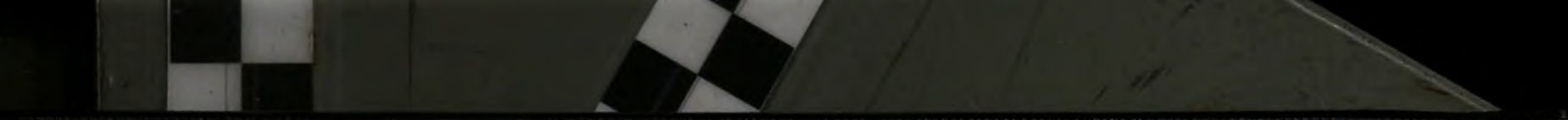

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The Process of Assembling Self Identity as Expressed in literary Works of Four American-Jewish Women: Esther Broner, Faye Moskowitz, Tillie Olsen, Grace Paley.

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THE PROCESS OF ASSEMBLING SELF IDENTITY AS EXPRESSED IN LITERARY WORKS OF FOUR AMERICAN-JEWISH WOMEN: E.M. BRONER, FAYE MOSKOWITZ, TILLIE OLSEN, GRACE PALEY

By

Karin Schreier

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ABSTRACT

THE PROCESS OF ASSEMBLING SELF IDENTITY AS EXPRESSED IN LITERARY WORKS OF FOUR AMERICAN-JEWISH WOMEN: E.M. BRONER, FAYE MOSKOWITZ, TILLIE OLSEN, GRACE PALEY

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In their literature, E.M. Broner, Faye Moskowitz, Tillie Olsen, and Grace Paley demonstrate the value of actively approaching self identity and the consequences of not doing so. Their works reflect their personal experiences as Jewish women. Writing about the effects of gender and ethnicity on selfhood, about the anxieties Jewish women experience forming their selves, the authors question the socially and religiously structured female role and offer new definitions. This thesis explores the literary theme of participation in the process of assembling self identity by looking at each author separately. It establishes the context of writing, i.e. the authors' personal experiences as Jewish women and the reflection of these experiences in selections of their writings. Thus, it identifies the pursuit of selfhood as expressed by each writer in her literature and as defined in relation to her personal values as a Jewish woman.

To my family with love:
Helmut, Sarah, Axel and Micky

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I am also most grateful to my parents, Helmut and Sarah, who instilled in me the thirst for knowledge and the value of education. They taught me to be optimistic and confident in my work. They also taught me patience, especially when I applied for admission to U.S. graduate programs and was about to give up. Without their support, I would not have had the opportunity to complete a degree at an American university.

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INTRODUCTION

If I am not for myself, who will be?
If I am only for myself, what am I?
And if not now, when?

---Rabbi Hillel

The process of assembling self identity is central to the writings of four Jewish women authors: E.M. Broner, Faye Moskowitz, Tillie Olsen, and Grace Paley. They teach us the importance of self respect and the danger of a stagnant self concept. These authors demonstrate the value of actively approaching self identity and the consequences of not doing so.

Their personal experiences as Jews and as women solidify their insights in two ways. First, Judaism, a patriarchal religion, does not consider women as equals to men. Susan Weidman Schneider explains that, historically, Judaism defines women as the "other." "This concept of difference allowed men to exclude women unjustly from much that was important in Jewish life."[1] The critic cites examples for the Orthodox exclusion of women from religious studies: a Jewish woman is not allowed to serve as witness in a religious court; she cannot file for divorce; she does not count for the initiation of prayers.[2] In short, in an orthodox religious tradition defined by participation,

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[1] Schneider, Susan Weidman. Jewish and Female. Choices and Changes in Our Lives Today. NY: Simon & Schuster, 1984. 33.

[2] Schneider 34-5.

Jewish women have been unable to establish self identity as Jews in relation to their own culture and history.

Second, in America, assimilationist pressures burdened Jewish immigrant women with the limitations of a sexist society. Upon their arrival in the "New World" many Jewish immigrant families quickly moved economically upward. In an analysis of "Jewish Women in the Nuclear Family and Beyond," Schneider points out that the Jewish husband's growing financial success was accompanied with his desire to "assimilate to a more 'American' style of behavior and thinking."[3] More "American" meant, among other things, the notion that a woman's place was in the home. The critic comments:

> What a shock this must have been to women whose image of themselves, and of their mothers and grandmothers before them, had been of hardy, active people. The real roles of Eastern European Jewish women included helping support the family, making decisions, and having (at least in much of family and community life) shared responsibilities with their husbands.[4]

The American cultural ideal of a woman, however, was the "lady" who belonged to the middle-class and depended on her husband's income. Thus, Jewish immigrant families underwent a change from traditional Jewish values to American cultural values, i.e. from the female's loss of power to the male as family breadwinner and the emergence of her subjective dependent status.

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[3] Schneider 270.

[4] Schneider 270.

Both the Orthodox Jewish and assimilationist pressures must be taken into consideration for an accurate understanding of these writers' works. Their writing is an expression and affirmation of the active pursuit of their own female identities. Assembling self identity is a process that emerges out of the ethnic and gender identity boundaries these Jewish women writers, to individual degrees, confront. The process itself is an interaction between cultural context and individual choice. To participate in this process is to define a place in society for oneself; it is to seek meaning in life, at least for that moment. Entire identities may change, the difficult part is allowing it to happen. One is successful, i.e. fulfills the task of achieving security in her/his own identity, only by being open to an exchange of ideas and beliefs other than one's own. Thus, participation in the process of assembling self identity is rewarding.

The authors draw on their Jewish heritage in different ways, i.e. Jewishness has different meanings for each of them; each writer seeks her own meaning for herself. Their literary works reflect their own personal experiences. They write about the effects of gender and ethnicity on selfhood, about the anxieties Jewish women experience forming their selves: the authors question the societal and religiously structured female role and offer new definitions. Thus, their literature demonstrates participation in the process of assembling self identity.

As a religious woman E.M. Broner challenges the interpretations of Jewish law that assign women a second-class status: she creates rituals and ceremonies that include women, i.e. she provides means for religious identification; she writes fiction about Jewish women participating in the process of assembling self identity.

Faye Moskowitz draws upon the tension between broad social experience and the boundaries placed on her by traditional Jewish values while growing up: the writer finds value in both aspects of her experience, humanitarian values and values of political and educational opportunity. Both her autobiographical and fictional stories provide a framework for participation in the process of assembling self identity by reconciling modern American with traditional Jewish values as viewed by a Jewish woman.

Tillie Olsen adds the effect of class on selfhood. Her experiences in a working class environment and a secular socialist home, with ideals rooting in Yiddish culture, influenced her writing: her fiction emphasizes limitations on participation in the process of assembling self identity dictated by restrictive "circumstances" of class, ethnicity, and gender. Women in particular, Olsen demonstrates, find it difficult to adequately express and develop their own positive self concepts. Trapped by the limitations of economic and gender circumstances, they receive little room to grow or develop friendships.

Like Olsen, Grace Paley grew up in a secular household.

She also emphasizes the limitations of class, ethnicity, and gender on selfhood. While Olsen stresses the impact of economic "circumstances," Paley accentuates an interactive approach: the formation of "communities" and inspiration of "social consciousness," ideas she shaped from her Jewish heritage. Through these, one exceeds boundaries of class, ethnicity, and gender. Thus, central to the writer's stories are forms of community: bonds between mothers and children, friendships between women, and relationships between women and men. Central is also political action, an expression of social consciousness. Both bonds and political action, Paley's stories demonstrate, help find security in self identity.

This thesis explores the theme of participation in the process of assembling self identity by looking at each author separately. It establishes the context of writing, i.e. the authors' personal experiences as Jewish women and the reflection of these experiences in selections of their writings. Thus, it identifies the pursuit of selfhood as expressed by each writer in her literature and as defined in relation to her personal values as a Jewish woman.

E.M.: TO HEAL AND REPAIR

"How do people sustain themselves, how do they survive? Nothing interests me more than that," says E.M. Broner in an interview by Nancy Hoy for the Massachusetts Review (1983). Broner's concern is primarily with Jewish women, how they "sustain themselves" and "survive" in sexist society and patriarchal religion. In other words, how do Jewish women successfully assemble self identity when their participation in the modes of life that would fully allow it, is stifled? How do they seek meaning out of the interaction between their cultural context of restriction and their individual choices to be complete human beings?

Broner's non-fiction criticizes women's subordinate role in traditional Judaism and the exclusion of women from religious studies, and are political in objective. As a solution to this problem, Broner re-forms Jewish rituals and ceremonies: she stresses the need for Jewish women to "connect" with their female "origins" and bond with other women. Through feminist rituals, Jewish women will heal their hurt and repair the damage inflicted upon them by patriarchal Judaism, i.e. will participate in the process of assembling self identity as Jewish women.

Broner's fiction also demonstrates her concerns. She writes about women who research their identity as women and Jews, who strive for a more active role in shaping their lives. The novelist prescribes a search for and connection

with female origins and suggests a bonding of women. Broner teaches Jewish and other women to say: "Here we are, we're priestesses, we're gods, we made the exodus. We are defining ourselves, and finding a new way of looking."[5]

Broner's feminist critique is motivated by her personal experiences as a Jewish woman. She grew up in a traditional Jewish household which subordinated women under men's rule, but matured in a society developing feminist ideas of gender equality. Traditional Judaism and feminism seem irreconcilable--yet they are not if we value difference and assert equality, insists Broner. The process of assembling self identity demands discourse regarding the validity of patriarchal subordination. Herein lies Broner's answer to the question of how Jewish women "sustain themselves" and "survive:" they actively pursue their own identity.

Roots of Upbringing

E.M. Broner grew up in the thirties and forties in Detroit as the daughter of East European Jewish immigrants. Her family actively participated in the Jewish traditions. When she was little, her father was her Sunday-school teacher, "which was both an embarrassment to me and a piece of luck," as she recalls.

A second aspect of Broner's traditional Jewish

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[5] Hoy, Nancy. "Of Holy Writing & Priestly Voices: A Talk With Esther Broner." Massachusetts Review 24, no.2 (Summer 1983):259.

upbringing was the mother's and daughter's subordination under the husband/ father. "Esther," Marilyn French explains, "suffered from the second-best status often accorded to girls in traditional Jewish families."[6] Information concerning Broner's specific religious upbringing was unavailable. Concluding from French's statement, however, it follows that Broner was raised according to Judaism's traditional concept defining women as the "other." As a result, she was excluded from participating in formal religious studies. A further result was that the family's middle-class status forced assimilationist pressures on Broner as a female, idealizing the conformity of women to stereotypical perceptions of "femininity," e.g. to "ladylike" looks and manners. The increase in her family's economic and social status, French remarks, made Broner "unhappy": "she hated the social and economic competition of middle-class youngsters."[7]

Despite her family's belief in traditional Jewish values, Broner worked as an editor for her father, a political journalist, when she was nine years old. She clipped out newspaper articles on labor issues and thus was politically trained from an early age on.[8] The "unhappiness" Broner felt as a consequence of her family's

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[6] French, Marilyn. Introduction. A Weave of Women. By E.M. Broner. 1978. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1985. XII.

[7] French XII.

[8] French XI.

middle-class status also enabled her to complete college. She got her BA and MFA degrees from Wayne State University and a PhD in English literature from Union Graduate. Today she teaches at Sarah Lawrence College. She married early, after her sophomore year, and gave birth to four children over the succeeding years.

The American notion of equality combined with her personal Jewish experiences, her political education during her childhood and her college education, formed Broner's thinking about women in general and their relation to Judaism in particular, and greatly influenced her writing. Her fiction, she explains, tells of "woman alone, hunting for her role in genealogy, in history, in relationship to herself and to the issue of her womb."[9]

Reconciliation of Judaism and Feminism

The various aspects of Broner's life seem contradictory, especially in regard to her Jewish religious beliefs and her identity as a feminist. Judaism's definition of women as second-class citizens and feminists' belief in gender equality seem to be irreconcilable. How does Broner define herself as a Jewish feminist and what ways does she offer for religious Jewish women to feel secure in their identities?

Broner attempts to re-form Judaism through her writing

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[9] Hoy 255.

in such a way that grants Jewish women equality with Jewish men. The writer challenges Jewish law by including women in Jewish customs and rituals, thus her challenge is political. "I speak with the tongue of my people's prayer, yet I change the gender. I speak out of a history, but I research it..."[10]

Broner's approach challenging traditional Judaism is careful yet radical. She emphasizes the "correction" of traditions, not their destruction. Old Jewish traditions must be stretched to include women and changed to allow women identification with their heritage. Broner insists,

> [I]f our religion tries to kick us out of it, I think we have to carefully elbow our way back in it and make a new tradition. Rewrite ourselves and correct that tradition...I will not be elbowed out of my religion. There's room. I have to turn it around; we have to rediscover our mothers. It's a political thing.[11]

Broner's recent publication of "Mornings and Mourning: A Kaddish Journal" (1989) illustrates women's subordinate status in traditional Judaism and calls for a "correction of the tradition." After her father's death, Broner feels a big loss and decides to mourn him in the traditional Jewish way. Attending daily services at an Orthodox synagogue, however, is not as easy for her as a woman as she had

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[10] Hoy 264.

[11] Windstone, Shebar. "Lilith Interview: Esther Broner." Lilith 1 (Fall/Winter 1977/78):34.

hoped.[12] The male members of the synagogue make clear that she is worth only "half a man." She does not count for the minyan which requires ten men over thirteen years of age to read the kaddish prayer. Although the rabbi has trouble finding ten members every morning, he rather keeps looking for them on the street instead of counting Broner, a woman. While the men pray, Broner has to stay behind a curtain, as the law forbids men to see into a woman's face during worship. When Broner refuses to remain in her "place," she is lectured: "You're an educated woman. I shouldn't have to explain to you that this is the way it is, this is the law of separation. You've got to obey the law."[13] She is accused of "sowing dissent" and "spoiling the services."[14]

Only slowly she begins to "feel secure enough...to take action." Broner invites some of her women friends to join her for a minyan. They come and fill the little room faster than the men can. "In the place where I have always been alone, they spill over onto the rows reserved for men, and the mekhitza [partition] doesn't cover them," Broner notes.[15] A troublemaker who overdid it by conducting a women's minyan, Broner receives a call from a lawyer who tells her to obey the rules--stand behind the curtain--so

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[12] Broner, E.M. "Mornings and Mourning: A Kaddish Journal." Tikkun 4 (Sept./Oct. 1989):19.

