

Family Politics and the Great Depression: The Traditional Family Model as a Reproduction of Capitalist Exploitation in Tillie Olsen's *Yonnondio: From the Thirties*

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Abstract

In this paper, Tillie Olsen's use of representation of the family in Yonnondio: From the Thirties is explored. Olsen's text suggests that the traditional family model is a middle-class dream, challenging the assertion, often touted by conservative social organizations, that the family is a moral unit, and generator of economic and cultural capital. Instead, Olsen asserts that the traditional family model is restrictive, confining women to the domestic realm and limiting the economic and educational opportunity of working-class people who attempt to adhere to the family model American ideology values so highly.

In the modern cultural imaginary, the traditional family is regularly regarded as a moral institution. Politicians consistently cite their devotion to "family-values" as a pillar of their campaigns in order to incite trust in potential voters, while both federal and state governments grant tax deductions to married people. These deductions grow even larger should a couple choose to have children, thus fulfilling the purported purpose of heterosexual marriage. Organizations committed to preserving the traditional family structure speak out against gay marriage, abortion, and (to a lesser degree) pre-marital sex and conception out of wedlock, claiming that these practices pose a threat to the sanctity of the traditional family. On its website, one such organization, the Family Research Council, defines a traditional family as a biological father and mother, "who are committed to one another in a lifelong marriage," raising children. The Family Research Council not only cites the moral importance of the traditional family, but suggests that the preservation of the traditional family structure is a significant economic issue, stating that, "the family is the great generator, and the intact family is the greatest generator of human capital (knowledge, attitudes, skills and habits of the individual), and much of the financial savings and capital as well." Another similar organization, Focus on the Family, cites Dr. Brad Wilcox on its website. On a Focus on the Family webpage, Wilcox asserts that "the long-term fortunes of the modern economy rise and fall with the family." These definitions explicitly link the traditional family to morality and economic growth, suggesting that traditional marriage and childrearing are key to escaping poverty and creating economic well-being on a grand scale.

While the narrative of family economics is largely surrounded by claims of morality, theoretical work, such as Engels's *Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State*, suggests that the formation of the traditional family is not rooted in nature, morality, or even personal wealth. Engels suggests instead that the traditional family is exploitative and essential to the development of capitalist-patriarchy. Building on the groundwork laid by Engels, Marx, and Feminist scholars like Maria Mies, Sylvia Federici reexamines the shift from feudalism to capitalism, suggesting that capital accumulation originally depended on the subordination of several groups including colonial subjects, slaves, and, most importantly for Federici, women. Federici asserts that the development of capitalist society relied on the subordination of women to their husbands, the removal of women from professional life, and the establishment of patriarchal social institutions, including the patriarchal traditional family. For Federici, the rise of capitalism resulted in women's loss of ownership of their labor power, which was ceded to their husbands, often through excessive physical violence. In *Yonnondio: From the Thirties*, Tillie Olsen explores the relationships between labor power, gender, and capital in a traditional working-class family, the Holbrook's, who struggle to survive the difficult economic conditions of the years leading up to the Great Depression. Olsen's narrative exposes the exploitation of the capitalist workplace, reproducing this exploitation in the traditional family model. Olsen

suggests that the traditional family model is a middle-class dream, challenging the assertion still touted by conservative social organizations, that the family is a moral unit, and generator of economic and cultural capital. Instead, Olsen asserts that the traditional family model is restrictive, confining women to the domestic realm and limiting the economic and educational opportunity of working-class people who attempt to adhere to the model American ideology values so highly.

