I Stand Here Ironing

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF TILLIE OLSEN

Tillie Olsen was one of six children born to Russian Jewish immigrant parents in Omaha, Nebraska. Olsen grew up in relative poverty and, although she was a voracious reader, her formal education ended when she left high school at age 16. Upon joining the Young Communist League in 1930, Olsen became deeply involved in communist activism and was noted throughout her life for her wide-ranging advocacy on behalf of women and the working class. Olsen published political poems and articles as a young woman, but her writing career slowed for many years due to the pressures of raising four daughters and earning a living. Olsen resumed publishing in her forties to wide acclaim, most notably with the four stories collected in *Tell Me a Riddle*, all of which were anthologized in the prestigious *Best American Short Stories* series. Following this success, Olsen was awarded numerous fellowships and honorary degrees and participated in the founding of The Feminist Press in 1970. Despite her relatively small body of published work, by the time of her death in 2007, Olsen was regarded as an instrumental figure in the evolution of feminist literature and activism.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Olsen is clearly influenced by the socialist ideals of her upbringing and, even more significantly, the Communist activism to which she devoted herself throughout her life. Her determination to amplify the voices of the working class and her skepticism of capitalist order define much of her work, and so the broader labor rights movement of her time can be seen as a significant historical influence. The lingering effects of the Great Depression and World War II also shape this story's setting, as they cause first the poverty and then, later, the post-war stability that the narrator experiences. Finally, this story can be seen as a reaction to the social mores of 1950s America, in which polished, perfect versions of domestic life were idealized.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

A leading voice in second-wave feminism, Olsen writes within the tradition of American short fiction that fuses stories of domestic life with questions of gender roles and equality. An early example of a short story dealing with those same themes is Charlotte Perkins Gilman's 1892 story *The Yellow Wallpaper*. Although the setting and social class of the characters differs from Olsen's work, *The Yellow Wallpaper* also examines the impact of domestic life on women through the story of a narrator whose transition to motherhood and oppression within her marriage lead to madness. The short fiction of Grace Paley, including her first collection *The Little Disturbances of Man*, also explores gender roles and domestic life through a feminist lens, this time during the same era that Olsen lived and wrote. Finally, Olsen's nonfiction writing shares crucial themes with her short stories. Most notably, Olsen's essay collection *Silences* includes reflections on the ways that motherhood and social oppression stifle the careers and creative ambitions of women, particularly those from working class background.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** I Stand Here Ironing
- **When Written:** 1950s
- **Where Written:** San Francisco, California
- **When Published:** 1960
- **Literary Period:** Postmodern period
- **Genre:** Short story, Realism, Feminism
- **Setting:** Unspecified urban, working class neighborhood
- **Climax:** Emily enters the room where the narrator is ironing
- **Antagonist:** Economic and social pressures
- **Point of View:** First person

EXTRA CREDIT

Documentary Subject. A 2007 documentary called Tillie Olsen: A Heart in Action focuses on Tillie Olsen's life and literary influence.

PLOT SUMMARY

"I Stand Here Ironing" is a first-person account in which the narrator thinks about her relationship with her nineteen-year-old daughter, Emily. The story begins with a request from an unidentified character (most likely a teacher or counselor at Emily's school) for the narrator to come and talk about Emily, whom the official feels "needs help." This request sets off the narrator's long rumination about Emily's childhood and her own role as a mother. The narrator is at home ironing the entire time that she relates these reflections to the reader.

The narrator begins by suggesting that she feels overwhelmed by contemplating Emily's life, but she describes it in great detail nonetheless. She tells the reader that Emily was a beautiful baby whom she, the narrator, loved deeply from her birth. However, Emily's father leaves the family shortly after Emily is born and the narrator is forced to find work and leave Emily in

daycare. Eventually, the family's fortunes worsen and the narrator sends Emily to live with the father's family for a stretch of time. When Emily returns, she is thin, nervous, and prone to illness, changes that cause the narrator guilt and sadness. The narrator sends Emily to nursery school during the day, even though she knows Emily hates it. Although Emily tries to avoid going to school, the narrator notes that Emily never openly rebels, and she wonders "what was the cost" to Emily of behaving well even when she was miserable.

The narrator goes on to describe the rest of Emily's childhood, during which Emily is serious, anxious, and often sick. The narrator recalls that **clocks** in particular frightened Emily. At one point, Emily becomes ill enough that the narrator and her new husband choose to send her away to live at a convalescent home for eight months, where Emily becomes even more unhappy. When Emily returns home, she is distant from both family and peers and continues to worry intensely about school and her appearance. The narrator gives birth to another daughter, Susan, who is cheerful and conventionally beautiful. Emily resents Susan and is often in conflict with her, and the narrator fears that she has failed to mediate the relationship between the sisters. Later on, Emily helps care for three more younger siblings while the narrator is busy working and managing the household. Again, the narrator suspects that these domestic burdens made life difficult for Emily and worries that she, the narrator, was too distracted to adequately express her love for Emily.

Toward the end of the story, the narrator describes Emily's transformation into a successful comedian who performs at her high school and other events. Though Emily has found a way to express herself joyfully, the narrator still worries, convinced that she will not have the resources to support Emily's talent. At the story's climax, Emily herself enters the room where the narrator has been ironing and reflecting throughout the story. Emily is in a cheerful, talkative mood, and the narrator suddenly wonders why anyone would worry about her. Emily makes a joke about dying in an atom bomb attack and then goes to bed, leaving the narrator to face the full, complex reality of her daughter's existence. The narrator concludes that she will "never total it all" but hopes that even if Emily does not live up to her full potential, she will still have a richer and happier life than her mother has had.