[13] Broner, "Mornings" 21.

[14] Broner, "Mornings" 22.

[15] Broner, "Mornings" 90.

not to jeopardize the chances for women to become members. "'They'll vote against women becoming members because I won't stand behind the mekhitza,'" Broner wonders?[16] Broner does not agree with the lawyer and is excommunicated from the synagogue. The rabbi, trying to reconcile, develops a plan to get Broner back into the community.

> Your husband will be voted in as a member. Then Tuesday night the shul will vote for the first time in sixty years to give membership to women. For sure, you will be a member.
>
> Then, in September, you and your friends--remember Doris?--will attend a membership meeting, and you'll talk about the mekhitza and you'll talk in a sweet voice...
>
> You could say that the mekhitza is a symbol and that it might as well be a bank of flowers.[17]

"Sweet voice" and "flowers" certainly are stereotypical female associations. The rabbi--although at least willing to understand Broner's demands--still has difficulties accepting her as an equal, entitled with the same rights to worship as men are. This shows how deeply orthodox Jewish beliefs root in people's conscience. The male members of the synagogue Broner met were "lonely, elderly widowers or single men, their days stretching emptily before them."[18] They lived in their own little world and were afraid of intruders, of changes. Through her actions, however, Broner shook this conscience and at least was able to make the synagogue members aware of her and other women's existence-

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[16] Broner, "Mornings" 91.

[17] Broner, "Mornings" 92.

[18] Broner, "Mornings" 22.

-she questioned the patriarchal status quo and demanded respect of her human identity. In this sense "Mornings and Mourning" is an appeal to women to bond against patriarchal religious structures and for women's equality within Judaism--to heal and repair the damage done by their exclusion.

Womenbonds

In her work, Broner stresses women's "connection" with their female "origins," the definition of a common female history in that process, and of bonding with other women. Feminist rituals are a basis for and expression of women's bonds. Through bonds Jewish women can heal their hurt from patriarchal Judaism, and women in general can repair the damage done by stereotypical associations and misunderstandings. This is how women will sustain themselves and survive.

The idea of women bonding and acting together as one, Broner expresses in her address to the National Women's Studies Association at Ohio State University in 1983 "The Mikveh Ceremony--Connecting Black and Jewish Women" (published 1988). The author created this ceremony in an effort to eliminate racism and anti-semitism among Jewish and Black women within the women's movement and to bond them. "There are impurities that must be cleansed from the soul," Broner explains, "the impurity of separation from another woman, the impurity of suspicion of another color,

the impurity of superiority over another religion."[19]

Broner stresses the need to "connect" while embracing difference. "Each, looking at herself, tells her history as a woman of color, a woman of another accent, another tongue, a woman of a different body...," Broner leads the ceremony. The women speak of their stereotyping and cursing of "the other" in their relationship--each other. But they must not forget their commonalities. For, "When we speak of connections, we can move closer in this wide-gapped circle." And the ritual moves on to the "exchanging and changing" of their selves. They start out each for herself, encountering each other as a stereotype; they end connected with one another, like a chain existing of many different pieces yet still one chain. "We write psalms of difference, of the rainbow of women. We become one another." The ceremony is concluded with the "song of purification: immersion." The women are singing in praise of the "Mother" who created them as they are, gave them the strength they have. "We are part of the body of women, / of earth and water. / May we survive at sea, on land, / in shallow straits or over our heads. / May we rescue one another / in deep water."[20] Through ritual, these women are healed and repaired from hurt and damage done by stereotypical associations and

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[19] Broner, E.M. "The Mikveh Ceremony. Connecting Black and Jewish Women." The Womanspirit Sourcebook. Ed. Patrice Wynne. San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1988. 195.

[20] Broner, "Mikveh" 196-99.

misunderstandings, existing in their relationship. Thus, we learn through this ritual that we can be open to "difference" without reducing ourselves and participate in the process of assembling self identity.

Ritual

Broner began creating ritual to "mark life," as she says. It was based on her need to connect with other women. "For myself, it isn't enough to be Esther or E.M., there have to be great, surging, epic events that occur; I have to connect myself to some kind of passion..."[21] To find security in their identities, Jewish women must find their origins and determine their independent periodization of religious history. Then they must connect with one another through rituals, the "great, surging, epic events"--to heal and repair.

Quoting Cynthia Ozick, Broner emphasizes that religious Jewish works like the Torah are only the works of men because women--half of the Jewish people--were never allowed to contribute to them. Therefore, these works are "frayed."[22] The Torah, for example, as the object of Jewish ritual, excludes women from participation in worship. Further, men's religious writings begin with the Testaments,

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[21] Windstone 34.

[22] Broner, E.M. "Honor and Ceremony in Women's Rituals." The Politics of Women's Spirituality. Ed. Charlene Spretnak. NY: Doubleday, 1982. 237.

ignoring the true beginning of worship. In the beginning women did actually pray to Mother Gods; women were priestesses, Broner informs. As women we have to learn of "those ancient women," our foremothers, otherwise we will lose our identities. "If we do not remember our womanly origins," Broner warns, "then we lose our images, our language, and the meaning of the cave of self."[23] Jewish women have to correct religious history and rituals so they include women.

In co-authorship with Naomi Nimrod, Broner created her "first corrective ceremony," "A Woman's Haggadah" (1975). The Haggadah is the tale of Israel's deliverance from Egyptian bondage. It is read at Passover, the outstanding festival in Jewish life. The text is solely directed at fathers and sons. Women are left out of the ceremony--except as caterers to the men. "How is it possible," Broner asks, "that a ceremony in which I have participated my entire remembered life makes no mention of my coming out of Egypt, and I am not commanded to remind my daughter of the exodus?"[24]

The "Woman's Haggadah" tells the exodus of women. "We used the male Haggadah as the spine of our ceremony and, within it, reincorporated women," Broner states.[25] Broner

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[23] Broner, "Honor" 236.

[24] Broner, "Honor" 237.

[25] Broner, "Honor" 238.

and Nimrod made not only changes in gender but also in language. They named and renamed women, and changed rhymes and rhythms of ancient chants.[26] They altered the first four questions asked at the beginning of the ceremony, and added more questions during its course. They added, for example, "Mother ...who are our mothers? Who are our ancestors? What is our history? Give us our name. Name our genealogy."[27] These are illustrative questions of Jewish women's search for an identity. Broner and Nimrod thus provide a means for Jewish women to ask about their "origins" and secure their identities as Jews--and in that, to heal and repair. They felt their approach was "radical" in nature and hence took a "political stand."[28]

Her Mothers

The novel Her Mothers (1975) reflects Broner's beliefs maintained in her political essays: the idea of women's "connection" with their female "origins," their defining of a common female history in that process, and thus their bond with other women. Most important, it is an attempt to answer her central question of Jewish female "survival" and "sustainment," and thus demonstrates successful

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[26] Broner, "Honor" 240.

[27] Broner, E.M. and Naomi Nimrod. "A Woman's Passover Haggadah and Other Revisionist Rituals." Ms. 5 (April 1977):54.

[28] Broner, "Honor" 240.

participation in the process of assembling self identity.

Although Broner's novel centers around women, she does not ignore men's experience. Rather, French states, Broner and others "have tried to retain the overall structure of a male [literary] tradition and to stretch it so it can hold a female as well as a male voice, female as well as male concerns. Such an approach feminizes--humanizes--the entire tradition."[29] However, it is important for women to assemble their own identities first, before they can negotiate male voices while keeping their own identities intact.

> My sense of change is of women getting stronger. We have been dependent too long. We have to become sure of our myths, sure of our voices...Years have to elapse before we allow men into that psychic part of our world. We must raise tender men and strong women, women who will be political warriors as well.[30]

Her Mothers tells the story of a Jewish woman, Beatrix Palmer, whose journey searching for her run-away daughter Lena turns into a quest for her self identity. The reader follows Beatrix from childhood to old age on this search that has significant religious and personal implications for Beatrix. Broner stresses the importance of a woman's "connection" to her "origins," here to Genesis of the Old Testament, as a means to achieve security in self identity. At the same time, her novel warns women of consuming connections, here maternal and sorroral connections among

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[29] French X.

[30] Hoy 263.

women that often stifle individual identity by demanding conformity to self-effacing roles, for example to stereotypical ideals of "feminine" looks and manners.

Beatrix recalls her childhood relationship to her mother as emotionless. She and her mother never have expressed their love for each other nor have they shared friendship (except in one incident where Beatrix tells her mother she loves her). Usually the mother makes fun of Beatrix's inexperience and innocence. Instead of explaining, for example, what was happening to Beatrix's body when she started to menstruate and was afraid it was caused by something she ate, the mother only laughed at her daughter. Also, she did not accept Beatrix's studiousness; she believed education would make her daughter unsuitable for the marriage market. And, as her parents saw it, Beatrix lacked manners and looks ("Although American, she was a peasant..." "What was unbecoming about Beatrix? Her hair, makeup, dress, gestures").[31]

This inexpression of love between mother and daughter is the cause of Beatrix's incomplete self identity. The literary critic Rose Yalow Kamel terms it "maternal deprivation." The mother-daughter dialogues, interspersed throughout the book, Kamel argues, exemplify Beatrix's

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[31] Broner, E.M. Her Mothers. NY: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1975. 26.

problem of not finding herself or her gender significant.[32]

> "Mother, I'm giving birth to a baby girl."
> "Ah, soon she will have the gift of life."
> "Oh no. He [the male] will have life enough for both of them."
> "Soon she will have speech."
> "Oh no. He will speak for the both of them."
> "Soon she will be independent."
> "Oh no. She wants to borrow."
> "Borrow what?"
> "Borrow courage."[33]

As Beatrix suffers from "maternal deprivation," so does her daughter Lena. Beatrix tried to define Lena's identity for her instead of allowing the child to be herself. For example, as a baby girl, Lena could not play with "male" toys like trains and boxing gloves. When Beatrix wrote stories about Lena, the child angrily replied: "You took my name from me."[34] She is worried that her daughter might inherit certain "flaws" her parents had detected in Beatrix herself. So Beatrix insists that Lena learns "manners" and has "becoming looks." She teaches the girl how not to "talk too much," how to "be helpful, silent, polite, energetic, and organized."[35] As Kamel remarks, "Beatrix processes Lena. Bea's daughter born in 'twilight sleep,' is reduced to sugar, spice, everything nice."[36] On her sixteenth

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[32] Kamel, Rose Yalow. Aggravating the Conscience. Jewish-American Literary Mothers in the Promised Land. NY: Peter Lang, 1988. 168-9.

[33] Broner, Her Mothers 92-3.

[34] Broner, Her Mothers 114.

[35] Broner, Her Mothers 175-7.

[36] Kamel 174.

birthday, Lena ran away.

Her Mothers is political. Here Broner re-forms the teachings of Orthodox Judaism through a fictional text by offering a reinterpretation of the early Genesis story of "The Temptation."

At the end of Genesis, chapter two, Adam and Eve were together in the garden of Eden, unaware of masculine and feminine distinctions between themselves or even of the fact that they were "naked." Men and women were yet unconcerned with distinctions between them, "they were one flesh...they were both naked...and were not ashamed" (Gen. 2:24,25). God tested their love: "Of the fruit of the tree which is in the midst of the garden...Ye shall not eat of it, neither shall ye touch it, lest ye die" (Gen. 3:3). Upon the taking of the fruit of the tree of knowledge of good and evil, however, "the eyes of them both were opened, and they knew that they were naked; and they sewed figleaves together, and made themselves aprons" (Gen. 3:7).

Thus, upon making the distinction between "good and evil" and thereby choosing this knowledge over love, humans were burdened with the curse of "enmity," the attitudes or feelings of enemies: "I will greatly multiply thy sorrow and thy conception; in sorrow thou shalt bring forth children" (Gen. 3:16). This curse is the Old Testament's answer to humankind's search for knowledge of good and evil, in this case the search for and establishment of exclusive human categorizations that deny equality. In the garden of Eden,

humankind started out unaware of distinctions like masculine and feminine, "beautiful" and "ugly" looks or "good" and "bad" manners: the painful distinctions made between men and women concerning their "proper" roles were not present and did not get in the way of love. To expose of the curse humankind must "put forth [its] hand, and take also of the tree of life, and eat, and live forever," i.e. since humankind betrayed love, it's curse is enmity--and the way out of enmity is love (Gen. 3:22).

In the concluding scene of Her Mothers, Broner provides the crucial elements of the problem of enmity between mother and daughter. In Lena's final meeting with her mother, love is still, after all these years, being held at bay; old wounds remain open. The reader knows that Beatrix loves Lena, but she allows enmity to get into its way: still the mother "wishes Lena would wash up, comb her hair. She wishes her daughter would take off the mother's green sun hat." They quarrel with each other and accuse each other.[37]

By this time Beatrix has reached the end of her life. Her preoccupation with Lena's looks and manners is something traded in for Lena's love. The tragic cost of her constant petty demands of Lena to be something other than she is repeats the cycle Beatrix lived with her mother. Love and self identity are stifled by qualifying, superficial distinctions and cause enmity between each generation of

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[37] Broner, Her Mothers 239.

women. Beatrix realizes this while contemplating her relationship to Lena. She knows that she "destroyed the present, but, much worse, the past."[38]

Beatrix's final wish is for a rebirth:

> Birth me, mothers. Carry me in your brine of your belly and your tears. Let us sit on each others' laps, daughters and mothers. We have hired our own hall. We hold hands. Our engagement rings do not scratch. Our wedding bands do not disband us. The musicians are women. The one ascending the podium is a woman.[39]

This scene of rebirth is crucial to an understanding of Broner's political ideals. It expresses the novelist's belief to include women's experiences in Jewish tradition and provides a means for Jewish women to achieve security in self identity: "Birth me, mothers," clearly alludes to Eve as the "mother of all living" (Gen. 3:20). Broner reinstates the significance of Eve, a woman, in Jewish tradition. "Hold hands," "engagement rings that do not scratch," express Broner's hope in love. A life of love, free from enmity, will allow us to be ourselves. Thus Broner wishes for a rebirth of Jewish tradition, love, the self.