Critics have often read *Yonnondio: From the Thirties* as a radical text decrying class inequality, a feminist text that attempts to expose the oppression of women in a patriarchal society, and an ideological work that mirrors the work of theorists forecasting cultural reform within a vague and unfinished timeline. While it effectively functions in all of the ways suggested by these critics, it also realistically portrays the workings of capitalist-patriarchal ideology through a close examination of the capitalist-patriarchal traditional family, detailing the existing sexual division of labor, and exposing the pervasive nature of the capitalist mode of production and the capitalist workplace hierarchy, both of which clearly define the domestic relationships of Olsen's characters. Through the close examination of the struggles and failures of a family that strictly adheres to the family model touted by capitalist ideology as the ideal societal, moral, and economic unit, Olsen displays the deep flaws that exist within the traditional family model which ultimately acts as a representative of capitalist-patriarchal society in the text. While the Holbrooks are very clearly intended to be sympathetic characters and victims of circumstance that the reader supports and relates to, they are not particularly nice people. Jim, the family patriarch, is a heavy drinker, always more likely to beat his kids and wife than to play with them or to show them affection, while Anna, the matriarch, does not at all fit the image of the Freudian nurturer. She takes as many swings at her children as Jim does and the beatings do not occur without consequence, as they leave the children feeling distanced from and even scared of their parents throughout the novel. The children live in such fear of their parents that, at one point in the story, "Will, waking, saw how his father sat so still and terrible. Still in his sleep, he began to whimper—'Don't hit me, Poppa, don't. I didn't mean nothing'" (Olsen 21). This unconscious expression of the fear of a beating from his father is not only a display of the acute emotional damage that Will's life within a traditional family structure has caused, but also helps to illustrate the hierarchy of power that exists within the traditional family, which so closely mirrors the hierarchy of power that is faced by the worker, and, to a greater degree (as some theorists have suggested) the wife in a capitalist-patriarchal society.

The mirroring of the capitalist-patriarchal power distribution in the traditional family model is constantly made explicit in the domestic relationships of Olsen's characters. Elizabeth Jameson comments on the trickle-down of the capitalist ideology and power distribution into the traditional family structure in *Yonnondio: From the Thirties*, stating that "women and children depended on the alienated labor of men, who came home and took out their own frustrations by hitting their wives, who hit the kids" (142). As Jameson suggests, the beatings served up by Jim and Anna are evidence of the pervasive nature of the capitalist distribution of power within the traditional family structure. However, the frustration and beatings are only side effects of a much more significant problem, namely, the exploitative nature of capitalist production and the fact that the traditional family is the basis of the capitalist production model. In her 1986 feminist manifesto, *Patriarchy and Accumulation on a World Scale: Women in the International Division of Labour*, Maria Mies deals heavily with the power distribution that makes capital accumulation possible. In an effort to make clear the relationship of patriarchal family power to state and capitalist power, Mies chronicles the observations of Rosa Luxemburg, writing:

Luxemburg had tried to use Marx's analysis of the process of extended reproduction of capital or capital accumulation (Marx, *Capital*, Vol. II) for the analysis of imperialism or colonialism. She had come to the conclusion that Marx's model of accumulation was based on the assumption that capitalism

was a closed system where there were only wage labourers and capitalists. Rosa Luxemburg showed that historically such a system never existed, that capitalism had always needed what she called 'non-capitalist milieux and strata' for the extension of labour force, resources and above all the extension of markets. (34)

While Luxemburg's comments regarding the necessity of a "non-capitalist milieux and strata" to the process of capital accumulation are in reference to the importance of colonies to capital production, Mies turns her attention to the family, suggesting that the work and production of the housewife is similar to the work and production of the colonial slave referred to by Luxemburg. While Jameson acknowledges the alienation and exploitation of Jim and attributes his bad parental behavior to this direct exploitation, her suggestion that Anna's frustration stems from Jim's alienation and consequential beatings is not fully developed. Jameson ignores the exploitation suffered directly by Anna, a member of the "non-capitalist milieux," who must not only suffer this exploitation as she works to produce a clean living environment, future labor power, meals, and a restful place where Jim can recharge for his next day of work, but must also do this work knowing that she will not earn a wage. The terrible expectations and exploitation that Anna endures under the direction of Jim, the family patriarch, colonizer, and contractor become clear as Jim attempts to constantly direct Anna's work, harshly criticizes her productivity, and forcefully colonizes her body through a violent rape, during which he responds to her protests and cries of pain with the declaration, "Can't screw my own wife. Expect me to go to a whore? Hold still" (Olsen 108). This exclamation clearly implies Jim's sexual ownership of Anna's body and his ownership of her labor power as he suggests that sexual labor is part of her duty to him and, should she not perform her duty, he will simply take his business elsewhere and "go to a whore."