CHARACTERS

The Narrator – The narrator is a working class woman and mother of five children. The entire story occurs as the narrator, while **ironing** clothes, worries about her oldest daughter Emily. Given that she was nineteen when her daughter Emily was born and Emily is nineteen at the story's start, it's safe to assume that the Narrator is about 38 years old. She has worked extensively outside the home at a number of jobs, as well as acting as the primary caretaker for her children. She was a single mother for some time after Emily's father left the family and then remarried a few years later to a man described only as Bill. The narrator reveals little about her own background and instead tells her story through the lens of her relationship with Emily. Although the narrator seems to be a hardworking and responsible mother, she is overcome with feelings of guilt and uncertainty about the mistakes she might have made in raising Emily, and hopes that Emily will have a richer life than she, the narrator, did.

Emily – Emily is the oldest daughter of the narrator. At the time of the story's telling, Emily is nineteen years old and seems to be thriving; her mother describes her as lovely and notes her popularity as a comedian at school. However, the narrator also receives a call, presumably from Emily's school, stating that Emily needs help, which suggests that she may be struggling socially or academically. Emily had a difficult childhood characterized by anxiety and illness, and at times, because of poverty or nervous illness, she had to live away from her mother in childcare that she hated. Emily also had a strained relationship with her sister Susan, who was pretty and carefree while Emily was quiet, nervous, and worried about her appearance. The narrator states that Emily often had to help take care of her younger siblings and that, due to economic challenges and her mother's overwhelming responsibilities, she did not enjoy the warm, stable home life that her siblings did.

Susan – Susan is Emily's younger sister and the second child of the narrator. Susan is a few years younger than Emily and is described as beautiful, confident, and clever. The narrator suggests that Susan had an easy childhood compared to Emily's and does not struggle socially or academically. As a child, Susan was often in conflict with Emily, who resented her beauty and quick wit. The narrator also notes that Susan was drawn to Emily's prized possessions and often broke or lost them accidentally.

Ronnie – Ronnie is the narrator's youngest child and the brother of Emily and Susan. He is a baby at the time of the story's telling. He uses the word "*shoogily*" to express the concept of comfort, a word that the narrator says Emily invented. His calm presence suggests that family life has gotten significantly more secure and stable since Emily's childhood, and his use of Emily's word indicates that her difficult childhood may have paved the way for her siblings' comfort.

THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.

POVERTY, LABOR, AND DOMESTIC LIFE

In the 1950s, when "I Stand Here Ironing" was published, family life and domestic labor were often depicted as idyllic: housewives wore clean dresses, cooked perfect meals, and cared for well-behaved children while their husbands worked. Tillie Olsen's depiction of domestic life as gritty, banal, and difficult contrasts with these romanticized representations, reminding readers that American domestic life was not always glamorous, particularly for poor families. The narrator's poverty traps her in grueling and repetitive chores and prevents her from fulfilling herself and giving her daughter Emily the best care. Still, the narrator's labor remains meaningful even as poverty constrains her, and in part because of the labor she has done throughout her life she is ultimately able to imagine a future in which Emily may live a freer life than she did. "I Stand Here Ironing" therefore makes a case for viewing domestic labor and family life as complex and wrenching, yet worthwhile.

Throughout the story, Olsen's narrator describes her work as a young mother in violent terms. The first line of the story, for example, mentions the "torment" that the narrator perceives while **ironing**, which is an outwardly peaceful activity. The narrator further describes the cries of infant Emily as "battering" and later, when Emily goes to nursery school, she notes the "lacerations of group life." These vivid word choices evoke war and bodily harm, indicating the intensity of the narrator's struggle as she begins her life as a young mother. Although her family's life is not marked by overt abuse or tragedy, the day-to-day realities that she and her young daughter face suggest that domestic life is not a haven from the dangerous world outside but rather an extension of it.

Despite the hardship that characterizes her life as a young mother, though, the narrator also notes several instances of peace and joy in those years. When Emily is born, for example, the narrator says that "she was a miracle to me." The narrator's ongoing devotion to Emily — even through the times of strife and difficulty — indicates that that sense of the miraculous continues to underlie the relationship between the two. Although the family does not have much money, Emily still finds a way to have "precious things" by collecting objects like beads and pebbles. While Emily's collections are monetarily worthless, they comfort her and provide a means for her to interact peacefully with her sister Susan. The narrator also mentions that Emily had moments of "lightness and brightness," even as an unhappy child. These fleeting moments indicate that even at its darkest, their shared life was buoyed by joy.

In light of the family's simultaneous poverty and surprising joy, the narrator doesn't simply despair at the outcome of her homemaking efforts: she ultimately wonders whether the imperfect home she provided might still be enough to make Emily's life better than the narrator's own has been. This sense of hope amid adversity advances the idea that domestic life does not have to be perfect to be worthwhile. When Emily finally enters the scene at the end of the story, she appears to the reader as a surprisingly normal teenager. Her cheerful presence causes her mother, and the reader, to reconsider all of narrator's previous worries. The narrator wonders: "Why were you concerned? She will find her way." This turn suggests that the narrator's labors, while lacking in many ways, may nonetheless have accomplished the essential goal of raising a healthy child. Though the narrator continues to think of Emily with some sadness, she notes that "there is still enough left to live by." Her hope for Emily is modest but meaningful: that Emily know "that she is more than this dress on the ironing board, helpless before the iron." This hope suggests that Emily may have a future in which domestic obligation—while perhaps still a burden—does not completely define her, marking a significant step forward from the life her mother has led.