Her Mothers teaches that women must actively pursue their self identities to "sustain themselves" and "survive." At the same time the novel warns of the myths inherited from generations before, to the damage of their relationships with one another; myths placing Jewish and other women in

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[38] Broner, Her Mothers 240.

[39] Broner, Her Mothers 241.

their "proper" roles--and driving them from their real identities. The character Beatrix inherited her mother's belief in certain feminine looks and manners, and tried to impose the same beliefs on her daughter Lena. Thus Beatrix stifled not only her own, but also her daughter's identity, resulting in Lena's running away from home.

The novel further warns of consuming connections, i.e. relations demanding and perpetuating conformity to self-effacing roles. Broner's message: only through love will we allow ourselves and others to be free from the conformity of exclusive traditions. Making Jewish women realize that they are not themselves by conforming to Jewish tradition, might allow them enough freedom to ask their own questions. Broner not merely reconciles Jewish feminism but creates a new Jewish tradition, as exemplified with her reinterpretation of Genesis. Broner truly heals and repairs.

Summary

Broner's explicit concern with the selfhood of Jewish women reflects her own experiences. A religious woman and feminist, she was unable to identify with traditional Judaism. Feminist inspirations led her to re-form Judaism and rewrite traditional rituals. Thus her writing is both religiously and politically significant for Jewish women--and humanity. She stresses the importance of remaining faithful to the individual truths we all know as humans, yet

also acknowledges the difficulties involved in having those truths accepted. As readers, Jewish women can draw on Broner's experiences and apply them to themselves: to "weave a seamless fabric out of these two skeins [woman and Jew] of our identities."[40]

Broner leads the way for Jewish women in demonstrating, through literary examples, the necessity of participation in the process of assembling self identity: she questions the validity of patriarchal subordination and insists on the validity of all human experience. The reader of Broner's work becomes aware of the painful distinctions that consistently divide the human community. For Broner "enmity" is a concept present in both the family and in politics, as well as in religion. Her experience as a Jewish woman is clearly related to the context of her writing. Women, for all the various reasons patriarchal society and religion provide, are driven to concerns of less importance than that of their own identity and their love for one another.

Broner's work strives to demonstrate the process of security in self identity and provides examples of the consequences of not doing so. Love for the human community is Broner's answer to the painful reality of a stifled self identity. Love is the surest way to heal the enmity between us; as men and women, Jews and Christians, blacks and

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[40] Schneider 512.

whites, mother and daughter. "When we read Broner, we discover not just what it feels like to be a woman, but what it feels like to be a human being."[41]

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[41] French XV.

FAYE MOSKOWITZ: BREAKING FREE

As Broner, Faye Moskowitz also stresses the idea of "connection" for participation in the process of assembling self identity. Moskowitz, however, explores the importance of communicative connections. Communication, to Moskowitz, requires openness to others' ideas and beliefs, and the evaluation of these for oneself. "[If] I have learned anything," she states, "it is that we all change constantly from student to teacher and back again."[42] This is a process of constant seeking of meaning in life, of pursuit of self identity. Without communicating, we stifle our identities, the author warns.

Moskowitz sounds this warning in her fictional short story collection Whoever Finds This: I Love You (1988). The stories tell of the tragic consequences of restricted ties of communication. The story characters are Jewish girls and women whose identities are stifled by Orthodox Judaism and sexist society; women who find themselves limited by conformity to stereotypical roles. In her fiction, Moskowitz makes one aware of this problem and offers communication as the solution. Through the exchange of ideas and beliefs one asserts meaning in life. Out of such an intense personal involvement in the process of assembling self identity, effective self definition emerges.

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[42] Moskowitz, Faye. A Leak in the Heart. Tales From A Woman's Life. Boston: David R. Godine, 1987. 124.

The reader recognizes Moskowitz's personal experiences, as she tells them in her collection of autobiographical short stories A Leak in the Heart. Tales From A Woman's Life (1985). As the daughter of Russian Orthodox Jewish immigrants, she draws upon the tension between broad social experience and the boundaries placed on her by traditional Jewish values while growing up in a small American town: the writer finds value in both aspects of her experience, humanitarian values and values of political and educational opportunity. Thus, she provides her reader with a framework for the active pursuit of self identity.

Autobiographical Theme: Reconciliation of Traditional Jewish and Modern American Values

Faye Moskowitz grew up in Jackson, a small Michigan city, during the 1930s and '40s. Her parents and grandmother were not assimilated to American culture. Maturing in a family with traditional Jewish customs and values on the one hand, and in American society on the other, Moskowitz grew up in the tension between her family's Jewish heritage and American culture. The daily confrontations Moskowitz encountered between Old and New World customs and values, shaped her development.

As a girl, Moskowitz dealt with the discomfort of being Jewish in a predominately non-Jewish community by denying her Jewishness. She did not want to be different. Looking at her "blond-haired, goyish" friends who went on vacation

every summer when she had to stay at home, Moskowitz was "sure" that she had been "exchanged at birth" and her parents were really worldly Americans.[43]

Another example of the tension Moskowitz grew up with is the embarrassment she felt when in company with her unassimilated grandmother. Walking through the streets of the small Jackson community toward a store, Moskowitz was very embarrassed by her grandmother's appearance and manner: Bobbe wore an apron over her dress instead of the "flowered silk dress" and "soft, stylish hat" of American women; she did not speak the "quiet" English but "loud" Yiddish in everybody's hearing range; she refused to accept the price a salesperson offered her for thread and tried to bargain like she used to in the Old Country; and most embarrassing for Faye, her grandmother went "to the bathroom in the middle of the street--in broad daylight." Faye put her "head down and walk[ed] away."[44]

Moskowitz's self-consciousness about her differences from her American classmates and friends also made her recognize her Jewishness. Because of her "un-American" dark hair and because she couldn't afford to buy expensive angora sweaters at a time when they were a "must-have," Moskowitz embraced her Jewish heritage by joining the Zionist movement

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[43] Moskowitz, Leak 8.

[44] Moskowitz, Leak 3-5.

and preparing herself "for life on a Kibbutz."[45]

Often Moskowitz appreciated her Jewish heritage; she enjoyed the Jewish community. On Passover, which has remained her favorite Jewish holiday, she felt close to her Jewish friends. "Breaking matzo together," Moskowitz remembers, "gave us a sense of community...[and] griping about our restricted diet truly bonded us."[46]

In short, Moskowitz was caught in a continuous confrontation between her traditional Jewish heritage and American culture. She felt, and was legitimately, a part of both. Since her childhood, she has assembled self identity from both sides of her environment. Her distinction between Yiddish and English is representative of her experience: Yiddish represents her Judaic roots in the Old World and English signifies her experiences in the New World. Thus Moskowitz not only found a connection between the languages but bridged the gap between her roots and experience--she successfully captured meaning out of the interaction between her conflicting cultural contexts:

> There is beauty enough and ugliness enough and love enough and hate enough for any one of us to select from and shape our own absolutely personal combinations. But this shaping must be a conscious thing: a reaching back and forward for those details that create pattern and form and motif in life. To see living as connection is to bevel the rough edges, miter the corners, blur the divisions for that time becomes a chain of always accessible segments, not fragments, of knowledge and experience.

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[45] Moskowitz, Leak 32.

[46] Moskowitz, Leak 15-6.

> I believe in...here, then, now, and forever in the connecting chains that set us free.[47]

Moskowitz is able to understand her own growth so clearly only today, as a woman who is actively involved in the process of assembling her self identity. She did not have this insight when she married right out of high school and had four children. Then, her life expectations were conformed to society's, defining a woman's "proper place" in the home. "Like many young women in my high school," she explains, "a diamond engagement ring to flash during senior year, the promise of babies and a little home in the suburbs, were expectation enough for me."[48]

But contrary to all expectations, Moskowitz felt more lonely and bored than ever, when she met another woman "trapped" in the same situation. They communicated their ideas and found something in common and worth working for. Together they became politically active, electing a highway commissioner and organizing meetings in the "subdivision for the state legislature." Applying American cultural possibilities to her own needs, Moskowitz's activism was a first step toward the realization of her abilities and formation of a self. "[R]isk is no excuse for inaction nor custom a definition of boundaries," the writer explains.[49] Significantly she refers to this period as her "first life."

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[47] Moskowitz, Leak 74.

[48] Moskowitz, Leak 81.

[49] Moskowitz, Leak 114.

She recalls:

> My husband and I found we had to take turns discussing our day. Sometimes we never got to his turn at all. Crazily, the more I did, the more I found time and energy for. The children grew before our eyes, and I did, too. For ten years I worked in politics; I call that decade "my first life."[50]

Moskowitz began her "second life" when her family moved to Washington, D.C. and she started a college education all the way through to a PhD in American literature. Afterward she took "the position of middle-school director in a small private school" (her "third life") where she still teaches.[51]

> At fifty-two, I feel younger than I did back in our little tract house when I tried to sleep the hours away. Each morning I arise with a sense of anticipation that the day confirms. I don't know how many more lives are left to me, but surely there will be others, and whatever they are, I will try to be open to them.[52]

Today Moskowitz attributes her growth to her "teachers." She considers herself "the sum of their feeling and doing."[53] Among them were her mother, and her husband's mother and grandmother. Communicating their knowledge and experience, Moskowitz was able to overcome the boundaries her "foremothers" had found themselves in, imposed on them by Orthodox Judaic traditions and American assimilationist pressures: the former granting women significance in

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[50] Moskowitz, Leak 83.

[51] Moskowitz, Leak 85.

[52] Moskowitz, Leak 85.

[53] Moskowitz, Leak 120.

economic matters yet limiting their status to non-existence in religious matters, the latter idealizing women's passivity in all matters but the caretaking of children and home. Moskowitz sought meaning for herself out of her foremothers' knowledge and experiences, and thus learned to feel secure in her own identity and to express herself--as her two book publications show.

Moskowitz's mother was the homemaker whose burden to feed her husband, children, parents, and herself in a time when the family income was very limited, was invaluable for survival and the holding together of the family. Yet she was full with optimism and communicated opportunities of the Promised Land--opportunities she never had.

> No, my mother would not consider us poor. Wasn't this the Promised Land? In spite of everything, she would make certain the promise was kept. She perceived America as a land where both men and women were capable of unlimited goals. Barriers were everywhere for her, yet she always found a way, if not through them, then around them.[54]

Her belief in the "unlimited goals" of the "Promised Land" did not mean full assimilation or denial of Jewishness to Moskowitz's mother--the most important lesson the daughter learned. The mother insisted that her children be proud of their Jewish heritage. Today Moskowitz remembers with humor the pain she felt as a child:

> ...[Mother] doggedly insisted that I be proud of my religion in a little town where to profess my Judaism was to mark myself different from everybody else. At a time in my life when I would have sold my soul in

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[54] Moskowitz, Leak 66.

> exchange for being 'Piscopalian like my friend Eileen, my mother coaxed me into carrying a box of matzo to school so I could give my classmates an explanation of Passover.[55]

Moskowitz followed the lessons of her mother's belief in the good deed, the mitzvah. As a child, she watched her mother giving money to pious male Jewish scholars from the little the family itself had. She offered kosher meals and a bed for the night, usually the daughter's. "'You're doing a mitzvah,'" her mother explained. Later, when Moskowitz has her own home, she and her husband take in peace marchers for the night. And she says: "They [the peace marchers] may not realize they stand at the head of a symbolic queue that began for me with an old man who carried a prayer book in his satchel--but I do."[56]

Today Moskowitz continues another Jewish tradition and passes it on to her daughter: the Pushke Lady, collecting money for a good cause. She remembers the Pushke Lady "sitting in a chair safely out of the draft, shaking her canister under our noses."[57] During her time in the Zionist movement, Moskowitz herself "stood on a street corner holding a canister."[58] Later she collected money for the United Way campaign, UNICEF, the Democrats, and the March of

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[55] Moskowitz, Leak 66-7.

[56] Moskowitz, Leak 119.

[57] Moskowitz, Leak 116.

[58] Moskowitz, Leak 117.

Dimes on Roosevelt's birthday.[59] She took her daughter with her to Alabama to meet the Freedom marchers, and notes: "I didn't tell my daughter the trip was a mitzvah or even that it was part of her pushke training, but she knows it now."[60] Relating her experiences from the Jewish tradition to issues concerning humanity in general, Moskowitz writes:

> Fund-raising is computerized now; we're not quick to let strangers into our homes, and no one seems to be marching very much, but the Pushke Lady in me still believes the knippl makes a difference. The world grows larger and more complex, yet hunger and pain have not lost their simplicity or directness. Besides, the way things are, I need to store up all the mitzvahs I can get.[61]

Before her babies were born, Moskowitz lived with her husband's mother and grandmother. With the grandmother, Bobbe Frieda, she developed a strong bond. They were like "sisters." Unable to sleep one night, Moskowitz and Bobbe talked. Until that night, the younger had perceived of the older as a stubborn person, anchored in the Old World and ignorant of the American way. When Bobbe unpacked her wedding gown and wig, relics from the Old Country, Moskowitz began to feel closer to her. Comprehending the older woman's experience, Moskowitz recalls, "I had the strangest feeling touching the crumbling hair that if I stretched my fingers far enough I could touch, too, the tender young bride who must have cried so bitterly when the women came to

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[59] Moskowitz, Leak 118.