Olsen pointedly establishes commonalities between Jim's treatment of Anna and the horrific conditions Jim must endure on the job, and, while the feminist intentions of Olsen's text are clear, the novel is clearly concerned with the oppressive nature of all work and the gendered expectations that define the role of each member of the Holbrook family. While the rape of Anna by her husband resonates deeply when considered in the context of recent focus on rape culture and the problem of men who feel entitled to sexual ownership of women due to their position in patriarchal society, Olsen's rape scene also echoes earlier scenes detailing Jim's workplace oppression in order to condemn the mechanics of capitalist patriarchy and its systemic exploitation. Rather than suggest that Jim's violence is merely the result of individual indiscretion, Olsen aims to expose a system of violent oppression that deeply affects each member of the Holbrook family. In an interaction between Jim, some of his coworkers, and the contractor who supervises the men as they work in the sewers, the contractor issues a threat of disposal similar to the threat uttered by Jim before the rape of his wife. "There's plenty of good concrete men and muckers with their tongues hanging out for a job," the contractor says when the men protest his demand that two men do the work of three, "You'll make ten or you're out" (Olsen 87). Just as Jim suggests the possibility of replacing Anna with a whore should she fail to meet his demands, the contractor threatens to find a new source of labor if his current employees cannot meet his. The connection between the literal rape suffered by Anna and the figurative rape suffered by Jim at the hands of the contractor becomes more explicit as Olsen uses a portion of the text to expose the naivety of Jim's young coworker Jim Tracy, who quits after hearing the absurd demand of the contractor. Olsen portrays Jim Tracy as a man who does not understand the system and his position within it, stating that Tracy "threw it [his job] up, not yet knowing a job was God, and praying wasn't enough, you had to live for It, produce for It, prostrate yourself, take anything from It" (Olsen 89). The expectation that Jim will prostrate himself, submit to the job and "take anything from it" suggests that his relationship to his job is dramatically similar to Anna's relationship to him, as both characters must bend to the will of the person or corporation that provides them with sustenance or suffer hunger and shame. Olsen shows that Anna's suffering of physical violence at the hands of her husband, while disturbing and unfair, is not unprecedented. Both she and Jim suffer similar-

ly as a result of the exploitative expectations of American Capitalist ideology. Interestingly, when examining these two events as the display of a similar (though disproportionate) oppression, it becomes clear that the capitalist-patriarchal system works here exactly as intended by creating a system of exploitation that pervades every aspect of working class life. Before Jim's assertion of patriarchal power through his rape of Anna, he walks home, "singing out his great crude singing...so that the little Negro boy, Jeff, on the corner, waking smiled and hummed softly to himself, and heard a humming in his head like a thousand telegraph wires, a thousand messages of sound that would blend into music—singing his wide crude singing (I hear America singing, the varied carols I hear)" (Olsen 107). The ominously joyous singing of Jim is echoed by another man, and, figuratively by thousands of other men, by America itself as he confidently moves toward his home where he will commit his horrible act of oppressive violence which affirms his power in the position as the boss of his family. This pervasive, echoing, strange excitement suggests that American patriarchal ideology is on Jim's side as he prepares to carry out his powerful and disgusting act of sexual violence against his wife, his slave, his employee.