FEMALE IDENTITY

For the narrator and her two daughters, being a woman is both a source of power and a burden. Since the men in their lives are unreliable, the story's women have learned to be self-sufficient and resilient, which helps them through difficult times. However, even without individual men supporting them, the influence of male-dominated culture still affects them, causing them to see themselves through impossible beauty standards and creating conflict between them. Women, Olsen suggests, must fill countless conflicting roles simultaneously, and these paradoxical demands make it nearly impossible for an individual woman to live up to all of society's expectations of her. In the story, then, femininity operates as a key to resilience, but also a liability.

While nothing in the story explicitly states that women are more powerful than men, Olsen implies it by depicting all of the male characters as absent, irrational, or helpless. The narrator mentions men only in passing, which makes clear by omission that her struggles and accomplishments are all her own. Emily's unnamed father, for instance, vanishes early in the story after saying good-bye to his family in a note, and the narrator does not mention him again. By leaving him largely absent and making even his departure silent, Olsen hints at his essential voicelessness and lack of influence. The father of the narrator's other children is presumably present throughout much of the story but his are never mentioned, making him effectively absent as well. The boy that Emily loves during childhood also remains nameless. He comes across as irrational and incomprehensible, rejecting Emily even though she brings him his favorite candy. Again, the narrator quickly moves on from recalling him, indicating that attempts to understand him are a waste of time. Similarly, the narrator reveals that her second husband is named Bill but says nothing else about him or his role in the family. The only other named male character is the

infant Ronnie, the narrator's youngest child. Ronnie is sweet but helpless, relying completely on the narrator's care and even on Emily for his notion of comfort, which he expresses using a nonsense word that Emily invented. Again, the narrator meets Ronnie's needs in a matter-of-fact way with little comment, suggesting that being the sole source of support is second nature to her. Ronnie's total reliance on the narrator illuminates Olsen's broader representation of gender dynamics: while male characters remain useless and nondescript, women like the narrator and Emily assume both the burden and the power of defining the world.

And yet even though the individual men in their lives are ineffective, the expectations of patriarchal society still constrain Emily and the narrator, most notably through standards of female beauty. The narrator describes Emily as "beautiful at birth," but notes that later on Emily was "thin and dark and foreign-looking at a time when every little girl was supposed to look or thought she should look a chubby blonde replica of Shirley Temple." The narrator links this difference in appearance to Emily's social and emotional struggles and notes that Emily's conventionally beautiful sister, Susan, had none of the same struggles. The narrator recalls trying to convince Emily that she was beautiful "to the seeing eye" but then adds that "the seeing eyes were few or non-existent. Including mine." That the narrator herself could not always appreciate Emily's genuine beauty shows that even when beauty is present, it often goes unappreciated, making its pursuit useless. Even the appearance of non-human entities demonstrates the deceptive nature of beauty. The narrator describes the home where Emily lives as a child as "a handsome place, green lawns and tall trees and fluted flower beds." But Emily and the other children are miserable living at the home, despite its pleasing appearance. Beauty, then, is unreliable, which further reduces its value and limits the power of those who do possess it. While Emily aspires to conventional female beauty, the narrator is more circumspect, suggesting that this outward measure of power lacks substance. The societal pressure to live up to arbitrary standards of beauty is one way in which female identity is a burden to the narrator and her daughter.

Like female beauty, relationships between women are also simultaneously empowering and limiting in this story. Love between the female characters sometimes strengthens them, but gendered social pressures often introduce anxiety and stress into those otherwise loving relationships. For example, the narrator acknowledges that, as Emily's mother, she is expected to have some special understanding of her daughter. However, she finds herself distant from Emily, musing: "She has lived for nineteen years. There is all that life that has happened outside of me, beyond me." This separation leaves the narrator wondering whether she has failed as a mother, even though she demonstrates to readers all the ways in which she has shown love and support to Emily throughout her life. The narrator's relationship with Emily is undeniably meaningful, but the narrator senses that society expects an even deeper, almost magical bond. In this way, the role of mother leaves the narrator despairing in the face of impossible expectations, despite all the positive elements of her relationship with Emily. Furthermore, Emily's younger sister Susan acts mostly as an antagonist in this story, even though she looks the part of the pretty, perfect young girl. Far from comforting Emily, Susan's presence causes "corroding resentment" in her sister. The narrator implies that this resentment stems from the discrepancy between Susan's easy compliance with gendered expectations and Emily's parallel inability to live up to those same standards. For Susan and Emily, the pressures of female identity transform the mutual support of sisterhood into painful competition. Love between female peers is also presented as dangerous at the convalescent home where Emily lives for some months due to her anxiety. After her close friend is moved to another residence, Emily tells her mother: "They don't like you to love anybody here." One of the only times that the narrator and her two daughters seem to be at peace together is when the narrator keeps both daughters home from school, "to have them all together." That the narrator chooses to do this, even though Emily's teachers get angry at her absences, suggests that deviating from social structures and expectations may be the only avenue to achieve conflict-free female relationships.

