Olsen's personal correspondence from 1930-1950. *This data pertains to Research Questions 2 and 3.*
  - a. Survey the amount of material and formulate a manageable timeline.
  - b. Add specific documents/pages to reproduction or take notes if relevant material is minimal.
    - i. Organize each excerpt according to keyword.
    - ii. Provide a few sentences describing the importance of the passage and how I intend to use it in my paper.
4. Create digital reproductions of selected material.
5. Summarize the day's work, adding notation of the characteristics of the data sample, such as the amount and relevancy of the analyzed documents.

**Upon Return**

1. Complete a second analysis of the collected data, re-organizing and/or cross-listing by keyword as necessary.
2. Write a one- to two-page synthesis of the data, noting any new or lingering questions.
3. Re-examine my original descriptors of passages and potentially re-write portions (while retaining a copy of my original notations).

4. Compile relevant data, original and/or re-written descriptions, and accompanying citations within my current archive of material to be included in my thesis.

## Plans for Dissemination of Information

---

The information collected will be included in my M.A. thesis. As all of the areas I intend to research directly pertain to my thesis topic, this information will greatly enhance my final document by adding a greater level of specificity, nuance, and authority than could be achieved through the material currently available outside of the collection.

I also intend to pursue possibilities for dissemination of my findings through a conference presentation or a published article. I plan to propose a paper for the American Literature Association's Annual Conference, which will be held May 22-25, 2014. None of the scholarship I have encountered thus far has referenced the original manuscripts or subsequent changes, so potential for publication seems high. As Olsen did liberally edit her texts, I am certain the available data is prolific. The many changes no doubt reflect Olsen's philosophies and intent, rendering the changes concrete examples of her evolving ideologies and priorities.

## Project Timeline

---

In preparation, I have contacted Stanford's Special Collections Department to confirm the availability of my intended dates and the necessary steps to ensure access to the materials. Below is a concise overview of my basic schedule (which is enumerated in more detail under the section heading "Methodology/Design/Data Collection/Data Analysis"):

### Monday, January 6

- Leave Grand Rapids at approximately 6:00 a.m.
- Estimated arrival (to vary according to flight availability): 12:00 p.m. (PST)
- Estimated arrival at Stanford's Special Collections and University Archives: 2:00 p.m. Work will continue until archive closes at 5:00 p.m.
- Evening summarizing of gathered material and preparation for subsequent day should take approximately one to two hours.

### Tuesday, January 7

- Estimated arrival at Stanford's Special Collections and University Archives: 10:00 a.m. (archive opens at this time). Work will continue until the archive closes at 5:00 p.m.
- Evening summarizing of gathered material and preparation for subsequent day should take approximately one to two hours.

### Wednesday, January 8

- Estimated arrival at Stanford's Special Collections and University Archives: 10:00 a.m. (archive opens at this time). Work will continue until approximately 3-5:00 p.m. depending on flight schedule.
- Summarizing of gathered material will be postponed until the following day.
- Desired return time to Grand Rapids is between 5-8:00 p.m., but will vary depending on flight availability.

## Budget

---

It is my understanding that all expenses in excess of the requested \$1,000 will be my own personal responsibility. As there is no cost associated with my actual research (digital reproductions are free if fulfilled by the researcher), below is a breakdown of my estimated travel expenses for January 6-8, 2014:

Flight (Grand Rapids to San Francisco).....	\$475.00
Hotel (Jan. 6 and Jan. 7).....	\$350.00
Rental car .....	\$200.00
Meals	
Monday .....	\$31.00
Tuesday.....	\$39.00
Wednesday.....	\$39.00
Total .....	\$1,134.00



11 October 2013

I write to endorse Rachel Curtis's application for a Presidential Research Grant. The research she proposes on Tillie Olsen is significant, her need to consult the manuscripts at Stanford University compelling, and her plan both feasible and thoughtful. Most of all, I know from my many dealings with Rachel—as graduate director, as her instructor, and as her thesis advisor—that she has the ability to execute this project in a manner that will bring great benefit to her work and credit to the University.

The original M.A. in English was originally envisioned as a resource for middle and high school teachers. That audience is still important for us, but now represents less than a third of our enrollment. During the past five years a number of our M.A. graduates have decided to pursue doctorates. While we can provide the advantages of small classes and strong teacher-scholars, we lack the resource that is essential to graduate study in the humanities—a major research library. The digital age has reduced the gap between Grand Valley and larger institutions in regards to books and journals, and our new library is indeed a stunning space, but our thesis-writing students lack access to significant manuscript collections.

Rachel's work on Tillie Olsen began in a graduate seminar I taught last winter. Her work in the final paper was so interesting that I not only agreed to direct her thesis, but urged her to submit a preliminary version to an important conference in Florida on Jewish American literature, where I am happy to report she will be presenting next month. Additionally, Rachel contacted the author of the most important biography of Olsen, who has agreed to serve as an outside member on her thesis committee.

All of these factors speak to the quality of their work, but the chance to do research with the Tillie Olsen collection will allow her to take her thesis to the next level, be it as an article or the beginning of an eventual doctoral dissertation. And such work will perhaps open doors for her at the kind of research institutions that offer PhDs in the humanities.

Many years ago a distinguished professor at Princeton told me that in literary studies some folks, the ones with access to major archives, "held the cards," while others were forced only to make guesses. One reason I support this proposal with great enthusiasm is that it may pave the way for Rachel to gain a seat at the table. Traveling cross-country to spend a few intense days in an archive is expensive, but I believe the funds will be wise investment by Grand Valley in this student's bright future.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Robert Franciosi'.

Robert Franciosi  
Professor of English & Director of  
the M.A. Program