Sexual submission is of course not the only job Anna is expected to perform and Olsen (as Mies does much later) recognizes that "female productivity is the precondition for male productivity" (Mies 58). In her role as wife and mother, Anna is not only the producer of life and future labor power through the process of sexual reproduction, but the producer of life and labor power in her role as an unpaid homemaker and caretaker to Jim and her children. Anna is expected to prepare dinner, keep a clean house, and raise her children so that Jim can focus exclusively on being a wage earner, and when she fails to do this work, she is the victim of tongue-lashings and abuse from her husband, who blames her for the family's struggles, saying, "No wonder I never got anywhere. No wonder nothing ever comes out right. Lots of help I get from my woman...No wonder we're starvin. Look at the woman I got (sic)" (Olsen 58-59). While Jim attempts to define Anna as a bad woman through his perception of her failures and shortcomings, which are colored by capitalist-patriarchal expectations, Anna continuously asserts the importance of her work and begins to define herself through it, turning to work during times of sickness when she has been ordered to remain on bed rest, and insisting upon the necessity of her continuing domestic labor through a resistance to her husband's almost ironic protests. In one instance of Jim's protestation against Anna's work, Anna acts in a surprisingly revolutionary manner, clenching her teeth and fists as Jim approaches with the gentle suggestion that she should not be up working in the yard, and fiercely responding to his request that she "set up and tell us how to fix supper so it'll taste better," as "the kids'll be waitin," saying, "Maybe they'll be waiting for supper someday and there'll be none to give. You ever think of that? We're puttin in a garden like you promised and never done, that's what I'm doin up. And I'm startin launderin work again if I can get it...go on in yourself (sic)" (Olsen 129). Anna refuses to return to the house to supervise her husband and children as they complete her work, demanding instead that she be allowed to remain in the yard supervising Will as he completes a manual task that Anna says Jim has failed to complete. Anna thinks ahead to a time when supper will not be available, suggests that Jim's failure to produce by making an area for the garden will someday impede her productivity, and asserts that she will begin to take on the domestic work of others in order to become a wage earner. Rather than simply reversing the roles of she and her husband or exposing to him that he could not do his work without her, Anna places herself in a position above Jim, supervising the completion of a task that was to be Jim's job while continuing to do her own, suggesting that she cannot be successful without adequate help from him and that if he does not provide that help, she will make a living, perform domestic work, and cultivate and colonize land on her own.

The gendered labor that helps to define the traditional family model and acts as an extension of the capitalist production model is enormously relevant when considering the relationship of Jim and Anna, and clearly more significant when considering both Jim and Anna's individual relationship to labor. Yet, gendered labor and the effect of labor on familial relationships is most poignant when examining the relationship of Anna's children, Most

importantly Mazie, who leads much of Olsen's text, to work. Mazie is defined by work to an extent that the other Holbrook children are not, and work heavily influences the way Mazie analyzes and understands her relationship to her family, particularly to her brother and her mother. As has been correctly suggested by Elaine Orr, Olsen's use of Anna and Mazie as the text's major voices allows for the exposure of female and maternal exploitation in a comprehensive way, as "Olsen writes near the mother. She hears and requires the reader to hear from the daughter's close positioning; thus, readers are 'touched' by the sounds of the mother's pain mediated by the daughter's thinking" (Orr 213). The closeness of Mazie to Anna is, at times, similar to an uncanny doubling, as the two characters fluidly exchange roles, perform each other's duties, and consider each other's feelings as they would their own. This is displayed as Anna disappears from her role as mother while Mazie and her siblings accompany her on a walk through an affluent Omaha neighborhood. When Anna begins to dreamily weave chains from the stems of dandelions and loudly pop a paper bag full of her own breath, Mazie recognizes her mother's childish behavior. Rather than rejoicing in Anna's unusual playfulness as her brother's do, Mazie dutifully and automatically assumes the work of mothering, protecting Anna as Ben, gripping Anna's skirt, exposes her thigh when another woman emerges from her home. "'Just keep your face to yourself, lady,' Mazie muttered furiously in her head. 'Old crummy Nicey Nice. Ben!' she ordered in her mother's voice, 'don't drag on Momma, walk straight. *Ma, this isn't the way*'" (142) Olsen writes. Mazie channels "her mother's voice" to command the cooperation of her siblings and Anna, and to right their behavior, but more importantly, provides Anna with an opportunity to briefly leave behind her own responsibility to her children. While Mazie clearly feels it is her responsibility to act as a substitute mother, her response to other work that she is expected to do suggests that Mazie takes on her familial responsibility begrudgingly. Mazie questions why she must help her mother in the kitchen while her brother Will is allowed to go out to play and receives from her mother the simple answer, "Will's a boy" (Olsen 177). Following Anna's statement, an argument ensues and Mazie runs away escaping the work her mother tries to push on her. Reflecting on this argument, Anna recognizes the stress Mazie is feeling and does not pursue her as she flees the house. Mazie's fleeing of responsibility and Anna's willingness to forgive her flight are clear indications that the two recognize that, as a girl, Mazie faces a disproportionate burden. She is expected to complete household chores while her brother is allowed to stay out and play and she is expected to take on responsibilities that her male siblings are never expected to take on.