TIME

In this story, the passage of time is both damaging and generative. Time tyrannizes the narrator by rushing her into choices she wouldn't ordinary make and by trapping her in routines that she feels unable to break. However, the passage of time also hints at the potential for progress and growth beyond old limitations, as when the narrator suggests that Emily might have a better future than the narrator's own. That time is simultaneously damaging and hopeful suggests that, in this story, growth and pain are inextricably linked. The narrator spends the entire story trying to separate the good and the bad of Emily's development, but perhaps this isn't possible. Just as the passage of time connects negative changes to positive ones, human potential—whether the narrator's or Emily's—can only be reached through painful experiences.

The narrator frequently states that she made certain parenting choices because of time pressures. When the story opens, for example, the person on the phone asks that the narrator "manage the time" to talk about Emily. This simple request seems impossible to the narrator, who feels that there will never be enough time "to remember, to sift, to weigh, to estimate, to total." This reaction immediately makes clear that, for the narrator, time is overwhelming and impossible to manage. Throughout the story, the narrator seems beholden to time: she recounts that she always nursed Emily "till the **clock**

decreed," even when doing so was painful. Similarly, she sends Emily to nursery school because "they said" she was old enough — that it was time for Emily to go. The narrator repeatedly ignores her own instincts in order to do as the clock tells her. This opposition between the narrator's natural impulses and the clock's external force indicates that the forward motion of time is not just inconvenient; it is actually a painful restriction on the narrator's sense of self. In an extension of the clock's tyrannical force in the narrator's life, it soon becomes a genuinely terrifying presence for Emily. When her parents leave her home alone, she is afraid to feel the time passing and tells them that "the clock talked loud" and scared her. Olsen suggests that the terror Emily feels is tied to the fact that time passing means permanent change, since Emily is especially afraid on the night that her sister Susan is born. That Emily reacts to such change with fear rather than excitement illustrates the reality that, in this story, growth is portrayed as being necessarily painful.

While time passing is actively frightening when it pushes people to action, time is perhaps more powerful in the story when it fails to produce change at all, as in the narrator's life of repeated actions and chores. This stasis, however, can have unexpectedly positive effects. The narrator says of her years with several young children: "I do not remember them well." Instead of recalling specific memories, she mentions a series of repetitive chores and activities that absorbed her and Emily. For example, the narrator mentions the constant process of "trying to get lunches packed, hair combed, coats and shoes found" She calls these patterns part of "Emily's seal," indicating that such repetition may eventually have come to dominate Emily's life. Meanwhile, Emily jokes that if she were to paint a picture of her mother, she would show her "standing over an **ironing** board." While this domestic labor has been crucial to helping Emily (and presumably her siblings) progress through childhood, it has simultaneously trapped the narrator in one place. This tension between imprisonment and forward motion underscores the broader point in the story that growth cannot be achieved without a related sense of restriction. The story's title and structure reinforce the idea that the narrator's life is marked by stasis. All of the story's action takes place in recollection, with the repetitive movement of the iron serving as the narrator's only real motion throughout. The title, too, states the narrator's action in plain present tense, seeming to suggest that, for the narrator, the present will always mean ironing. However, the narrator conveys complex and meaningful information to the reader while stuck in this pose, even though she says initially that she won't be able to. Only by surrendering to time's strictures, it seems, can the narrator make progress toward the goals she fears are impossible. Indeed, even Emily herself seems to be reborn from the repetitive days of her childhood into the older, freer Emily who appears at the end of the story.

Despite the tensions and pain that the passage of time brings to the narrator and Emily, it is also responsible for the glimmers of hope that appear toward the end of the story. Emily's offhand comment about dying from an atomic bombing indicates that for her, the idea of the future will always contain fear and danger. Still, she makes the comment cheerfully, while giving her mother a kiss. This tonal contrast demonstrates that Emily, unlike the narrator, has moved beyond being paralyzed by her fear of the clock's voice. The fear remains, but Emily has grown into a young woman who can acknowledge the pressure of the future without letting it immobilize her. The narrator expresses tentative hope that Emily's future will be better than the narrator's past. Although the narrator seems unsure of whether this wish will come true, it already has in one important way. Emily is 19, the same age that the narrator was when Emily was born, but instead of caring for an infant and working for pay, Emily is taking exams and performing as a comedian. Already, Emily has begun to reinvent herself in a way that was impossible for her mother. This transformation illustrates that although many challenges remain, the passage of time has caused a generational shift that provides new opportunities for Emily.

OBEDIENCE VS. SELF-EXPRESSION

Throughout the story, the narrator and her daughter Emily attempt to meet society's expectations of them: Emily tries to be a good student and daughter while the narrator tries to be a good mother and homemaker, each defining her success based on social norms and judgments. Starting in Emily's early childhood, the narrator discovers that obedience to these societal standards does not always lead to positive outcomes, but she also feels that speaking up can be just as dangerous as silently complying. The narrator's weighing of the relative costs and benefits of fulfilling versus resisting social norms animates the entire story, but she never comes to a final conclusion about which attitude is better. That the narrator remains caught between obedience and self-expression illustrates Olsen's broader point that all actions come with both costs and benefits, and that deciding which choices are "correct" is impossible.