[60] Moskowitz, Leak 118.

[61] Moskowitz, Leak 119.

shear her heavy hair."[62] She found similarities between her and the grandmother. "Like me, she had gone to live with her shviger (mother-in-law), at first. I wanted to ask her if, like me, she had ever wondered just who she was in a household that wasn't really hers."[63]

Through communication, Moskowitz and Bobbe Frieda grew closer. With this growth of closeness, Moskowitz respected Bobbe Frieda more. As she thought of the old woman's life, she suddenly realized that "from identity crisis...[Bobbe] didn't suffer."[64] To the contrary, Bobbe was not at all stubborn and ignorant, but a powerful woman who had sought meaning for herself out of what she was doing and felt confident. Upon her arrival at her husband's house, Moskowitz had intended to reorganize her mother-in-law's household. Her attempts failed. That night Moskowitz learned that the grandmother had recognized them as a simple "narrishkeit" (foolishness) all along. Moskowitz was not upset, instead acknowledged her own stubbornness and ignorance. She had learned to respect the old woman and felt of her "power deposed." The two women spent the rest of the night "giggling like schoolgirls."[65]

In short, actively pursuing her identity, Moskowitz

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[62] Moskowitz, Leak 46.

[63] Moskowitz, Leak 46.

[64] Moskowitz, Leak 47.

[65] Moskowitz, Leak 48.

draws from both the older Jewish and newer American traditions: humanitarian values from the one, political and educational opportunities from the other. Thus, Moskowitz reconciles both Jewish and American traditions. A Leak in the Heart tells of Moskowitz's immigrant foremothers, and American friends and students, who have been her teachers. They communicate their knowledge and experiences, and thus provide the necessary tools for the successful participation in the process of assembling self identity: to respect herself and others, to be open to an exchange of ideas, and not to allow imposed limitations of society or religion idealizing women's conformity to stereotypical roles. Moskowitz realizes that we all are teachers and students at certain times and change from one to the other constantly.[66]

Fictional Theme: Danger of Conformity

Although Moskowitz's growth through the reconciliation of both Jewish and American traditions seems easy-going, she by no means perceives the process of assembling self identity as anxiety-free. To the contrary, in her second book publication Whoever Finds This: I Love You (1988), a collection of fictional short stories, she characterizes these anxieties as results of imposed limitations on women by religion and society, idealizing conformity to stereotypical female roles.

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[66] Moskowitz, Leak 124.

Her fictional stories express Moskowitz's understanding of the necessity to participate in the process of assembling self identity through communication of ideas and beliefs. Though these stories are fictional rather than autobiographical, the reader of A Leak in the Heart recognizes Moskowitz's experiences woven into the stories. Not only do they play in Michigan, but the main characters are Jewish girls and women. The stories tell of its characters' own inner selves dealing with the fear of growing up, of love, of death, of loneliness, and most of all of the difficulty finding security in their identities. Moskowitz's characters represent the tragic consequences of not actively pursuing selfhood. Again, the reader understands the message: recognize imposed limitations on yourself and participate in life to the fullest--seek meaning in life through communication.

The title story tells of the young immigrant mother Shifra who grieves over the loss of her baby daughter. Chaya died from "a leak in the heart" and left the mother with a hole in her life she has yet to fill. More importantly, Shifra suffers from the ignorance of Orthodox Judaism toward women, limiting them to passivity through teachings of patriarchal superiority.

The resemblances between this story and Moskowitz's experiences are striking. To the reader it appears as the author's interpretation of her mother's dealing with a situation she could not really cope with. Moskowitz had an

older sister who also died of "a leak in the heart." After the sister's death, her parents moved out of their apartment leaving everything behind, "food in the cupboards, sheets on the beds, [they] had turned the key and walked out."[67] The character Shifra also wants to leave their home after their baby's death. "'David,'" she says to her husband, "'I can't look at this place. Get me out. I'll never come back here again.'"[68] As Moskowitz's parents moved from Detroit to Jackson, Michigan, Shifra and David move "away from Detroit to a small town some sixty miles from their family and friends."[69] In the new home Moskowitz's father worked at a junkyard; so does the character David.[70] And like Moskowitz's mother, a homemaker, preoccupying herself with the cleaning of the house ("My mother's floors were of the legendary variety you could eat from"[71]), Shifra, the homemaker, cleans constantly so the dirt will not "bury" her.[72]

Shifra lives in fear instilled by patriarchal teachings of Orthodox Judaism, idealizing men's superiority and women's inferiority. Most of all, Shifra fears God. After

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[67] Moskowitz, Leak 54.

[68] Moskowitz, Faye. Whoever Finds This: I Love You. Boston: David R. Godine, 1988. 4.

[69] Moskowitz, Whoever 5.

[70] Moskowitz, Whoever 5.

[71] Moskowitz, Whoever 31.

[72] Moskowitz, Whoever 17.

her baby's death she is anxious to find out "what it was she had done to offend God so, perhaps she could make some sense out of what He had done to her."[73] Assuming she sinned when she and her husband David made love while she was pregnant, she blames the baby's death on herself. A week after Chaya's death, when David wants to make love to Shifra, she believes God is still "angry" with her and fears he will punish her again. "Tell me," she asks David scared and angry, "that I need another baby for the evil eye to fall on."[74] Acknowledging male superiority, Shifra also fears she sinned by becoming angry with and refusing David, who then leaves the house. She blames herself and excuses him: "He was a man, after all."[75]

Tragically, her fears stifle Shifra being herself. She lives in her own little world, secluded from communication, signifying her fears. The young woman is introverted, her communication with David reduced to listening. Yet, filled with questions about her relationship to God, Shifra holds them back and instead entertains "endless inner conversations, like dozens of crossed telephone lines."[76] Unsurprisingly, the "world seemed shrunken for her like a woolen dress washed in boiling water by mistake, a dress

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[73] Moskowitz, Whoever 5.

[74] Moskowitz, Whoever 10.

[75] Moskowitz, Whoever 13.

[76] Moskowitz, Whoever 5.

whose shoulders refused her bowed back, into whose pockets she could no longer plunge her balled-up fists."[77]

Shifra's fears are aggravated by her loneliness. Bound to the home, she is constantly alone. Only cleaning occupies her, cleaning to be respected in God's eyes again. New to America, language and culture barriers do not make it easier on her to break out of her fearful world. When a neighbor calls on her with a plate of homemade cookies, Shifra is too "anxious" and "suspicious" to talk to the woman but loses her few English words and quickly shuts the door. And she stands "for half an hour behind the door, heart pounding, balancing the plate."[78]

Shifra's relationship to her husband is affected by assimilationist pressures, confining her to the home in accordance with the ideal of the lady. Her husband assimilates more rapidly than she, who stays home all day. To David, who works and has the opportunity to communicate, Shifra feels more and more distanced. David talks "American," only intensifying her feeling of loneliness in a world which is already foreign to her.

> ...[Shifra] resented the excitement that seemed to creep more and more frequently into his stories. She took it as one more sign that he was diluting the strength and purity of their grief. Scornfully, she mocked his clumsy English. "I'm free, white and twenty-one," he kept telling her. What did that mean? Soon he would be speaking nothing but English, and she would be more alone than ever. So she only pretended

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[77] Moskowitz, Whoever 7.

[78] Moskowitz, Whoever 8.

to listen for she did not really want to hear about his life outside.[79]

Tragically, there is no hope for a change to the better. Shifra's fears and loneliness will remain because of her passivity. She takes things for given and does not believe in change through action. Once contemplating the idea of running away, she quickly reconsiders, "Where can I run...to where the black pepper grows?" Reflecting on her argument with David, Shifra simply wonders, "Who could change the world?"[80]

Shifra's passivity is instilled by Orthodox Judaism, teaching women's obedience toward God and men. Herein lies Moskowitz's criticism: through these teachings women are barred from communication in the sense of questioning, i.e. seeking meaning through an exchange of ideas and beliefs. While Shifra's husband David goes out to work and assimilates more and more to American culture, Shifra, bound to the home as a result of assimilationist pressures, does not have the opportunity to communicate and familiarize herself with American culture and language. As a result, she does not feel secure in her identity but constantly fears punishment from God. Shifra, the reader understands, will need to learn to communicate, i.e. to actively pursue an exchange of ideas and beliefs and pursue her self identity.

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[79] Moskowitz, Leak 8.

[80] Moskowitz, Whoever 18.

The story "Irene" also deals with a young mother trapped in her home. Unlike Shifra, Irene is familiar with American culture and the world outside her home is not foreign to her. Stifled by the effects of society's idealization of female domesticity, she is unable to assemble a positive self image. The assumption of traditional female roles is unfulfilling to Irene.

Again, the story is woven out of Moskowitz's experiences. Irene, like the author, married out of high school. As Moskowitz did not have more expectations out of life than "the promise of babies and a little home in the suburbs," the character Irene perceived babies and home as a "solid foundation" in a "grown-up world" that was "crumbling."[81] Bored with their restrictive housewife/ mother role both author and character tried to sleep the day away. "I remember mornings," Moskowitz writes, "when my youngest son rocked his crib from wall to wall, leaving mounds of cracked plaster on the floor, while I burrowed under the covers until noon, desperately trying to pass the hours away."[82] And of her character Irene she says, "Mostly Irene slept, deep, dreamless sleep, awakening still tired, not knowing where she was, not thinking she was somewhere else, simply lost."[83]

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[81] Moskowitz, Leak 81; Whoever 59.

[82] Moskowitz, Leak 82.

[83] Moskowitz, Whoever 62.

"Lost" in the home, Irene is secluded from meaningful communication and as a result is lonely and bored. She spends her time smoking cigarettes and drinking coffee, believing they "went along with marriage and maturity."[84] She has a strong desire to communicate but does not get familiar enough with other young women to exchange ideas; they find meaning in the domestic female ideal. To her it seems their conversations center around "waxing and polishing." Referring to "'my' floor" and "'my' furniture," they reveal a certain "sense of proprietorship" which Irene feels unable to match.[85] The only person whose company Irene enjoys is her housemaid Marie's. Irene often desperately awaits Marie's arrival, for the company not the cleaning. When Marie does not come in, Irene is disappointed.

> She was more disappointed than she cared to admit, not only because the house, as usual, looked as if it had been ransacked, but because she looked forward to Marie's company. She was supposed to get out of the house a little on the day Marie gave her; often she found excuses to stay home, and then she followed Marie around, carrying an ashtray, smoking cigarettes, and gossiping about Marie's family and her own. Sometimes Marie had time to bake an apple pie or fry some chicken for supper. Then Irene felt especially happy. She liked to have her house smell homey, the way a house should.[86]

Moskowitz demonstrates the tragic effects of conformity to society's idealization of female domesticity--where women

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[84] Moskowitz, Whoever 60.

[85] Moskowitz, Whoever 63.

[86] Moskowitz, Whoever 65.

do not find meaning in domesticity--in a scene where Irene's mother tells her daughter "to get out of herself." Irene remembers an image she envisions so often: "...her spirit leaving her body, dragging along behind her, a shadow she was forever tripping on as if it were the hem of a too-long coat."[87] The "shadow," i.e. the ideal, Moskowitz illustrates, does not fit Irene.

Irene forces the ideal to fit by embarking on project after project conform to the stereotypical ideal. None of the projects she becomes involved with have meaning to her, Irene is not interested in what she is doing. As a result her projects fail--the ideal does not fit. Irene attempts to sell cosmetics to her neighbors but never makes any sales. "The trouble was she kept running into women as moorless and lonely as she was. The hours she spent chatting in their spotless homes or apartments never resulted in any sales."[88] Then Irene cans tomatoes for a whole season. But the vegetable rots faster than she can work. "No matter how quickly she worked, and Carl [her husband] too, sometimes, the apartment reeked for days of decaying tomatoes." She gets tired of canning and returns to buying canned food.[89] Irene participates in a practical nursing course. But "the week they practiced giving him

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[87] Moskowitz, Whoever 63.

[88] Moskowitz, Whoever 60.

[89] Moskowitz, Whoever 61.

[the dummy] an enema, Irene stopped going to Goldberg Trade."[90] She buys a sewing machine planning to pay the installments with the money she hopes to earn from sewing. "Unfortunately, she had no car with which to get to the free sewing lessons in Detroit that came with the machine. The clothes she managed to sew, following the machine's instruction booklet, were all misshapen."[91]

In this story also, there is no hope for a change to the better. Irene's communication network is limited, a meaningful exchange of ideas and beliefs stifled. And, a tragic expression of her state, she is convinced that nothing "substantial" exists; the world is "crumbling." Ever since the Second World War, Irene feared that the existence of the atom bomb, with its power to erase life within seconds, makes everything "unsubstantial."[92]

Irene desires security and meaning in life. Moskowitz illustrates this symbolically when Irene successfully steals the most beautiful dress from the most expensive clothing line she can find. Both security and meaning are not given to Irene, so she takes them. Tragically, at least for that moment the theft provides Irene with security and meaning. "For the moment she felt exhilarated and invulnerable," Moskowitz describes. "Deliberately, she slowed her pace,

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[90] Moskowitz, Whoever 63.

[91] Moskowitz, Whoever 65.

[92] Moskowitz, Whoever 62, 59.

even stopped at the hosiery counter to debate the relative merits of 'warm beige' and 'suntan' with a clerk who wore her glasses on a long gold chain." Just like the other symbols signifying Irene's stifled identity, she stores the dress in the basement along with the person she desires to be.

> Irene took off the Lanz dress in the bathroom and dropped it in a clothes hamper. After her mother left, she put it with the other Lanz dresses in the basement near the wedding presents, the canned tomatoes, and the Singer sewing machine.[93]

Irene is a victim of society's ideal of female domesticity. As her mother before her and her high school friends too, Irene perceived marriage right out of high school with babies and a nice home as the single path to happiness. Lonely and bored, she tries to find satisfaction in occupations conform to the stereotypical female ideal. But to Irene this ideal simply does not have any meaning. Unknowingly, she bares the tragic consequences of this misperception. Irene, Moskowitz teaches, needs the opportunity to communicate, to stimulate meaning in life through new ideas and beliefs. But, conforming to the ideal, Irene is secluded from communication that gives meaning and thus from participation in the process of assembling self identity.

