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"All the world is a-cryen": Gender Hierarchy, Capitalism, and Labor in Yonnondio

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Subject: English/Women's & Gender Studies

Tillie Olsen's *Yonnondio* contains an argument for a woman's role in domestic labor and how patriarchal and capitalist beliefs harm families, both physically and psychologically. Olsen's fictional work attempts to reclaim women's bodies from unpaid, domestic labor. The events depicted in the text criticize how women's roles seem entirely composed of domestic labor; taking care of the children, cooking, cleaning, and satisfying their husband's desires. The text simultaneously shows how capitalism, and the poverty it creates, causes families to behave negatively to one another losing respect for each other because of how the value of money plays a critical role in the lives of the poor. Olsen's depictions of the impoverished family and a woman's role in it shows how, if a woman loses the strength in her body, she may be devalued by her husband because she is not the "same woman" and seems now like a useless object. At the same time, when a man loses his job, he will feel like less of a man because he is not following the society norms of properly taking care of his family. According to Olsen, people value each other based on what work they can do to support themselves and how they are beneficial to society through this work: the physical hard labor for men in the factory and domestic labor for women in the home. *Yonnondio* shows how Anna's and Jim's bodies are being used as objects or commodities for capitalists to extract profit from. It further shows the irony of how a husband and wife might fight constantly, but they both live in similar situations where their bodies and their work satisfy someone else's desires. For instance, men work for their boss in hope of a good income, and women provide free work at home in hope of their husband's support. Therefore, the text demonstrates, through its depiction of an impoverished family's struggles, how patriarchy and economy or co-constitutive and must be dismantled. Through this, we can understand both the gender and class hierarchy through Olsen's critique of capitalist relations in the text.

Historical Background

During the 20th century, in the United States, women were influenced by their environment, where societal norms pushed women to stay home and take care of the household because she is a woman, but this was actually good for capitalism. In "Manufacturing Femininity," Mary Inman says, "To manufacture femininity, about one minute after a baby is born you determine whether it is male or female. After that has been established you are ready to begin, for there are already set up and operating two well-defined sets of rules to guide you" (304). This shows that women, right after birth, are "manufactured" with the position of housewife in mind. Her manufactured role makes her a worker whose job is taking care of her husband so he can keep working and produce more

children, so that there will be more poor workers to work at the factories in the future. Capitalism creates these gender norms and society supports them. They exist for both genders and, where a woman's role is to get married, a man is told he should work hard to support his family, even though he might not get paid enough to reasonably do so. A man's identity is surrounded by "rules which govern him [that] are calculated to bring out and emphasize those traits useful to a petty straw boss and submerge and atrophy those traits which would interfere with the successful pursuit of such a role. To this end also, rules taught to her are calculated to aid him in a successful consummation of his straw boss rules over her" (Inman 305). Inman criticizes how a capitalist society is set up where parents have rules they "must" follow that even influence marriage, where capitalists profit through the birth of their children and the continuation of capitalism. In order for capitalism to continue, there must be free labor inside the home where a woman takes care of her family and continues the reproduction thereof. This system allows capitalism to make greater profits by only paying for the labor of workers outside of the home. Therefore, everyone works to satisfy capitalism through what they can do with their body; men labor outside the home and women do house "work" because this is what capitalism insists a proper family should do, despite the fact that it does not pay enough (or at all) and may lead to people being stuck in unfair jobs or living situations.

According to Michael Staub in *The struggle for "Selfness" through Speech in Olsen's Yonnondio: From the Thirties, in the 1930s to 1970s*, many scholars were writing literature like *Yonnondio* in the hope of raising consciousness in people; to realize the suffering poor, working-class people went through, especially women who may not have the right to express their own concerns at home or in society. Society positioned women as being valued primarily as objects and for what they can give to their husband through doing domestic work at home. Furthermore, women and children were constantly silenced, this could lead to confusion where a female's "speechlessness resulted in her identity confusion," or an inability to understand their own identity and their existence in society as a woman (132). This is why Staub believes that the only way people can change society's beliefs, so that poor women and others can have a better life, is by creating forms where all individuals can write their own stories and share them publicly, so that it can be read and discussed. Doing so would then lead to society valuing these women as people equally to men. Staub looks at how society has been set up through capitalist patriarchy and how it affected people by describing how, "Mazie's speechlessness results in her identity confusion. Life of Mazie meant the power of pushing 'her mind hard against things half known, not known' (p. 12), and she struggles with her limited comprehension of the world around her" (132). According to Staub, Olsen uses this young child, who is in the process of being manufactured into her role of being a woman meant to create more profit for capitalism as a housewife. The text uses this innocent girl as a symbol of people who are stuck and "confused" under capitalism, not knowing what to do to live happily and without being treated poorly.