Both the narrator and Emily largely conform to the demands placed on them by others. However, the narrator worries that in both of their cases, complying with rules may have been more costly than she realized at the time. For example, the narrator makes parenting choices that she doesn't necessarily agree with when authority figures direct her to do so. Perhaps the most notable example of this is when she sends Emily to the convalescent home on the advice of a clinic and keeps her there for eight months, even though she knows that Emily hates being there. She worries that this experience, despite seeming like the correct choice at the time, has harmed Emily in the long

term. Emily herself is also compliant throughout childhood, never throwing tantrums even when she hates going to school. Comparing Emily's silent cooperation to more rebellious natures of her other children, the narrator wonders: "What was the cost to her…of such goodness?" Later, when Emily goes to elementary school, her quiet presence and inability to be "glib or quick" causes her teachers to mistake her for a "slow learner," demonstrating that behavior considered "good" in one situation can easily be construed as "bad" in another. Later on, Emily's silent compliance allows her sister Susan to steal Emily's ideas for jokes and riddles and tell them "to company for applause." Not only does Emily's polite avoidance of confrontation cause her to lose credit for her own creative work, but it likely also increases tension in her strained relationship with Susan. Throughout the story, quiet obedience comes with a painful cost.

Just as unquestioning cooperation turns out to be costly, though, so too does self-expression come with unexpected burdens. When Emily first succeeds in a comedy performance, for instance, the narrator reflects: "Now suddenly she was Somebody, and as imprisoned in her difference as she had been in her anonymity." She goes on to note that along with the joy of Emily's new skill comes the pressure to "do something about her with a gift like that." However, the narrator knows that without resources to support Emily, "the gift has as often eddied inside, clogged and clotted, as been used and growing." That image of stagnation suggests that becoming acquainted with the self is perhaps as risky as ignoring it, since awakening a gift of expression means accepting the possibility that it might go to waste. This potential outcome clearly frightens the narrator and seems to sway her back toward the idea of obedience that she previously rejected. Toward the end of the story, the narrator comments that Emily, in a talkative mood, "tells [her] everything and nothing." Though the narrator has often wished for a closer relationship with Emily, she seems to write off Emily's outpouring of words as unimportant. This suggests that the narrator distrusts the meaning conveyed by straightforward speech, which perhaps betrays her lingering bias toward the repeated physical actions and habits that have characterized her life with Emily. Even as she wishes for the benefits of self-expression, the comforts of obedience call to her, leaving her stranded between these opposing values.

The narrator's inability to decide whether conformity or self-expression is better echoes Olsen's more general attitude that some things are impossible to know. When Emily asks her mother why the boy she likes prefers another girl, for instance, the narrator stays silent, calling Emily's inquiry "the kind of question for which there is no answer." This suggests that the narrator—even as her thoughts are obsessively directed towards answering the central question of how to help Emily—might know that finding a single answer is impossible. Indeed, in the end, the narrator knows even less than she started with; at that point she doesn't even know whether Emily needs help at all. She asks, "Why were you concerned [about Emily]?" but at the same time she suspects that "probably little will come" of Emily's potential. Perhaps, then, no behavior or choice can be considered "correct"—all come with costs and benefits, and one can never know if another outcome might have been better.

RESPONSIBILITY AND GUILT

As she guides the reader through her detailed account of Emily's upbringing, the narrator is motivated in equal parts by her sense of responsibility and by her sense of guilt for having failed Emily. Both motivations stem from her love for Emily, but when combined, they seem to create a toxic emotional atmosphere that makes the narrator doubt even her own experiences and memories. Through her examination of the effects of guilt and responsibility on the narrator, Olsen indicates that these feelings, while powerful motivators, can ultimately degrade the human relationships they shape.

Though she does not say so directly, the narrator's account indicates that she has sacrificed an enormous amount of her time and energy caring for Emily and her siblings. Although the grinding poverty of her life sets the narrator apart from her era's ideals of family life, she still lives up to these ideals in her own way: she devotes herself to supporting her family, stops working outside the home as soon as she can, and successfully raises five children with little fanfare. These actions and the narrator's casual reference to them demonstrates how deeply ingrained her sense of responsibility is. Even though the narrator claims not to remember much of Emily's childhood, her story proves otherwise. The simple fact of her recounting it in such detail provides further evidence of her responsible, thorough approach to parenting, in which a simple call from Emily's school triggers a rigorous examination of Emily's childhood. Again, the feeling of responsibility to represent Emily accurately arises automatically in the narrator, even when she doesn't believe she's able to live up to it.

While the narrator's account clearly displays her deep embrace of maternal responsibility, the narrator herself is far more overtly concerned with her maternal guilt. She remains preoccupied with her perceived failures, and as much as she tries to figure out the reasons for Emily's trouble, she keeps coming back to herself as the true cause. This almost compulsive focus illustrates the poisonous side of embracing responsibility and the corrosive effect that it can have on an individual's psyche. The story begins with a request for the narrator to talk about Emily, but the narrator fears that she will be overwhelmed if she does so, saying: "I will become engulfed with all I did or did not do, with what should have been and what cannot be helped." The narrator indicates that thinking about her daughter at all causes deep feelings of inadequacy,

rather than pride in the various ways that she did succeed as a mother. Reflecting on Emily's relationship with her sister Susan, the narrator says, "I have edged away from it, that poisonous feeling between them, that terrible balancing of hurts and needs I had to do between the two, and did so badly, in those earlier years." In evaluating her work as a mother, the narrator focuses not on the amount or difficulty of the work she did, but on what she perceives she did badly. Olsen implies that responsibility itself makes the narrator focus on negative outcomes, keeping her stuck between her obligation to her daughters and her concern that she is failing them.