While Mazie and Anna do seem to recognize (on some level) the unfairness of capitalist-patriarchal ideology and gender expectations, there is still a sense of the rigidity and inescapability of these expectations and the capitalist-patriarchal ideology. Mazie clearly identifies not only the unfairness of gendered expectations in the example provided above, but also the unfairness of the inevitability of her eventual fate as a woman in her questioning of her mother during their argument, "Why couldn't I get borned a boy?" (Olsen 177). The desire for maleness that is expressed by Mazie has been read by Melody Graulich, who applies her theory to the female children of several pieces of literature of the western family, as a sort of cathartic identification, saying that the girls of traditional families "are drawn to the male world not so much because it is attractive as because they see their mothers' worlds as so limited and constricted, because they do not want to grow up to be women" (18). As Mazie matures, it is clear that her world becomes more like the limited and constricted world of her mother. During the Holbrook's Fourth of July celebration, Mazie is not allowed firecrackers despite the fact that the boys have been tormenting she, Ben, and her friend Annamae with them throughout the day and is told by Anna, "make yourself useful. I could stand a little helper" (Olsen 152), again being asked to work while her brother is free to play. Mazie not only loses play to the gendered expectations of work that are inherent to the traditional family model, but to expectations about her maturing body. In an attempt to defend themselves against the heat of an overwhelmingly hot summer, Mazie, Will, and other neighborhood boys take to the streets, jumping onto the backs of ice trucks to obtain pieces of ice to cool themselves with. Olsen writes:

Mazie is not long among them. Once a chant starts up:
 Girl go to London, go to France
 Everybody sees your pants.
 Girl shimmy shimmy shimmy shimmyhigh
 Everybody sees your pie.

and after that shame and self consciousness make her body awkward.
 Twice she misses, almost goes under the wheels. No more for her that
 lithe joy, that sense of power. (156-7)

Here, Olsen illustrates that play, joy, and power are part of the male realm and that, as Mazie's body matures and she becomes a woman, her access to these things will be more and more restricted. Ultimately, as Graulich suggests, Mazie identifies the association of feelings that she loves with maleness, and is left feeling estranged, shouting, "I don't *have* no place" (Olsen 178) in reference to the fact that she literally has no place to put her material possessions where they will be safe from theft by her brothers or the constant cleaning performed by her mother, which results in their disposal. The exclamation resonates more deeply on an emotional level, though, as Mazie feels herself being robbed of her freedom by the sexist expectations about what is appropriate behavior for a girl her age, and by the pressure from her mother to perform chores, which force her to occupy a place in society that is essentially "no place." According to social standards, she is too young to be a wife and mother, but too mature to carelessly jump onto ice trucks with her friends as she desires.