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[93] Moskowitz, Whoever 71-2.

Summary

The title story and the story "Irene" from Moskowitz's collection Whoever Finds This: I Love You are two significant examples of the author's critical ideal: women's stifled identities resulting from Orthodox Judaism's teachings of women's inferiority toward men and from sexist society's ideal of female domesticity. Following the teachings of Orthodox Judaism, Shifra learned to be passive, does not communicate, and fearfully takes everything as given and therefore unchangeable. Her husband David, however, learned to be active and expresses himself in excitement, "I'm free, white and twenty-one."[94] Irene, influenced by society's idealization of female domesticity, does not see opportunities to engage in something else but traditionally female trades. While her husband is at work, Irene tries to sleep away the days and steals dresses to find meaning in life at least for a moment. Confined to the home and immobilized from an interaction with the "outside world," both women have difficulties communicating to seek meaning in their lives. Thus they are stifled from actively participating in the process of assembling self identity. Moskowitz's message: women have to be themselves and not conform to religious or societal concepts that define their identities for them. Conformity, as in these two stories, fosters fear and insecurity. To live a life without fear

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[94] Moskowitz, Whoever 8, 17.

and insecurity, Moskowitz teaches, we have to "break out of the constricting circle" of conformity.[95]

Moskowitz herself was able to "break out": she had "teachers" who communicated their knowledge and experiences and she was lucky to find friends and a husband who were open to an exchange of ideas and beliefs. Unfortunately, the story characters Shifra and Irene do not have these opportunities. Trapped inside their homes, it is hard for them to find communication with nurturing companions. They are closed off to new ideas and perceive life as given and unchangeable or as meaningless. Instilled beliefs in conformity to stereotypical female roles stifle participation in the process of assembling self identity. Moskowitz's stories demonstrate the tragic consequences of a stifled self identity.

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[95] Moskowitz, Leak 111.

TILLIE OLSEN: THE POWER OF "CIRCUMSTANCES"

As Moskowitz illustrates the need for communication in the process of assembling self identity, Tillie Olsen's fiction presents self identity stifled by "circumstances" of class, ethnicity, and gender. Olsen's literature illustrates that women, in particular, often find it difficult to adequately express and develop their own positive self concepts. Trapped by limitations of economic and gender circumstances, they receive little room to grow or develop friendships. Raising children, working in the home or in the workplace, each add their own dimensions to the problem of assembling self identity for women.

Olsen's thoughts and beliefs grew out of her Jewish heritage on the one hand, and her maturing in a working-class home on the other. Combined, they provided her with a vision of an equal and just world for everybody. The humanitarian ideal is expressed throughout her work: Olsen presents the suffering of people who do not belong to the dominant class, ethnic group, or gender. Implicitly, Olsen criticizes capitalist patriarchal society for its disregard of human life; she illustrates the power of circumstances that do not allow human beings to participate in the processes of assembling self identity: friendship and self-exploration become stifled by economic and gender boundaries.

Yiddish Culture and American Socialism

Tillie Olsen was born in 1912 or 1913 to immigrant Russian Jews in Nebraska and was the second oldest child of six. Outlining the cultural contexts in which Olsen developed, the literary critic Elaine Neil Orr finds two main influences on the author's beliefs and ideals: American socialism and Yiddish culture. In the American midwest of the 1910s and 20s, Olsen grew up in an economically depressed environment. Her father, then a worker in a packinghouse, together with others organized against the management. "Thus her first memories were colored by labor struggles, the realities of the workplace, the desire of laborers for a job and dignity, and a growing American socialism."[96]

According to Orr, Olsen's parents' socialist ideal rooted in their Jewish heritage. Yiddish culture, emerging in Eastern Europe during the late nineteenth century, provided Jews with a vision to achieve a more humane world. Until then, over centuries, Jews in Russia had waited for the Messiah to deliver them from bondage under the Russian Zsarist regimes. But the Yiddish ideal called for the Jews' own participation in the realization of "greater economic justice, learning, and human expansiveness." The spreading of this new ideal brought about a break with the traditional Jewish religion which was perceived as "a structure of life

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[96] Orr, Elaine Neil. Tillie Olsen and a Feminist Spiritual Vision. Jackson: U of Mississippi P, 1987. 23.

so tied with the old constrictions." Orr explains:

> Though she did not grow up in an Orthodox Jewish family by any means...Olsen received the socialist and Yiddish influence of her parents as a profound international concern. She has said her parents chose what they would keep of a Jewish identity, and it was largely the humanism of Yiddishkeit. Socialism provided the political lens for viewing the severe inequities of life in Russia and later in the United States and gave people like the Lerners a means of uniting with others to fight aggressively for change.[97]

These humanitarian ideals, combined with Olsen's personal experiences, lay the groundwork of her writing. From early childhood on she experienced what she later defines as "circumstances" restricting one's selfhood.[98] Her family's economically depressed situation forced Olsen to drop out of high school in eleventh grade and help financially support her family. "[A]lthough, as she is careful to remind people who today take their degrees for granted, this means that she went further in school than most of the women in her generation."[99] She married, raised four daughters in San Francisco, and worked at low-paying jobs. Also, she became an active member of the Young Communist League organizing unions for which she spent times in jail.[100]

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[97] Orr 24.

[98] Olsen, Tillie. Silences. 1978. NY: Delacorte P/Seymour Lawrence, 1989.

[99] Rosenfelt, Deborah. "From the Thirties: Tillie Olsen and the Radical Tradition." Feminist Studies 7, no.3 (Fall 1981):375.

[100] "Tillie Olsen." Twentieth-Century American Literature. Ed. Harold Bloom. Vol.5. NY: Chelsea, 1987. 2925.

Economic "Circumstances"

Olsen's fiction reflects the ideals she inherited from Yiddish culture and American socialism. Her work calls for a more humane world against social injustices, inequalities and discrimination, a world granting everybody happiness by allowing equal opportunity to participate in the process of assembling self identity. Olsen's early work focuses on the limitations lower-class status thrusts upon individuals; her later work develops especially the restrictive circumstances of gender.

One example of Olsen's early writing is the poem "I Want You Women Up North to Know" (1934). It contrasts the situation of the Mexican-American women who slave in the clothing industry with the situation of the "women up north" who wear the product of this labor. Olsen deals with social injustices, the differences between the rich and the poor, and stresses these as the cause for the loss of the working women's identity. Selma Burkom and Margaret Williams note that the poem's "central metaphor transforms the women themselves...into the clothing they embroider--<u>they</u> become the product of their labor."[101]

> I want you women up north to see
> the obsequious smile, the salesladies trill
> "exquisite work, madame, exquisite pleats"
> vanish into a bloated face, ordering more dresses,
> gouging the wages down,
> dissolve into maria, ambrosa, catalina,
> stitching these dresses from dawn to night,

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[101] Burkom, Selma and Margaret Williams. "De-Riddling Tillie Olsen's Writings." <u>San Jose Studies</u> 2 (1976):69.

In blood, in wasting flesh.[102]

In her novel Yonnondio: From the Thirties, Olsen also illustrates economic circumstances as stifling in the process of assembling self identity, but emphasizes the special situation developing for women out of these circumstances. Olsen began writing the novel when she was nineteen and finished it five years later (1932-37). But she did not publish her text then. "Thought long since lost or destroyed" she found the manuscript in 1973. "It is all the old manuscripts--no rewriting, no new writing."[103]

Yonnondio is the story of the Holbrook family struggling to find a decent life when moving from a Wyoming coal-mining town to a tenant farm in South Dakota and further on to a hog-slaughtering factory in some unnamed city. Their situation does not improve. Nevertheless, the major character, Anna, learns to find meaning in life and feel secure in her identity. But this is a hard and slow process, stifled by the family's financial circumstances. In Yonnondio, the critic Annette McElhiney states, "Olsen allows us to see the major character triumph over life

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[102] Olsen, Tillie. "I Want You Women Up North To Know." Partisan Review (1934):4. (Published under the name of Tillie Lerner.) Rpt. in Feminist Studies 7, no.3 (Fall 1981):367. I quoted from Feminist Studies.

[103] Olsen, Tillie. "A Note About This Book." Yonnondio: From the Thirties. 1974. NY: Delacorte P/Seymour Lawrence, 1989.

despite the restraints which it has imposed upon her."[104]

Developing the process Anna goes through, the critic marks the different stages: Anna's depression, her sickness, her recovery and simultaneous attempts to "understand the difference between 'existing' and 'living,'" and her final understanding. The strengthening force for Anna is her innate "zest for life."[105] Early in the novel, McElhiney points out, Olsen describes Anna's strong character and will to live life.[106] Elias Caldwell, a dying old man, explains to Anna's daughter Mazie:

> Mazie, live, don't exist. Learn from your mother, who has had everything to grind out life and yet has kept life. Alive, felt what's real, known what's real. People can live their whole life not knowing.[107]

Financial circumstances, however, continue to make life hard on the Holbrooks. Pregnant with her fourth child, Anna falls into lethargy. She lets "things be" and retreats into a dreamworld, thumbing "over the pages of a catalogue."[108] Anna exists, not lives.[109]

The birth of the baby Bess, of the new life, provides Anna with renewed strength: she comes out of her lethargy

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[104] McElhiney, Annette Bennington. "Alternative Responses to Life in Tillie Olsen's Work." Frontiers 2, no.1 (1977):86.

[105] McElhiney 86-9.

[106] McElhiney 86.

[107] Olsen, Yonnondio 37.

[108] Olsen, Yonnondio 40.

[109] McElhiney 87.

and again struggles to give her family all the care she can under the circumstances. Unable to make a living in the country, the family moves to the city slums where Jim Holbrook works in a meat-packing factory; their financial and spiritual situation does not improve--it gets worse. They live in a filthy, broken down area where a "fog of stink smothers down over it all--so solid so impenetrable, no other smell lives beside it."[110] Again Anna becomes pregnant, and again, as McElhiney describes, "moves back into that somnambulant state which is psychologically, if not entirely, like the physical chaos of death."[111] One day Mazie finds her mother at home:

> In the dirty light of dusk her mother sat motionless, her eyes large and feverish, the baby at her breast asleep. The lifeless hair hung in two black braids, framing her like a coffin, and above a spiral of fire foamed, reflected the open damper.[112]

When Anna has a miscarriage, Olsen also uses death to describe the scene: "The blood on the kitchen floor, the two lifeless braids of hair framing her face like a corpse, the wall like darkness behind."[113] For days Anna stays in bed, "numb." When she has gained enough strength, Anna has the remaining fetal tissue taken from her womb.

In the clinic Anna saw posters warning mothers of

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[110] Olsen, Yonnondio 47.

[111] McElhiney 87.

[112] Olsen, Yonnondio 71. McElhiney also cites this example.

[113] Olsen, Yonnondio 75.

germs. Her desire to provide for her family the best life possible under their circumstances, drives Anna to clean their home--but she is still too weak. Moreover, Anna realizes that her family's well-being is intricately bound to their economic circumstances and not to her efforts. Knowing their financial situation will not change, she feels helpless.

> [Anna stood] swaying in the middle of the floor, twisting and twisting the rompers in soundless anguish. It was that she felt so worn, so helpless; that it loomed gigantic beyond her, impossible ever to achieve, beyond, beyond any effort or doing of hers: that task of making a better life for her children to which her being was bound.[114]

Slowly Anna grows physically stronger, and more and more the reader is aware of Anna's change from a merely "existing" to a "living" woman. During her illness Anna realized that her happiness would come from spreading love. Tragically, only when Anna was ill, had she the time to seek meaning in her life. "And a separation," Olsen describes, "a distance--something broken and new and tremulous--had been born in her, lying by herself those long unaccustomed hours free of task."[115]

Thus, Olsen points to those circumstances that impose on people's lives and their identities. Again consumed by housework, Anna discovers she must take the necessary time to "understand the difference between 'existing' and

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[114] Olsen, Yonnondio 88.

[115] Olsen, Yonnondio 93.

'living.'" One day she and the children cross the boundaries of the slum to find dandelion greens. Overwhelmed by the peacefulness surrounding them, Anna forgets her "mother look," the "mother alertness...in her bounded body," instead sings and strokes Mazie.

> The fingers stroked, spun a web, cocooned Mazie into happiness and intactness and selfness. Soft wove the bliss round hurt and fear and want and shame--healing, transforming. Up from the grasses, from the earth, from the broad tree trunk at their back, latent life streamed and seeded. The air and self shone boundless. Absently, her mother stroked; stroked unfolding, wingedness, boundlessness.[116]

Here, Anna understands the difference between "existing" and "living." She "has come to terms with herself and her life," remarks McElhiney.[117] Through seeking meaning in life, Anna recognizes that her "being is bound" to spreading love. Only then will she feel secure in her identity.

This newly found security in her identity fills Anna with strength and spirit for life, despite its hardships. From this point on, the novel describes scenes where the children and their parents laugh. Anna has become the comforting source for her family. In the final chapter, Olsen illustrates Anna's strength and spirit: Baby Bess pushes fruit jars from the table. "Centuries of human drive work in her; human ecstasy of achievement; satisfaction deeper and more fundamental than sex. I can do, I use my powers; I! I!" The family unites in the kitchen laughing

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[116] Olsen, Yonnondio 102.