In addition to causing the narrator pain, the dual pressures of responsibility and guilt ultimately make it harder for her to continue the effort of parenting Emily. Of raising small children, the narrator comments that "the ear is not one's own" but rather belongs to the calls of the child. Olsen seems to say that, paradoxically, this very state of devotion causes the listener's sense of self to vanish, thus reducing her ability to fulfill the role of mother. The narrator often lacks confidence in her own version of events, admitting of one memory: "I do not even know if it matters, or if it explains anything." She wishes to do as directed and make meaning out of Emily's story, but after her long years of combined responsibility and doubt, she is left unsure how to do so. Toward the end of the story, the narrator finds that her attempts to understand her past with Emily have left her less able to tolerate the remarks of the real, present-day Emily. She says: "Because I have been dredging the past, and all that compounds a human being is so heavy and meaningful in me, I cannot endure it tonight." Again, Olsen demonstrates that delving into the burdens of motherhood does not necessarily improve one's ability to act as a mother; in fact, such exploration may do the opposite.

SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.

THE IRON

The iron that the narrator holds throughout the story symbolizes both the power and the limitations of domestic life. Emily jokes at one point in the story that a portrait of the narrator would show her ironing, indicating that the act of standing still and maintaining a household is a defining, even imprisoning state for the narrator. The iron, serving as it does to smooth away wrinkles, also indicates that domestic work is a way for the narrator to control the messy world around her and improve its appearance. However, its weight and its repetitive motion also signify the monotonous, crushing nature of the narrator's responsibilities to her home and children — she not only can iron away the wrinkles, she must do so as part of her duties as a wife and mother. The narrator irons throughout the story and refers to having done so for much of Emily's childhood, but she concludes with the hope that Emily may someday "know that she is more than this dress on the ironing board," demonstrating the narrator's hope, and perhaps belief, that Emily's future may be comparatively free of the burden of domesticity that has shaped the narrator's life.

CLOCKS

Clocks and the associated concept of time represent another aspect of the social rules that binds both the narrator and Emily. The narrator frequently makes parenting choices based on societal ideas of when certain milestones should occur, even when she herself does not believe in these choices. That oppression by time becomes more extreme in Emily's childhood, when Emily is frightened of clocks and the changes that she associates with the passage of time. In both cases, the external force of time as represented by the clock restrains the characters in painful ways. In this way, the clock and its effects act as a microcosm of the broader, equally damaging pressures that social norms exert in this story.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the University of Nebraska edition of *Tell Me a Riddle, Requa I, and Other Works* published in 2013.

I Stand Here Ironing Quotes

"And when is there time to remember, to sift, to weigh, to estimate, to total? I will start and there will be an interruption and I will have to gather it all together again. Or I will become engulfed with all I did or did not do, with what should have been and what cannot be helped.

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker), Emily

Related Themes:

Page Number: 5

Explanation and Analysis

At the story's start, the narrator expresses doubt that she can provide meaningful insight into her daughter Emily's life. This quote sets up what a challenge the task of accounting for Emily's childhood will be, and it also hints at the narrator's domestic realities and her relationship with

time. By expecting "an interruption," the narrator indicates that her time is constrained by the various tasks she's responsible for, and indirectly states that uninterrupted time for reflection is not a luxury she feels able to claim for herself or her daughter. Finally, the narrator mentions the danger of feeling "engulfed" by the knowledge of her past actions, which introduces the idea of motherly guilt that pervades the rest of the narrative.

I nursed her. They feel that's important nowadays. I nursed all the children, but with her, with all the fierce rigidity of first motherhood, I did like the books then said. Though her cries battered me to trembling and my breasts ached with swollenness, I waited till the clock decreed.

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker), Emily

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 6

Explanation and Analysis

The narrator's description of nursing the infant Emily according to the exact guidelines laid out by her books is the story's first specific instance of the narrator denying her own instincts in favor of obedience to external authority. Even though Emily's cries and the narrator's own body indicate a particular course of action to the narrator (presumably, nursing immediately), she nonetheless feels limited by others' expectations of how motherhood should look (waiting to nurse until a certain time). This is also an early indication of the ways in which female social roles (such as motherhood) offer the story's characters both power and limitation: the narrator devotes herself lovingly to the work of mothering Emily, but that work causes her pain. Additionally, this quote introduces the symbol of the clock and the fearsome power that it holds over the narrator and her family. This quote's harsh language ("fierce rigidity," "battered") also underscores the hardship of the narrator's domestic life, setting up a contrast to the idyllic models of domesticity that predominated at the time of this story's publication.

[B1]Except that it would have made no difference if I had known. It was the only place there was. It was the only way we could be together, the only way I could hold a job.

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker), Emily

Related Themes:

Page Number: 7

Explanation and Analysis

This quote is one of the few times in the story that the narrator explicitly notes the inevitability of her parenting choices. Speaking of her decision to send Emily to nursery school at age two, she expresses guilt about the conditions that Emily suffered there, but openly states that her economic circumstances left her with no better options for Emily's care. It is significant that she chooses to emphasize the need for the family to "be together." This focus demonstrates that even though her choices caused Emily pain, they also enabled her to remain part of the loving family that ultimately supported her healthy growth. This statement illustrates the essentially unsolvable nature of the narrator's life with Emily and foreshadows the difficulty that the narrator faces later on in deciding how to evaluate her actions.

I think of our others in their three-, four-year-oldness—the explosions, the tempers, the denunciations, the demands—and I feel suddenly ill. I put the iron down. What in me demanded that goodness in her? And what was the cost, the cost to her of such goodness?