In *Yonnondio*, Olsen describes both women and men's roles under patriarchal capitalism by showing how people of both gender are valued for what value they can give to each other through their work. Because of capitalism, it became natural for people to ask each other what they do for a living and, based on the response, treat and value individuals differently. The domestic example of this appears in Olsen and shows how

women had less value than men, even though her domestic labor should be valued. In the text, the husband, Jim, says, "No wonder I never got anywhere. No wonder nothing ever comes right. Lots of help I got from my woman." Anna replies saying, "You get plenty. Kitchen help, farm help, milkin' help, washwoman help. And motherin' too," to which Jim angrily asks, "Who asked for your goddam brats?" (58). The text shows that Jim, being a man, has social authority over his wife, and he demands that she do her job and satisfy his desires because she is his "woman," as if she is an object that belongs to him and is valuable only for what work she can give as a woman. Furthermore, Anna explains back to her husband that she helps him by doing all the house duties and even giving birth to and taking care of the children. She never says, however, that it's her duty to do so, but that she helps him, which links back to the idea of a "proper" partnership between husband and wife where they help each other. Lastly, as a man, Jim does not want to admit that he is partially to blame for her role in giving birth, instead continuing to be bossy at home to his wife blaming her for everything and claiming he "never asked" for children. Olsen shows that, in her text, Jim feels too much pressure from his work and the way it treats him negatively, and this affects him mentally to mistreat Anna. According to the "Code of a Class," Inman says "The vast majority of the male population, made up of working-and middle-class men, have not and can never have, under the present economic arrangement, the means to maintain a family household and support as many persons as this plan involves" (313). During this time period, men felt under attack by capitalism because no matter how hard they worked, they were mistreated and "can never have" enough salary to support their family. This is why, as a man, Jim may feel guilty for not fulfilling the "duty" of supporting his family, yet he still tries to follow the social beliefs of needing a family and having authority over them, preventing his anger by treating them badly.

Anna's domestic work contrasts with how Jim's industrial work mistreats people, making it so it's impossible for laborers to survive after leaving a job because having a job is the only thing that helps them live under capitalism. For example, Jim says, "I'm a man, and I'm not taking crap off anybody. I'm going to live like a man. There's more to life than working everything you got to live with outa you in order to keep a job." The narrator continues, "Yet knowing a job was straw and every man (having nothing to sell but his labor power) was the drowning man who had no choice but hang onto it for not-so-dear life" (89). The text shows that having and keeping a job is not easy and that a man should hold on to the "straw" tightly because, for poor men like Jim, all they have to provide to capitalism is their body, because they don't own a product that they can sell. This is all they can sell to get profit: their body and its "labor power." Jim mentions that he wants to quit because working there keeps him from "living like a man" would do, but he knows that he must hold on to his job, otherwise he will "drown" from not having any income to survive. Furthermore, Jim tries to argue that his gendered role as a man means he should be free to refuse being oppressed. Despite his gendered claim, capitalism places him into a similarly disempowered role as Anna, where they both must satisfy other people in order to receive financial support and survival.

According to Olsen, there is a domino effect in poverty where, because of their daily struggles to survive, pain passes on from family member to member, causing them to mistreat each other and act like there is an "evil spirit" among them. While Anna and

her family is struggling and starving, everyone gets psychologically affected. Jim's job mistreats him, so he is "dead drunk" constantly and in an "evil mood" according to Anna, saying he "struck Anna too often" (9). This shows how Anna blames the alcohol for Jim's mood, not Jim himself for choosing to drink so that he can ignore the reality of capitalism's harm. Anna seems to want to give mercy to Jim, excusing his actions because they're caused by the evil spirit of alcohol in him, which he drinks because of his hard work. Olsen's depiction shows how women may feel sympathy for their loved one because they know the cause lies elsewhere, even when this loved one's negative response hurts her the most. However, Jim's personal violence still affects Anna psychologically, leading her to react violently towards her own children. The narrator says, "Anna too became bitter and brutal. If one of the children was in her way, if they did not obey her instantly, she would hit at them in a blind rage, as if were some devil she was exorcising" (9). With Anna's rationalization that Jim's acts are caused by an evil spirit, she projects similar belief on her children's normal, developing misbehaviors. To her, they are also possessed by evil spirits, rather than considering that they are just children who do not know what's right and wrong yet. However, Olsen returns to women's emotions and nurturing, regardless of the fact that capitalism's violence infects even the home. After Anna hits her children the narrator says, "Regret would cramp her heart at the memory of the tear-stained little faces" (9). As a mother who loves her children and cares about them, Anna regrets her actions, showing she's not the root cause. It's interesting to note how in the text, Jim drinks heavily, and seems like he is possessed by evil spirits to Anna, but he too views his family poorly due to capitalism's effects. The narrator says, "Once Anna had questioned him timidly concerning his work; he struck her on the mouth with a bellow of 'Shut your damn trap'" (9). The text shows a double meaning where Jim really just wants Anna to shut up, but the word choice also indicates he does not want to get "trapped" into thinking capitalism affects him. Anna's question forces him to use her position as a woman to silence her for fear of recognizing his own weakness. Olsen challenges readers with her text allowing sympathy for Jim because of how capitalism leads him to drunken abuse, but also showing how he uses patriarchal beliefs to enforce silence on his wife, who does not have a right to question his authority under sexism.