[117] McElhiney 88.

at Bess. "Heat misery, rash misery transcended."[118] McElhiney interprets this scene in relation to what Elias Caldwell told Mazie early in the novel, "She [Anna] has had everything to grind out life and yet has kept life." The critic concludes:

> Anna knows what is real: work, sweat, heat, disappointment, and failure--and also challenge, achievement, joy, and love. She also knows that she can achieve, both as an individual, and as a wife and mother. She is not chafing against the misery of her life: she is hopeful and strong with her self-knowledge.[119]

Yonnondio shows that security in self identity leads to a rewarding life. Yet, the process to reach it, Olsen also demonstrates, does not only depend on one's self but on certain circumstances. As a woman of the working class, Anna is wrapped up by the tasks as mother and homemaker, and can not afford time for herself. Only when she is sick, has she time to think about life and her role in it. Thus, the circumstances of being a working-class woman, stifle participation in the process of assembling self identity.

Gender "Circumstances"

After writing Yonnondio, Olsen is silent for more than twenty years. Caught herself by circumstances of class and gender, she works at low-paying jobs as laundress, waitress and secretary, and fulfills the non-paying task of homemaker

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[118] Olsen, Yonnondio 132.

[119] McElhiney 89.

and mother raising four daughters.[120] Her work leaves her no time nor gives her the energy for fulfillment of her desire to write.

> [The] simplest circumstances for creation did not exist. Nevertheless writing, the hope of it, was "the air breathed, so long as I shall breathe at all." In that hope, there was conscious storing, snatched reading, beginnings of writing, and always "the secret rootlets of reconnaissance."
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> In such snatches of time I wrote what I did in those years, but there came a time when this triple life was no longer possible. The fifteen hours of daily realities became too much distraction for the writing. I lost craziness of endurance.[121]

Finally, in the late 1950s Olsen was awarded a grant allowing her the necessary time to write. Ever since she has received several awards and honorary degrees, and has taught at many colleges, among them Amherst College and Stanford University. Her experiences during her years of silence as well as humanitarian ideals inherited from her socialist Jewish heritage, served Olsen as groundwork for her more recent writings, consisting of four short stories now collected in Tell Me A Riddle (1961). In these stories restrictive circumstances of class still play an important role. Stronger than in the novel, however, they emphasize the interplay with circumstances of gender. In the story "O Yes," Olsen develops the theme further by adding circumstances of race as another factor stifling selfhood.

The stories tell about female characters, mothers and

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[120] Bloom 2925.

[121] Olsen, Silences 19-20.

daughters, the burdens they carry as results of their low-class status, their gender or race. Olsen's stress on "circumstances" of gender is an indication of her own restrictive experience. The stories "I Stand Here Ironing" and the title story are autobiographical in that they describe women who are silenced by the circumstances of class and gender leaving them no time for participation in the process of assembling their self identities.

"I Stand Here Ironing" goes one step further and demonstrates the tragic consequences of circumstances on children. A nameless mother tries to justify why her daughter Emily, compared to her four siblings, is introverted and pessimistic about the future. The answer to this riddle "moves tormented back and forth with the iron."[122] Louise Bernikow writes, "Back and forth, like the iron, the mother's mind moves, love and despair, blame and resignation."[123] Becoming a mother at nineteen and then deserted by her husband, living in the depression, working at low-paid jobs during the day, doing housework at night, having to put her daughter into a convalescent home for some time, rearing four children in a second marriage--all this seems to be reason enough. Yet, the critic Rose Yalow Kamel finds, the mother recognizes it is not. And she also knows

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[122] Olsen, Tillie. Tell Me A Riddle. 1961. NY: Delacorte P/Seymour Lawrence, 1989. 1.

[123] Bernikow, Louise. Among Women. NY: Harmony Books, 1980. 46.

that she will never solve the riddle.[124]

> I will never total it all. I will never come in to say: She was a child seldom smiled at. Her father left me before she was a year old. I had to work her first six years when there was work, or I sent her home and to his relatives. There were years she had care she hated. She was dark and thin and foreign-looking in a world where the prestige went to blondeness and curly hair and dimple, she was slow where glibness was prized. She was a child of anxious, not proud love. We were poor and could not afford for her the soil of easy growth. I was a young mother, I was a distracted mother. There were the other children pushing up, demanding. Her younger sister seemed all that she was not. There were years she did not let me touch her. She kept too much in herself.[125]

Growing up in a hostile world, seeking her mother's love and attention, Emily has never learned to feel secure in her identity. Instead, she stays frightened and silent. Only on stage, as a comedian at school performances, does Emily speak out. This, however, Kamel remarks, is another's role, not her own.[126] The girl has not been given the opportunity to grow into her self. Thus, Emily sees no prospect for the future but believes that in a few years everybody will be "atom-dead."

The mother acknowledges that "her wisdom came too late" to help her daughter, but also that Emily "is a child of her age, of depression, of war, of fear."[127] Financial and political circumstances did not allow the daughter to learn

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[124] Kamel 92.

[125] Olsen, Tell Me A Riddle 12.

[126] Kamel 92.

[127] Olsen, Tell Me A Riddle 12.

to seek meaning in life and thus participate in the process of assembling self identity. Realizing her daughter's problem, yet unable to help her, the mother can only pray:

> Only help her to know--help make it so there is cause for her to know--that she is more than this dress on the ironing board, helpless before the iron.[128]

Eva, the grandmother in "Tell Me A Riddle," has lived her life as the all-giving and all-loving mother and wife. She recognized that for the most part of her life she has lived "between" and "for" but "not with people."[129] Not only her seven children but also her husband Max demanded full attention and could not stand her doing something just for herself: a young wife alone at night nursing the baby, she "would try to stay awake for the only time there was to read." Her husband would come in late and tell her, "put the book away, don't read, don't read."[130] The children grown up and gone now, he wants to sell the house and move into an Old People's home, the Haven, where he can be near his friends, and let others care for him and his wife. But Eva wants her peace in their old home. "Never again to be forced to move to the rhythms of others."[131]

Until her cancer surgery, Eva had only wanted peace.

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[128] Olsen, Tell Me A Riddle 12.

[129] Olsen, Tell Me A Riddle 76.

[130] Olsen, Tell Me A Riddle 67.

[131] Olsen, Tell Me A Riddle 68.

But after it, McElhiney states, "she begins to review, evaluate, and attempt to renew her life."[132] She is anxious to hear everything. Before, she used to shut her hearing aid off: Eva shut out life. Now she attempts to comprehend every little detail, "How the petals are, fold on fold, and the gladioli color. The autumn air."[133] Eva lives life: consciously breathes, smells, sees--participates.

Eva further expresses her desire to live life by rejecting possible restrictions thrust on selfhood by religion and custom. As McElhiney points out, she voices the importance of "an awareness of life, and teaching others to be aware of the same."[134]

When her son-in-law, a Rabbi, appears, Eva is angry and wants him to leave. She tells her family to change her status on the hospital list regarding her religion and race. "Tell them to write: Race, human; Religion, none."[135] McElhiney explains, "No crutches for Eva now, she intends to walk through the rest of her life without them."[136]

Eva is also upset when her daughter Hannah lights the candles of benediction. She realizes, "Not for pleasure she

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[132] McElhiney 81.

[133] Olsen, Tell Me A Riddle 79.

[134] McElhiney 82.

[135] Olsen, Tell Me A Riddle 80.

[136] McElhiney 81.

[Hannah] does it. For emptiness."[137] But Hannah explains that she does it for her children, to give them a sense of their heritage. This upsets Eva even more who believes in the importance to value life:

> Heritage. How have we come from our savage past, how no longer to be savages--this to teach. To look back and learn what humanizes--this to teach. Learned books in the house, will humankind live or die, and she gives to her boys--superstition.[138]

At the same time, Eva realizes that she herself was unable to teach her children awareness of life. Olsen, again, makes the circumstances of a lower class housewife/mother responsible. "Heritage! But when did I have time to teach? Of Hannah I asked only hands to help."[139]

When it is clear that Eva will soon die, all but her learn about it. Max takes her on a round of family visits for one last time. Eva does not enjoy the forced visits. She cannot stand being with her family. Too many memories come back about her life lived "for" and "between" others with hardships and pain, constantly absorbed by the problem of feeding and raising her children with so little money. No, all Eva desires is solitude, time to think about life and her role in it.

> Surely that was not all, surely there was more. Still the springs, the springs were in her seeking. Somewhere an older power that beat for life. Somewhere

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[137] Olsen, Tell Me A Riddle 81.

[138] Olsen, Tell Me A Riddle 81.

[139] Olsen, Tell Me A Riddle 81.

> coherence, transport, meaning. If they would but leave her in the air now stilled of clamor, in the reconciled solitude, to journey on.[140]

Unable to endure the constant confrontation with her past, Eva wants to return home and have her peace. But nobody allows her to find it: Max forces her to stay "for the fear of the future raced in him."[141] Her children burden her with their memories and needs.

Later, finding out about her illness, Eva finds peace only in death--not at home, but in a Los Angeles apartment for the elderly. Slowly she retreats into her self. "She, who in her life had spoken but seldom and then only when necessary (never having learned the easy, social uses of words) now in dying, spoke incessantly."[142] Eva speaks of her life fifty years ago in Russia, and of Lisa, a Russian revolutionary who taught her to read. "To her [Lisa], life was holy, knowledge was holy, and she taught me to read. They hung her." And Eva realizes, "Everything that happens one must try to understand why."[143]

When her children come to visit, Eva "tries to understand" herself as a mother. "Pay me back Mother, pay me back for all you took from me," guiltily she imagines her oldest daughter's thoughts, for whom she never had time but

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[140] Olsen, Tell Me A Riddle 84.

[141] Olsen, Tell Me A Riddle 85.

[142] Olsen, Tell Me A Riddle 103.

[143] Olsen, Tell Me A Riddle 103.

asked only help of in caring for the younger siblings.[144] And she "tries to understand" her role in the general society, and is shocked by the easiness with which humans destroy other lives.

> Even in reality (swallow) life's lack of it
> Slaveships deathtrains clubs eeenough
> The bell summon what enables
> 78,000 in one minute (whisper of a scream) 78,000
> human beings we'll destroy ourselves?

Eva seeks a solution to the problem why human beings kill each other. As McElhiney points out, "the nearer Eva gets to death, the more she seems to understand."[145] She understands that we have to value every life.

> No man one except through others
> Strong with the not yet in the now
> Dogma dead war dead one country
> ...
> Lift high banner of reason (tatter of an orator's voice)
> justice freedom light
> Humankind life worthy capacities
> Seeks (blur of shudder) belong human being[146]

Seeking meaning in life, Eva not only pursues her own identity, but inspires Max to ask similar questions. He remembers his own revolutionary past in Russia with regret for what their lives lost in America:

> ...that joyous certainty, that sense of mattering, of moving and being moved, of being one and indivisible with the great of the past, with all that freed, ennobled[147]

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[144] Olsen, Tell Me A Riddle 107. Original emphasis.

[145] McElhiney 84.

[146] Olsen, Tell Me A Riddle 109, 110. Original emphasis.

[147] Olsen, Tell Me A Riddle 113. Original emphasis.

And his thoughts wander to Eva, picturing her life in the past and the present. Admiring his wife for her enduring belief in life despite all the throwbacks, Max asks: "Still you believed?"[148]

Eva provokes Max's "awareness of life, of others, and of questioning one's relationship to both."[149] Max learns that despite the hardships Eva has had to put up with throughout her life, her belief in life is not broken. Her belief motivates her to "review and evaluate" life. Thus, Eva pursues her self identity and dies in peace. Eva's granddaughter Jeannie tells Max:

> Grandaddy, Grandaddy don't cry. She is not there, she promised me. On the last day, she said she would go back to when she first heard music, a little girl on the road of the village where she was born. She promised me. It is a wedding and they dance, while the flutes so joyous and vibrant tremble in the air. Leave her there, Grandaddy, it is all right. She promised me. Come back, come back and help her poor body to die.[150]

Summary

This selection of works by Tillie Olsen demonstrates the power of circumstances of class and gender on selfhood. Living in economic poverty stifles participation in the process of assembling self identity for the Mexican-American women in Olsen's poem, for the novel character Anna, and the

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[148] Olsen, Tell Me A Riddle 113-14.

[149] McElhiney 85.

[150] Olsen, Tell Me A Riddle 115-16.

short story characters Emily and Eva. As mothers of low-income families the characters Anna and Eva carry an extra burden: they feel guilty and unable to provide necessities for their children, like a good meal, for example.

Further, the mothers are victims of gender circumstances: they have no time for themselves but are consumed by their families' needs. Victims of circumstances, Olsen's literature illustrates, are not only the mothers themselves, but also their children: if the mothers are not secure in their identities, they cannot be spiritual sources for their children, as in Emily's and her mother's case. As Olsen explains through the novel character Anna: once Anna found meaning in life, and thus felt secure in her identity, she became a spiritually comforting source for her family. But the author emphasizes once more the power of circumstances: to reach a recognition as Anna did, depends on the time a mother is able to spare. Poor economic circumstances certainly stifle the process of reaching such a recognition.

By making us aware of restrictive circumstances on selfhood, Olsen is critical of our capitalist patriarchal society's structures and functions. Her critique is the product of ideals steeped in Yiddish culture and American socialism, ideals, in Orr's words, that provided her with "a fundamental faith in possibility and a desire for change

into a more harmonious and life-affirming existence."[151] Olsen envisions a humane world, equal and just. Through the story character Eva, the author expresses her vision: we have to consider us all as one equal human race. We have to value life, like Eva did, by opening up our senses to its natural beauty and by questioning artificial circumstances. To "try and understand" as Eva put it, to seek meaning in life as a life-long process, helps not merely to assess life, but also allows participation in the process of assembling self identity; a process necessary to live a happy and rewarding life.

Thus, Olsen's message: we have to be responsible to life. We must not allow circumstances to exert power on our lives but must believe in ourselves, our abilities "to understand." We must participate.

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[151] Orr 76.