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker), Emily

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 7

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, the narrator reflects on Emily's unflagging obedience, even in doing things that she hated. Seemingly for the first time, she compares Emily to her other children at the same age and realizes that Emily's obedience may have caused her hidden harm. The narrator then locates the cause of this obedience within herself, assuming that something about her own behavior made Emily feel that she could not disobey. The connection between mother and daughter expands the theme of toxic obedience from the narrator outward to Emily, setting up the contrast that occurs later with Emily's embrace of self-expression

through comedy. By mentioning that the narrator "put the iron down," this quote also reaffirms the constant presence of domestic labor in the narrator's life and suggests that it may keep her from fully examining her past with Emily. Only after she sets the iron down does the narrator confront the question of how her parenting style might have led to Emily's suppression of self.

"It wasn't just a little while. I didn't cry. Three times I called you, just three times, and then I ran downstairs to open the door so you could come faster. The clock talked loud. I threw it away, it scared me what it talked."

Related Characters: Emily (speaker), The Narrator

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 8

Explanation and Analysis

Emily speaks these words when the narrator comes home after staying out late and finds Emily wide awake and the hall clock thrown on the floor. Notably, this is one of Emily's only pieces of extended dialogue throughout the story. While the symbolic clock functioned as an annoyance or a burden to the narrator, Emily's relationship to it has intensified into genuine fear. For Emily, it seems, the burden of being left alone while her mother is out is a new phase of maturity that she feels unprepared to handle, and her fear of the clock indicates that she suspects, on some level, that the further passage of time will lead to additional frightening phases of growth. Emily also emphasizes that she "didn't cry," and it's clear that she has continued to do her best to behave herself instead of fully expressing the negative emotions beneath the surface of her fear. This passage begins the section of the story in which Emily becomes persistently ill, a development that highlights how painful the experience of moving forward through time is for Emily.

There was a boy she loved painfully through two school semesters. Months later she told me how she had taken pennies from my purse to buy him candy. "Licorice was his favorite and I brought him some every day, but he still liked Jennifer better'n me. Why, Mommy?" The kind of question for which there is no answer.

Related Characters: The Narrator, Emily (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 10

Explanation and Analysis

This quote occurs during the narrator's description of the many ways in which life was challenging for Emily as a school-aged child. As the narrator has done throughout the story, Emily makes what seems to her to be the most logical choice to get what she wants, and yet the outcome is nonetheless painful. Here, as throughout, doing the "right" thing fails to produce an understandable outcome. Additionally, the behavior of the nameless boy mentioned here adds nuance to the theme of female identity and its burdens. The boy has no identifying features other than his seemingly blithe obliviousness to Emily's efforts and he gives Emily nothing in return for her daily gifts. Even amongst children, the author seems to suggest, gender dynamics place painful burdens on girls while boys ignore the girls' contributions, both emotional and material. Finally, the narrator's admission that some questions do not have answers foreshadows her conclusion, at the story's end, that there is no one correct analysis of her life with Emily.

Oh there are conflicts between the others too, each one human, needing, demanding, hurting, taking—but only between Emily and Susan, no, Emily toward Susan that corroding resentment. It seems so obvious on the surface, yet it is not obvious. Susan, the second child, Susan, golden- and curly-haired and chubby, quick and articulate and assured, everything in manner and appearance that Emily was not.

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker), Susan, Emily

Related Themes:

Page Number: 11

Explanation and Analysis

The narrator describes Emily's relationship with her sister Susan and relates her own feelings of guilt in failing to foster a better relationship between them. In addition to adding dimension to the ways in which the narrator scrutinizes her own parenting, Emily and Susan's relationship is the story's starkest depiction of the pains and pressures of female identity. Susan's more conventional beauty and easy willingness to live up to expectations of femininity make her

childhood significantly easier than Emily's. At the same time, the contrast with Susan makes Emily even more self-conscious about her own perceived shortcomings and turns their sisterhood into a destructive force rather than a supportive one.

In this and other ways she leaves her seal, I say aloud. And startle at my saying it. What do I mean? What did I start to gather together, to try and make coherent? I was at the terrible, growing years. War years. I do not remember them well. I was working, there were four smaller ones now, there was not time for her. She had to help be a mother, and housekeeper, and shopper. She had to set her seal.

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker), Emily

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 12

Explanation and Analysis

The narrator surprises herself by speaking aloud of Emily's contributions to family life. Her uncertainty in this passage builds toward her final surrender at the end of the story, as she continues to explore Emily's past without ever being sure of the accuracy or value of her interpretations. She also links Emily's identity to the same kinds of domestic labor that have defined her own life, further demonstrating the way that poverty shaped Emily's development. Her choice of the word "terrible" to describe the "growing years" also ties back to the idea of the clock forcing growth forward, even as the changes it brings result in pain for Emily and the narrator. Finally, the narrator's surprise at hearing herself speak aloud underscores the silent obedience that has defined her throughout most of the story, and hints at both the power and the potential danger of expressing oneself.

Afterwards: You ought to do something about her with a gift like that—but without money or knowing how, what does one do? We have left it all to her, and the gift has as often eddied inside, clogged and clotted, as been used and growing.

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker), Emily

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 13

Explanation and Analysis

In these lines, the narrator describes her reaction to Emily's newfound gift of comedy performance. The narrator acknowledges her daughter's unique talent, but fears that she will not be able to help Emily develop her skill further. Even at this later, more stable phase of their lives, lack of time and money still impose limitations that even Emily's extraordinary talent cannot overcome. Again, the narrator feels powerless against her circumstances and so Emily faces this challenge essentially alone. The word choices of "clogged and clotted" to describe Emily's gift also evoke the dark side of self-expression. Emily has found a way to speak for herself instead of remaining silent as she did during childhood, but because her family and socioeconomic status remain the same, this ability has the potential to turn against her and be as much of a burden as unquestioning obedience might be.