Gendered work becomes an enormous focus when considering the function of the family in *Yonnondio: From the Thirties* because of the modern conservative definition of the traditional family model as a "great generator" of economic capital; however, the conservative conception of the traditional family also potently casts it as a generator of cultural capital (i.e. knowledge, attitudes, skills, and habits) or as, essentially, the greatest educator of American children. This function of the mythical traditional family is certainly not ignored in Olsen's text, as Olsen makes it clear that the Holbrook children are gaining knowledge almost wholly through the experience of being raised by poverty-stricken, working-class parents, while suggesting through Anna's constant concern with the children's schooling, that an education based solely on life experience is inadequate and will result in the children having an adult life that is simply a reflection of the difficult life their parents lead. Education is a persistent theme that first appears very early in the text, and it is consistently linked to the development of more wealth and a higher cultural and economic status. In an early scene, the ever-inquisitive Mazie follows her father as he heads into town for a night of drinking, drilling him with questions about what makes the Holbrooks' life the way it is, saying, "Pop, mamma says I'm gonna get an edjication, and my hands white. Is that a story, Pop? (sic)" (Olsen 13) to which Jim replies, "'Sure you are. You'll go to college and read books and marry a—'... 'a doctor. And,' he finished, 'eat on white tablecloths'" (Olsen 13). Despite the fact that Jim does not believe in formal education, he reinforces the suggestion of Anna that Mazie and her other children will use education as an escape from their life of poverty. On several occasions Anna touts the importance of education, telling Mazie when she brings home a failure report from the school, "You bring another one and I'll beat you to a pulp... Don't you know learnin's the only hope a body's got in this world" (Olsen 96), then saying to Jim, "I aim to see any kids we have happy, Jim, not like we were brought up. Happy and with learnin'" (Olsen 96). The importance with which Anna regards formal education directly contradicts the idea that the family is the generator of cultural capital, as Anna suggests that, in order for her children to escape poverty, they will have to go outside of the home to develop habits, skills, and knowledge that will differ from the habits, skills, and knowledge that their parents will be able to hand down to them.

While it is clear that Anna recognizes, at least on some level, that the family life of her children can only teach them to adhere to the gendered expectations of work and to the family structure that has essentially trapped the Holbrook's in poverty, the possibility of the Holbrook children acquiring an adequate formal education appears ever more fleeting due to the way

they are viewed by other members of their society. The low opinion that people of the higher classes carry for members of the working-class is disturbingly stated by the doctor who visits the Holbrooks after Anna's miscarriage. In an aside that represents the thoughts of the doctor as he completes his examination, Olsen writes, "(Damn fools, they ought to sterilize the whole lot of them after the second kid.)...These animals never notice but when they're hungry or want a drink or a woman" (110). In an examination of the doctor's statements concerning the Holbrook's, Helge Nilsen suggests that his low opinion stems from an ideology of individualism which places undue responsibility on members of the working-class. Nilsen writes, "The ideology of individualism and free enterprise prevents solidarity between classes and creates fear and contempt instead. Thus, when the doctor visits the Holbrooks...He regards them as inferior creatures, holding them solely responsible for their suffering without ever considering the role played by external circumstances" (84). The assumption that the Holbrooks are to blame for their situation is also displayed in the comments of the Holbrook children's teachers. One teacher experiences "wheezing horror" (Olsen 48) at the discovery that Mazie is eight years old and has not yet learned to read and makes Mazie feel ashamed, despite the fact that reading is simply something she has never been taught to do. Later, the idea that members of the working class are animals (first uttered by the doctor) is echoed in the language of the children's teacher in the city, who puts great emphasis on the children's country background while introducing them to the class, then ignores the fact that Mazie is defending herself when she shoves other children on the playground, saying, "Perhaps you indulged in rough play of this nature where you came from, but we do not permit it here" (Olsen 72). Each of the problems faced by Mazie at school, which create in her the overwhelming sense that she does not belong there, are caused by external circumstances. She cannot read because her parents must constantly work leaving them with no time to teach her and she responds violently because she has been violently tormented. These circumstances are entirely ignored by her teachers, who assume that these things are part of her nature as the daughter of a lower-class worker. Because the structure of her family and the economic demands of supporting a family have forced the Holbrooks into poverty, Mazie is assumed to be incapable of learning or behaving properly and is discouraged from pursuing an education.