GRACE PALEY: BACK TO FRIENDSHIP

Like Olsen, Grace Paley grew up in a secular household. She also emphasizes the limitations of class, ethnicity, and gender on selfhood. While Olsen stresses the impact of the social class system, Paley accentuates an interactive approach: the formation of "communities" and inspiration of "social consciousness." Through these, one exceeds boundaries of class, ethnicity, and gender. Thus, central to the writer's stories are forms of community: bonds between mothers and children, friendships between women, and relationships between women and men. Nurturing bonds are founded on an exchange of ideas and beliefs that add meaning to life. This exchange, Paley demonstrates, fosters awareness and understanding of others and ultimately inspires social consciousness. She expresses this theme in her stories as common political action for social justice. Thus, the idea of reaching back to friendship is crucial to her characters' participation in the process of assembling self identity.

Implicitly, the author criticizes society's capitalist patriarchal strife for power, neglecting and destructing human life. She sets women and children as an opposing pole to this negligence and destruction, as regenerators of life: in her stories, they form communities and inspire social consciousness. Paley recognizes, and in this sense appeals to the reader to realize, that we all are equal human beings

and deserve to be valued as such, without the categorizing boundaries of class, gender, or ethnicity.

Paley formed her beliefs in community and social consciousness already as a child, growing up in a Jewish environment. Ever since she has valued and applied these beliefs in her life as mother, wife and friend, and as activist in both the women's and peace movements. The experiences she gained, the stories she found in her life and around her, weave into Paley's fictional collections of short stories The Little Disturbances of Man (1959), Enormous Changes At the Last Minute (1960), and Later the Same Day (1985). Paley's message: community and social consciousness add meaning to life. Security in self identity, she demonstrates, depends on values of community and social consciousness as well as individual effort.

"Community" and "Social Consciousness"

Grace Paley was born in 1922 in the Bronx as the daughter of Russian Jewish immigrants. Although raised in a secular household, her Jewish heritage has had great impact on Paley's beliefs. The Jewish neighborhood, a grandmother who attended religious ceremonies in the synagogue, and a father who was not religious but introduced his daughter to the Old Testament, established a sense of Jewish identity

from early childhood on.[152]

Paley's readings of the Old Testament were especially influential. They provided her with a sense of "common history" and formed, for her, the meaning of being Jewish: "to have social consciousness."[153] The Old Testament book of Exodus, stories of the Jews in Egyptian exile, for example, she interpreted as a reminder that Jews were once "strangers"--outsiders. She also took it as a lesson for Jews "to behave decently" toward the stranger. When Paley saw injustice, she felt "outraged" and wanted to end it. Her Jewish sense of community and social consciousness made Paley proud of her heritage.[154]

Today Paley still identifies being Jewish with community and social consciousness. In New York City, her first home, she is around Jews always, "in a continuous Jewish community." She never feels the urge to attend services; Jews are around her always. In Vermont, her second home, however, there are only a few Jews. There Paley attends services. For her this has a "communitarian reason:" "My going comes from a very simple longing to see my own people...and to be with them at a very profound point

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[152] Kaye/Kantrowitz, Melanie and Irene Klepfisz. "An Interview With Grace Paley." The Tribe of Dina. A Jewish Women's Anthology. VT: Sinister Wisdom Books, 1986. 289-90.

[153] Kaye/Kantrowitz 290.

[154] Kaye/Kantrowitz 290.

in their year, in their life, in their thinking."[155] Paley's Jewish heritage has had a more significant impact on her than any American educational institution. When she was seventeen, she dropped out of Hunter College; Paley had other priorities.

> I would go to school but I could never get up to the classroom. I could sometimes get to the first floor, but I couldn't get into the classroom. I would meet someone, and talk to them, and that would be it. You know, a conversation anyplace stopped me from doing anything...[156]

"Conversation" in the form of storytelling has been most influential on Paley--as listener and as teller. To her it constitutes a form of community. She used to listen to the stories her parents (especially father) and relatives told when she was a child. Later she listened to her neighbors, friends, and children. Everybody tells stories, she says. "...I think that storytelling and people telling stories to other people and the experience of paying attention and listening in some way relate to that former loss of a community."[157]

Paley forms community by telling stories about everyday issues, common things we all can relate to. The storyteller explains:

> [Everydayness] that's what interests me. When I am asked--Is she a heroine?--I'm not really interested in

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[155] Kaye/Kantrowitz 290, 291.

[156] Gelfant, Blanche. "Grace Paley: Fragment For A Portrait in Collage." New England Review 3 (1980):287.

[157] "A Symposium On Fiction." Shenandoah 27, no.2 (1976):29.

> that. I'm not interested in that extraordinary person to that extent, except to the degree that all these people are extraordinary to me. But how daily life is lived is a mystery to me. You write about what's a mystery to you. What is it like? Why do people do this? Every day, get up in the morning...[158]

Paley's emphasis on daily life raises social consciousness by increasing awareness of our common concerns and finding beauty in these--what to have for dinner, who watches the kids while the parents work, how to buy toys for the children if there is hardly enough money for shoes. In this sense Paley's writing is political: if men and women, blacks and whites, Jews and gentiles all share a sense of having something in common, we are closer to eliminating injustices. Paley's stories contribute to a dialogue between people and to the realization that we all are more alike than different; we are the human community.

Themes and Characters

Grace Paley's central themes are motherhood and womanbonding--forms of feminine community. Her special concern for women and children grew out of her own experiences. At nineteen she married and had two children. Paley's children are a source for her writings. They are represented in her stories' characters. But also a lot of their friends and mothers are.

I still can't forget how much I learned about human

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[158] Lidoff, Joan. "Clearing Her Throat: An Interview With Grace Paley." Shenandoah 32, no.3 (1981):12-3.

> life being not just with my own kids, but with other women and their children. I can never repay the debt that I have to the community of women with whom I raised my kids. I owe them a lot, and they owe me. I mean, we began in those days friendships that lasted for thirty years.[159]

Paley did not write stories until she was about thirty-three. "Upset" and "concerned" about the relationships--or rather non-relationships--between women and children and men, Paley "became terribly interested in the life of women and children, how they were living apart from men."[160] Her interest was accompanied by a "sudden consciousness" for the problems of her female friends, a realization that she was "a part of this bunch of women," that their "lives were common and important."[161] Today Paley considers herself a feminist writer, an identity which clearly emerged out of her experiences. "I'm a feminist and a writer. Whatever is in here comes from the facts of my life. To leave them out would be false."[162]

Paley's descriptions of a bond between mothers and children and between women express the author's belief in community and concern with raising social consciousness. Major characters are single and married mothers who are immigrants, blacks, whites, Jewish or gentile. No matter who they are or where they come from, they all form a

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[159] Gelfant 288.

[160] Lidoff 6.

[161] Lidoff 6-7.

[162] Lidoff 23.

nurturing bond with their children and each other--they exceed class and ethnic boundaries and form a community.

These communities are founded on an exchange of ideas and beliefs with each other. The story characters find meaning in life through this exchange and thus feel secure in their identities. Paley emphasizes the reaching of this feeling of security in identity as a life-long process. In the stories, the critic Blanche Gelfant notes, this process is described as "change."[163] Open to an exchange of ideas and beliefs, Paley's characters constantly find new meanings in life and may change their entire identities.

Paley's work develops a comprehensive picture of the process of change and self identity. Gelfant remarks:

> [The] sense of the value of life--of every individual life, and of life as a process, described in the stories as change--may be exactly what we mean by faith; and Paley's heroine, who pops in and out of her stories, growing older and treasuring both past and future, is well-named.[164]

Faith is the most outstanding character among several cast characters, reappearing in each of Paley's books, that offers insight into the process of change and the assembling of self identity. As her name suggests, Faith is the confident believer in life; she asserts life while forming communities and allowing others to inspire her social consciousness as well as inspire it herself in others. Thus, the character Faith is Paley's voice. As Eve Merriam

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[163] Gelfant 279.

[164] Gelfant 279.

in her review of Later the Same Day notes, "I think it is not presuming overmuch to read Faith as a possible Grace, and I find it felicitous that both names have an evocative generic as well as an individual assignment."[165]

Bonds Between Mother and Child

"A Subject of Childhood" is one of Paley's early stories. Faith is a young mother, her two sons Richard and Tonto are small. Despite the hardships raising the children by herself, Faith finds meaning in life in bond with her sons and identifies herself as a mother. When her lover Clifford engages in a wrestling match with the boys and "loses," he cannot admit his defeat. In this scene Paley illustrates the tension present between masculine values of dominance and feminine values of survival. Clifford attacks Faith's mother-identity, accusing her of having "corrupted" the children's "instincts," of being a "stinking mother." Faith angrily replies:

> For I have raised these kids, with one hand typing behind my back to earn a living. I have raised them all alone without a father to identify themselves with in the bathroom like all the other little boys in the playground. Laugh. I was forced by inclement management into a yellow-dog contract with Bohemia, such as it survives...Meanwhile I have serviced Richard and Tonto, taught them to keep clean and hold an open heart on the subjects of childhood...I said, "Stinking?

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[165] Merriam, Eve. "In Praise of Grace: The Book We've Been Waiting A Decade to Be Read." Review of Later the Same Day. Ms. 13 (April 14, 1985):13.

I raised them lousy?"[166]

Clifford does not answer. Offended and hurt, Faith throws a heavy ashtray at him which tears his earlobe. "'You don't say things like that to a woman,' I whispered. 'You damn stupid jackass. You just don't say anything like that to a woman. Wash yourself, you moron, you're bleeding to death.'"[167] Clifford leaves and Richard goes down to play. Tonto refuses to join his brother, instead he insists on sitting on Faith's lap. To Rose Yalow Kamel this scene represents a dialectical tension between bonding and bondage: "The boys have sentenced Faith to years of lobbying in stores, schools, playgrounds on their behalf. Paley's telling images in that epiphany dramatize the bondage: prison, stripes, bars, contrasts in brown and white, and a vision of Alcatraz filtered through the fingers of a child."[168] Paley writes:

> I held him so and rocked him. I cradled him. I closed my eyes and leaned on his dark head. But the sun in its course emerged from among the water towers of downtown office buildings and suddenly shone white and brown on me. Then through the short fat fingers of my son, interred forever, like a black and white barred king in Alcatraz, my heart lit up in stripes.[169]

Meaning for Faith comes from being a mother; her life evolves around her sons. Although it has been hard raising

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[166] Paley, Grace. The Little Disturbances of Man. 1959. NY: Penguin, 1985. 139-40.

[167] Paley, Disturbances 140.

[168] Kamel 124.

[169] Paley, Disturbances 145.

the boys by herself, Faith has not lost her own values. She realizes the problem of the need for self assertion as well as the importance of flexibility. She raises her children accordingly. Faith may feel "barred" by circumstances yet her "heart lights up" through the bond with her sons. Thus, through this mother-son bond and her self identification as mother, Faith finds security in her identity.

In the story "Faith in a Tree" Paley describes the mother-child bond inspired by social consciousness. Faith and her sons are older now. Open to an exchange of ideas and beliefs, Faith, who used to be politically passive, becomes active to secure a better life for her community. From a tree, Faith overlooks the playground while watching her neighbors and friends, mothers like her, and contemplates their ordinary lives. Here, for her, is where meaning lies.

> One God, who was King of the Jews, who unravels the stars to this day with little hydrogen explosions. He can look down from His Holy Headquarters and see us all...But me, the creation of His soft second thought, I am sitting on the twelve-foot high strong, long, arm of a sycamore, my feet swinging, and I can only see Kitty, a co-worker in the mother trade--a topnotch craftsman.[170]

Later in the story some parents appear with their children demonstrating the Vietnam War. A policeman tells them to disperse. For three minutes they do so, and then

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[170] Paley, Grace. Enormous Changes At the Last Minute. 1974. NY: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1981. 77-8.

continue their activities on the park's boundaries, "their posters on the carriage handles, very solemn, making friends and enemies." Upset with his mother's and friends' failure to join and support the demonstrators, Faith's son Richard writes the demonstrators' slogans on the park blacktop "so the entire Saturday walking world could see--WOULD YOU BURN A CHILD? and under it, a little taller, the red reply, WHEN NECESSARY." Richard's action stimulates insight for Faith into her incomplete approach to dealing with life and raises her social consciousness. She climbs from her tree, determined to become politically active. "[E]vents turned me around," Paley writes, "changing my hairdo, my job uptown, my style of living and telling...I thought more and more and every day about the world."[171]

Her new openness to alternative ideas and beliefs allows Faith to participate in the process of assembling self identity: she becomes more aware of "the world" and finds meaning in her new interests. "Faith in a Tree" exemplifies its author's emphasis on the pursuit of self identity as a life-long process: a constant exchange of ideas and beliefs generates the process. As Paley illustrates in this and the previous story, a mother is not only her children's nurturer, but the children also nurture their mother. Thus, Paley's characters participate in the process of assembling self identity through relationships

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[171] Paley, Enormous 99-100.

that involve interaction and openness to change.

Friendships Between Women

Paley describes womenbonds as often long-lasting friendships or as sometimes short but intensive comraderies. Sharing the same experiences and/or fighting together for social justice, the characters exceed boundaries of class, age, or ethnicity. As bonds between mother and children, womenbonds in Paley's stories exist as inspirations for social consciousness. Again, through such an exchange of ideas and beliefs the characters add meaning to life and ultimately feel secure in their identities.

In "The Long-Distance Runner" Faith, now middle-aged, is afraid of getting old. She realizes that soon her children will begin their own lives. Also, her boyfriend, Jack, is uncommitted to their relationship. Faith needs time to think and decides to run, leaving the children, old enough now, by themselves. "I wanted to go far and fast...round and round the county from the sea side to the bridges, along the old neighborhood streets a couple of times, before old age and urban renewal ended them and me."[172] Running through the places of her childhood, Faith hopes to recapture her life she feels she is losing. "...I had already spent a lot of life lying down or standing and

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[172] Paley, Enormous 179.

staring. I had decided to run."[173]

In her child-neighborhood, Faith finds herself surrounded by many blacks who begin to question her. She becomes uneasy when the people begin singing "Devil, Oh Devil."[174] Faith then meets a Girl Scout, Cynthia, on the street and explains that she used to live in the neighborhood. Cynthia leads Faith into "the hallway of the whole house of my childhood."[175] Faith, suddenly uncomfortable and scared upon the confrontation with memories, only resentfully allows the girl to lead the way to her old apartment.