Under patriarchal capitalism, children are also affected through witnessing the violence between their parents who are trying to fulfill their society's norms. Based both on their gender role, and not getting paid enough for their hard work, poverty affects the family relationship by limiting their ability to live well. Ann's oldest daughter, Mazie, in the text, can be seen as a symbol of innocent "reality" that is missing in America because of people's unquestioned following of society norms. According to the text, late at night, Mazie talks to herself saying, "All the world is a-cryen, and I don't know for why." She then questions Jim by saying why the "world is crying?" Her questioning forces him to think about her as a person and what's happening around her (Olsen 11). This little girl is reacting to what capitalism is doing to the world, to all the people who are hurting due to how society demands women and men work so hard to fit into their roles in society. They cry because, no matter how hard they work, it will not result in a better life because capitalism demands the hard work and will never give the same benefit back to its laborers, and this affects the lives of the individuals. This even "hurts" Jim. He must realize that his daughter asks questions about her own identity, and those of others. He must see she is a person and she has desires, which makes Jim realize how, regardless of

the fact that they are all human, they are ensnared by capitalism and patriarchal beliefs that pushes them to live a certain way. However, Jim responds to Mazie, saying, "Don't be worrying your head with such things, big eyes-it'll bust. Wait'll you grow up" (Olsen 12). This shows how society sets up certain rules based on a person's gender and how capitalism places too much pressure on people. Being young, Mazie should not worry about it. However, when the time comes, it will be her turn to be "manufactured" and continue the women's responsibility of marrying a man after growing up and producing children, thus continuing the cycle of patriarchal capitalism.

Conclusion

Capitalism and patriarchy continue to exist in our society today, but capitalism has changed inside America, to where it may be called a service-based economy. In the 21st century, there are factories, but there are more fast food restaurants like McDonalds or Chinese restaurants. Where people continue to use their bodies as tools to do labor providing services instead of products. People still are not getting paid enough despite the hard work they provide to these restaurants. In our society, we also still have patriarchal beliefs where, regardless of women being equally educated as men and working in the same jobs as men, they still gets paid less solely because they are women. Government welfare, like unemployment benefits or food stamps for poor people, exist, but their budgets continually go down and the assistance often still is not enough to feed an entire family without someone working. In order to solve this problem, we cannot fix only patriarchy or capitalism because the systems are knotted together. Pulling one string out will not solve the problem because everything, like patriarchy, capitalism, racism, and other social beliefs affect each other. Olsen shows in her text how capitalism controls people, manufacturing them into certain positions through the use of patriarchal beliefs. The systems make this seem "normal" for society, so the cycle of capitalism continues despite how it leaves both adults and even young children, like Mazie, confused about how the world became so cruel. Furthermore, even though our society has become a more service based economy, other globally developing countries, like Ukraine or Uzbekistan, still have an industrial economy with lots of factories. People living in those countries are affected by the decisions of Americans, buying the products that they produced. The whole world is crying, and if we are to solve this problem, and get rid of capitalistic patriarchy, we must go beyond America because it infects other countries. No human being should be used as a tool to generate profit, regardless of their sex or nationality.

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Why Won't You Stay? A Quantitative Sociological Analysis of Factors Influencing Retention at IU South Bend

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Abstract

In a society where going to college increasingly is becoming a minimum educational requirement, colleges and universities are constantly looking for clues as to how to engage their students in such a way as to keep them attending and progressing steadily towards graduation. The following paper is the result of a survey I did on first-year, first-semester students at IU South Bend. The goal of the survey was to try to identify particular experiences students may have had that have a statistically significant correlative effect on their confidence that they will continue at the university beyond their first semester, their first year, and through to graduation. After assessing the recent literature on the topic, I decided to model my study after a survey done in Australia that focused on these types of experiences and their effect on retention. Using a Spearman rho correlation analysis, I was able to identify many common experiences that students reported as having either a positive or negative effect on their desire to continue at this institution. By considering the results of this analysis, educators and administrators may be able to determine where to focus their efforts in their attempts to increase both retention and graduation rates at this and in similar university settings.

INTRODUCTION

As someone who is interested in education and has worked in a number of different programs on my campus designed to increase retention and graduation rates, I decided to do research on our campus to try to determine the effects certain activities have on those outcomes. Research is being done throughout the country as more and more of the funding given to public universities is tied to these two measures. As Dan Clawson and Max Page point out in their book *The Future of Higher Education*, "Higher education in the United States is in the midst of a major crisis of funding, affordability, mission, and organization" (Clawson & Page, 2011, p. 1). As an economic sociologist, I'm interested in pinpointing the most economic activities that the university can support in order to keep students engaged. Research indicates that engagement leads to retention (Chambliss & Takacs, 2014). According to fatsa.ed.gov, retention is "the percentage of a school's first-time, first-year undergraduate students who continue at that school the next year. For example, a student who studies full-time in the fall semester and keeps on studying in the program in the next fall semester is counted in this rate" ("What are graduation, retention, and transfer rates?" n.d.). It is clear from the research that the experiences that students have in their first semester at any given institution can have a profound impact on whether they stay at that university the following semester, the following year,