While the ideology of individualism mentioned by Nilsen is the source of oppression and struggle for the Holbrook children (due to the prejudice they must face from their teachers) it is also the main source of frustration for the Holbrook parents, not only because of discrimination from members of the upper class, but because it is in direct contradiction to the ideology that defines the traditional family as a great economic generator. The ideology of rugged individualism and the traditional family simply cannot coexist, because, as Jennifer Sherman found in a study of the attitudes of working-class Americans conducted through multiple interviews with members of rural American communities, "the terms 'traditional' and 'family-oriented' refer to three key divisions," one of which is "the prioritization of family stability over individual needs and pursuits" (105). According to these two dominant pieces of American ideology, the family is a key economic unit, and its well being must be valued more highly than individual interests, however, in order to advance from one's current economic condition, one must pull oneself up by the bootstraps and take responsibility for his own economic situation, working hard and prioritizing individual economic stability over all else. The ideology of rugged individualism seems to entirely ignore the fact that American working men with families in the 1920s and 1930s had to not only pull themselves up by the bootstraps, but carry their families with them, as they were the sole wage earners in their households. This oppressive contradiction of ideology is perhaps the only ideological problem explicitly recognized by a member of the Holbrook family throughout Olsen's text, and is expressed as a source of frustration by Jim, who says, "All right for Tracy to talk, all right, he didn't have a wife and kids hanging round his neck like an anchor. All right for him to talk, all right with nothing more important to worry about than getting canned up and steppin out a floosie" (Olsen 89), after witnessing Jim Tracy's resignation. While it is clear that Jim Tracy is not more successful as an individual in the tough economic atmosphere of the years leading up to the depression, Olsen suggests that Jim is not wrong to believe that he is at a disadvantage as a result of the fact

that he must support several children. Olsen demonstrates this by introducing the Bedners, old friends of the Holbrook's who were from the same neighborhood as Jim and Anna and presumably have a similar socio-economic background, but now "lived in a five room house with a piano and a stained glass window" (Olsen 73). By detailing the much more affluent lifestyle of the Bedners and exposing that the biggest difference between the two families is the fact that Alex and Else Bedner "can't even manage to get one [child]," Olsen suggests that supporting children is one of the most oppressive aspects of the traditional family in an economic sense. This idea is particularly important for Olsen, who claimed that one reason she was never able to complete her work on *Yonnondio: From the Thirties* was that she had children before she had finished her writing and was then consumed by the work of being a mother (Herring 82).

Ultimately, Olsen recognizes that the traditional family model serves an ideological function; however, she uses the close examination of the traditionally organized Holbrook family in order to suggest that the ideological function of the family that is advertised in capitalist rhetoric is at best a gross exaggeration and at worst an outright lie. Instead of being a great generator of economic capital for members of the family, Olsen suggests that having a wife and children who rely on the income of one man creates a system in which men must take any job they can find. This makes them slaves to their jobs once they have them and allows large corporations to profit massively while paying their working class employees disturbingly low wages. This system also traps women in positions of essentially slave labor, as they cannot earn a sufficient income and must marry a man, raise his children, and perform housework and sexual labor in order to gain any sort of economic support. Besides the oppressive and exploitative work the traditional family model forces parents to perform, Olsen criticizes the idea that the traditional family model produces cultural capital, suggesting that even working-class parents who are dedicated to education (such as Anna Holbrook) do not have the time or resources necessary to provide the support that is required to ensure that a child receives an adequate education. As a result, the children of the working-class are forced to help their parents work instead of attending school, or are labeled dumb and slow as result of the fact that they have had no education before the first time they are able to enter a classroom. Instead of acting as an apparatus for educating people in moral behavior and a catalyst for class mobility, the traditional family model traps working-class parents in physically demanding, time consuming jobs, and ensures that their children will not receive an adequate education. This creates a system in which a single working-class family unit cannot escape poverty within its lifetime, and will likely be trapped in poverty for several future generations.

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