Still downstairs, Faith lies to the girl that she can not knock on her old home's door because her mother is dead. Saddened, Cynthia starts to cry and wonders what would happen to her if her protective mother died. To calm her, Faith answers Cynthia could live with her and her two boys. But the thought of living with two white boys terrifies the girl who learned that all white men are out to "jostle my black womanhood."[176] She screams for help. Hearing the rescuers approach, Faith is frightened, runs up the stairs and finds herself suddenly at the door of her old home. Frantically she knocks. The door opens and Faith meets Mrs.

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[173] Paley, Enormous 181.

[174] Paley, Enormous 182.

[175] Paley, Enormous 184.

[176] Paley, Enormous 187.

Luddy, a young mother who inhabits the old apartment together with her four children. Hearing all the noise, Mrs. Luddy quickly "took a hard pinching hold on [Faith's] upper arm" and pulled her in. "Then she bolted the door herself."[177]

As it turns out, Faith stays for three weeks exploring old emotions and her immigrant past. The shelter protects her not only from the neighbors Faith fears, but also offers a retreat from her present situation: "There was a sentimental truth that lay beside all that going and not going. It was my house where I'd lived long ago my family life."[178] Happy memories come into Faith's mind. She remembers her mother, for example, who sewed beautiful cushions and decorated the home with them.

> It was the way she expressed herself, artistically, to embroider at night or take strips of flowered cotton and sew them across ordinary white or blue muslin in the most delicate designs, the way women have always used materials that live and die in hunks and tatters to say: This is my place.[179]

During Faith's stay, friendship between the women grows, exceeding racial and generational boundaries. Together with Mrs. Luddy she rises early in the morning to feed the babies and change their diapers. She spends time with the seven year old Donald, engaging him in conversations about reading and writing. Faith and Mrs.

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[177] Paley, Enormous 188.

[178] Paley, Enormous 188-9.

[179] Paley, Enormous 189.

Luddy discuss their pasts, sharing in common that both their husbands left them. Mrs. Luddy spends hours at the window waiting for her husband's return, like Faith used to do. They are trying to find meaning in their lives through the exchange of their thoughts.

> I believed she was watching and waiting for a particular man. I wanted to discuss this with her, talk lovingly like sisters. But before I could freely say, Forget about that son of a bitch, he's a pig, I did have to offer a few solid facts about myself, my kids, about fathers, husbands, passers-by, evening companions, and the life of my father and mother in this room by this exact afternoon window.
>
> I told her for instance, that in my worst times I had given myself one extremely simple physical pleasure. This was cream cheese for breakfast. In fact, I insisted on it, sometimes depriving the children of very important articles and foods.
>
> Girl, you don't know nothing, she said.
>
> Then for a little while she talked gently as one does to a person who is innocent and insane and incorruptible because of stupidity. She had had two such special pleasures for hard times she said. The first, men, but they turned rotten, white women had ruined the best, give them the idea their dicks made of solid gold. The second pleasure she had tried was wine. She said, I like wine. You <u>has</u> to have something just for yourself by yourself. Then she said, But you can't raise a decent boy when you liquor-dazed every night.[180]

Unwilling to bond too close with Faith and also realizing that Faith would only reluctantly abandon the comforting shelter, Mrs. Luddy tells her guest to leave. "Well, don't you think your little spoiled boys crying for you? Where's Mama? They standing in the window. Time to go lady. This ain't Free Vacation Farm. Time we was by

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[180] Paley, <u>Enormous</u> 191-2.

ourself a little."[181] Forced out of her shelter, Faith only gradually understands that she can not live in her memories forever. On her way home, slowly, she begins to run.

> I was a little stiff because my way of life had used only small movements, an occasional stretch to put a knife or teapot out of reach of the babies. I ran about ten, fifteen blocks. Then my second wind came, which is classical, famous among runners, it's the beginning of flying.[182]

Paley illustrates running as a metaphor for life--as a process. One has to be open to this process. Then, one is, like Faith, a long-distance runner, moving on in life. Re-living in her childhood home, and through the bond she ties with Mrs. Luddy, Faith realizes that life is a process, made up of the different stages childhood, middle age, and old age. "A woman inside the steamy energy of middle age runs and runs. She finds the houses and streets where her childhood happened. She lives in them. She learns as though she was still a child what in the world is coming next."[183] One has to be open to the changing circumstances of life and seek meaning in all of them--otherwise, one loses her/himself. Self identity changes; it is a process which Paley illustrates throughout her work.

Paley also includes death as the final process of life. In her story "Friends" she demonstrates this process when a

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[181] Paley, Enormous 195.

[182] Paley, Enormous 196.

[183] Paley, Enormous 198.

life-long friend dies of cancer. Yet, Paley remains life affirming, emphasizing the bond of friendship and love between a group of women, and treasuring each individual life.

Faith and her friends have come together to say goodbye to Selena who is dying of cancer. They try to comfort her and each other. Although she hardly has the energy, Selena manages to pack sandwiches for her friends before they leave--a last act of love. "[S]he actually stood, leaned her big soft excavated body against the table to make those sandwiches..."[184] Faith and her friends find out later that Selena died within two hours of their departure.

The bonding between the women is the fruit of their long sharing of life. They have known each other and cared for one another's children from birth. They have supported each other after failed marriages and their children left home. On their train ride back, the friends remember their shared experiences and the stories Selena told them, trying to keep Selena and the bond with her alive. Kamel notes, the women "try to voice the ineffable as they reenter the quotidian."[185] Faith, the narrator, recalls:

> Anyway, I always thought Selena had told us a lot. For instance, we knew she was an orphan. There were six, seven other children. She was the youngest. She was forty-two years old before someone informed her that her mother had <u>not</u> died in child-birthing her. It was

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[184] Paley, Grace. <u>Later the Same Day</u>. NY: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1985. 72.

[185] Kamel 140.

> some terrible sickness. And she had lived close to her mother's body--at her breast, in fact--until she was eight months old Whew! said Selena. What a relief! I'd always felt I was the one who'd killed her.[186]

Faith does not allow her sorrow to destroy her belief in life. At home, her younger son Tonto scorns Faith for being so confident in life; Tonto himself believes that humankind, victim of patriarchal capitalists, is doomed. "Here she goes with her goody-goodies--everything is so groovy wonderful far-out terrific. Next thing, you'll say people are darling and the world is so nice and round that Union Carbide will never blow it up." Faith thinks:

> He [Tonto] was right to call my attention to its [the world's] suffering and danger. He was right to harass my responsible nature. But I was right to invent for my friends and our children a report on these private deaths and the condition of our lifelong attachments.[187]

Faith recognizes that every human life counts: public deaths we can read and hear about through the media as much as "private deaths" in a broader form usually publicly unaccounted for. Each death is tragic. At the same time she understands that we all will die, if through Union Carbide, cancer or natural death, in the end only "lifelong attachments" count. Only through these true human values, friendship and love, will we live meaningful lives and feel secure in our identities.

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[186] Paley, Later 73.

[187] Paley, Later 88-9.

Relationships Between Women and Men

Although Paley emphasizes bonds between mothers and children, and friendships between women, she does not neglect relationships between women and men. Here, again, Paley expresses her belief in community and social consciousness; ideas she shaped from her Jewish identity. The writer portrays men as allies with women in the struggle, against daily hardships, for a decent life, a struggle that gives meaning in life and expresses the characters' participation in the process of assembling self identity. The idea of women and men struggling together clearly relates to Paley's concern with the creation of one humankind who recognizes that we are all equal human beings--no other of Paley's stories but "Zagrowsky Tells" explains this better.

The narrator Iz Zagrowsky, a pharmacist, watches over his five-year-old grandchild in the park. His story is an answer to his neighbor Faith's question; she wonders what he is doing with a black child, because she remembers Zagrowsky as a racist. Answering, he tells her:

> All right. A person looks at my Emanuel and says, Hey! he's not altogether from the white race, what's going on? I'll tell you what: life is going on. You have an opinion. I have an opinion. Life don't have no opinion.[188]

Zagrowsky learns that his grandson "isn't the first colored child. They tell me long ago we [Jews] were mostly

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[188] Paley, Later 158-9.

dark."[189] He began to love the child, Emanuel--and as the reader learns, Emanuel was not only "Cissy's connection to life" but also Zagrowsky's. Emanuel, or the Hebrew form Immanuel, means "God is with us." Wondering one day why God gave him a black grandchild, Zagrowsky realizes, "To remind us. That's the purpose of most things."[190] He understands that God is with him as much as with the little black boy; it does not matter whether the child is black or white, he is a human being. Thus, through his grandson, Zagrowsky that all human beings are equal--indeed, "life has no opinion." Zagrowsky, though at first reluctant, open to change, embraces his new realization that the only meaning in life is love and friendship. With pride and love he now identifies himself as Emanuel's grandfather.

Summary

This selection of short stories by Grace Paley provides insight into the significance of daily human interaction: the author finds beauty in "everydayness," and meaning in friendship and love. She recognizes these as basic to the survival of humanity. Implicitly, Paley criticizes life-destructive patriarchal capitalist powers by focusing on women and children as regenerators of life.

In Paley's stories, women and children are reaffirming

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[189] Paley, Later 171.

[190] Paley, Later 166.

humanity: they are forming communities and inspire social consciousness, as, for example, Richard in "Faith in a Tree" inspires his mother to political activism, fighting for a better life. Or as Emanuel, the black boy, who is his white grandfather's "connection to life." Social consciousness, realizing our commonalities and respecting our differences--this, according to Paley is valuing life. Such an attitude will lead us toward community. Basic to these ideals are an exchange of ideas and beliefs that give meaning in life. Paley's stories teach that forming communities leads to participation in the process of assembling self identity.

CONCLUSION

Despite their various contexts of writing, the works of Broner, Moskowitz, Olsen, and Paley provide examples of patterns for participation in the process of assembling self identity. E.M. Broner's literature appeals to Jewish women, encouraging them to actively pursue their self identities to "sustain themselves" and "survive" in sexist society and patriarchal religion. As tools she offers re-formed Jewish rituals and ceremonies for Jewish women to "connect" with their female origins and bond with other women as well as an alternative interpretation of Old Testament writings. Thus, Broner's work attempts to heal the hurt and repair the damage inflicted upon Jewish women by patriarchal Judaism.

Faye Moskowitz stresses communication as a tool for the pursuit of self identity: openness to others' ideas and beliefs and the evaluation of these for oneself. In her fiction, she warns of restricted ties of communication--restricted by Orthodox Judaism and sexist society, each limiting women to conformity and stereotypical roles of femininity. Women, Moskowitz's literature teaches, have to break free from religious and societal concepts that define their identities for them, and be themselves.

Tillie Olsen's work evolves around the power of economic and gender "circumstances" that stifle participation in the process of assembling self identity. She makes aware of the suffering of people who do not belong

to the dominant class or gender. Women in particular, the author demonstrates, find it difficult to adequately express and develop their own positive self concepts. Trapped by the limitations of economic and gender circumstances, they receive little room to grow or develop friendships.

Lastly, in her writing Grace Paley emphasizes daily human interaction as a means of participation in the process of assembling self identity: the formation of "communities" and inspiration of "social consciousness." Central to the writer's stories are forms of community: bonds between mothers and children, friendships between women, and relationships between women and men. These nurturing bonds are founded on an exchange of ideas and beliefs that give meaning in life. This exchange fosters awareness and understanding of others and ultimately inspires social consciousness, expressed in Paley's stories as common political action for social justice. The idea of reaching back to friendship is crucial to Paley's story characters' pursuit of self identity.

These authors' works are products of their insights as Jewish women. Broner's feminist critique is motivated by her growing up in a traditional Jewish household which subordinated women under men's rule and maturation in a society developing feminist ideas of gender equality. She reconciles traditional Judaism and feminism by "correcting" Jewish traditions to include women and allow them identification with their Jewish heritage.

In her writing, Moskowitz draws upon the tension between broad social experience and the boundaries placed on her by traditional Jewish values while growing up in a small American town: the writer finds value in both aspects of her experience, humanitarian values and values of political and educational opportunity. Influential have been her immigrant foremothers, and American friends and students who have made her realize that we all are teachers and students at certain times and change from one to the other constantly.

Olsen's literature is steeped in humanitarian ideals she inherited from Yiddish culture, in her involvement with American socialism, and in her gender experiences during her years of silence. Combined they provide her with the vision of an equal and just world for everybody.

Paley's work reflects her beliefs in community and social consciousness she formed already as a child, growing up in a Jewish environment. Ever since she has valued and applied them in her life as mother, wife and friend, and as activist in both the women's and peace movements. The experiences she gained, the stories she found in her life and around her, weave into Paley's fictional collections of short stories.

Although these authors differ in the way they draw on their Jewish heritage, they share challenging societal and religiously structured female roles and offering new definitions: the writers teach self-respect, to be oneself,

and an active approach to life. In short, they demonstrate the value and significance of participation in the process of assembling self identity.

Their new definitions of societal and religious female roles have to be interpreted as not only relating to women but to all humankind: their writings communicate the idea that once one feels secure within her/his identity, they are more "humanly responsible." Retrieving women's experience in traditional Judaism, Broner validates and asserts women as equals to men; she appeals to love for the human community. Stressing openness to communication, Moskowitz emphasizes respect for others' ideas and beliefs. Pointing to the power of restrictive class and gender circumstances, Olsen criticizes capitalist patriarchal society for its disregard of all human life as equal. Accentuating daily human interaction, Paley finds beauty in "everydayness" and meaning in friendship and love, and recognizes these as basic to the survival of humanity. Thus, Orr's statement on Tillie Olsen can be applied to all of these Jewish women writers: "Human responsibility...is for nothing less than the co-creation of the world. In such a vision of possibility, all actions have ultimate potential because they make us who we are; they give us identity and purpose."[191]

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[191] Orr 181.

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