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 dimples, 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, her life was such she had to keep too much in herself. My wisdom came too late. She has much to her and probably little will come of it. She is a child of her age, of depression, of war, of fear.

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker), Emily

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 13

Explanation and Analysis

The narrator's rapid, almost breathless summary of the events of Emily's life concludes the story with the idea that, even after having gathered all of these elements together, the narrator is still unable to ascribe a coherent meaning to them. At the same time, she also demonstrates that she has succeeded in relating the facts of Emily's life, which she had previously felt herself unable to do. In reviewing these facts

one more time, the narrator touches upon all the themes that have frustrated her throughout the story's telling, from the constraints of poverty to her guilt and insecurity in the role of mother. She remains unsure of the value of the story she has told, but she relays it nonetheless, thus creating a final illustration of the impossibility of capturing the full meaning of a human life. Her allusion to war and depression also offer a rare window into the pressures that broader sociopolitical forces would have placed on her family's life, even though she mentions them infrequently throughout the story.

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

I STAND HERE IRONING

As the narrator **irons**, she addresses an unidentified person who has asked her to discuss her nineteen-year-old daughter Emily, since Emily "needs help." The request torments the narrator—just because she is Emily's mother does not mean she has special insight into her daughter's life. Besides, there will never be enough time to "remember, to sift, to weigh, to total" and if there were, she would "become engulfed" by "all I did or did not do."

The narrator's immediate reluctance to talk about Emily sets off her struggle with guilt, which persists throughout the story. Additionally, her admission that being Emily's mother has not given her the ability to understand her daughter hints at the fraught depictions of female relationships to come. Finally, this opening passage sets up the narrator's position at the ironing board, which introduces the crucial theme of repetitive, constraining domestic labor.

Emily, the oldest of the narrator's five children, "was a beautiful baby," even though she spent much of her childhood fearing that she was ugly. While the narrator reassured Emily that she was beautiful "to the seeing eye," she admits that "seeing eyes were few or nonexistent. Including mine." The narrator cared for Emily with "fierce rigidity," doing just as "the books" said and waiting "'till the **clock** decreed" to nurse Emily, despite that Emily's cries "battered" the narrator and her breasts "ached." The narrator says this, despite not knowing "if it matters, or if it explains anything."

This discussion of Emily's early childhood years brings to light all of the complex forces that act on the narrator and her family—they're so complex, in fact, that the narrator herself can't figure out which ones mattered to Emily's development and which didn't. The narrator's quick surrender to "the clock" and to societal expectations of parenting illustrates the ways in which she sacrifices her own instincts in order to obey social norms. Emily's physical beauty also comes into play immediately, demonstrating that, even as a small child, she was not free of the pressures of her female identity. The narrator is in a tough position here—she admits her flaws, such as failing to see Emily's beauty, while also asserting her effort and sacrifice for Emily.

Emily was a "miracle" to the narrator, but at eight months old, she had to start spending days with the downstairs neighbor to whom Emily was "no miracle at all." This was necessary because Emily's father "could no longer endure…sharing want with us," so he left the family and Emily's mother had to work to support them. Eventually, the narrator had to send Emily to live with her father's family, and it was a long time before she could save enough money to bring Emily home again.

This section makes the difficulty of poverty clear, since the narrator discovers that economic need must dictate many of her parenting choices. That Emily's father leaves suddenly and selfishly suggests that men are unreliable and irresponsible, while women must do the important work.

While living with her father's family, Emily got chicken pox and she returned to the narrator seeming thin and nervous, with "all that baby loveliness gone." Emily then began nursery school at age two, since "they" said she was old enough, and the narrator didn't know that nurseries can be bad environments—not that it would have mattered if she knew, since she had a job and the school was the only place for Emily to go.

As Emily grows older, the narrator continues to make choices based on the pressures of poverty, time, and external expectation, denying her own intuition in favor of obedience to others. The narrator continues to feel guilt over her choices, but knows that, due to the constant need to hold down a job outside the home, she is powerless to choose differently.

The narrator *did* know that Emily hated school, because she often made excuses not to go. While other children often rebelled and threw tantrums, Emily never did, which makes the narrator wonder "what was the cost [to Emily] of such goodness?" A neighbor once suggested to the narrator that she smile at Emily more, which makes her wonder what was in her face instead, and whether she expressed her love to Emily effectively.

The narrator's painful tendency toward obedience and politeness also begins to show itself in Emily, as she quietly attends the school that she hates without rebelling. At this point in the story, it's clear that the narrator's obedience has led her to make parenting choices that she now guiltily questions or outright regrets, and she wonders if Emily's obedience will lead to similar distress.

While the narrator applied the neighbor's advice about smiling to parenting her other children, it was "too late for Emily." Now, as a teenager, Emily doesn't "smile easily," and she is "closed and somber," except when she is performing comedy onstage, for which she has a "rare gift." The narrator has no idea where Emily's gift for comedy comes from—it wasn't there yet when Emily came back from being sent away the second time. When Emily returned then, she had a "new daddy to love," and it was a "better time," except when they left her alone some nights, which she didn't like. Once, they came home to find the **clock** on the floor and Emily terrified. "The clock talked loud," she said. "I threw it away. It scared me what it talked."

Again, the narrator agonizes over whether she was a good enough parent, but she struggles to identify a clear correspondence between her choices and Emily's struggles. It's not clear that Emily's somber demeanor is related to the narrator not smiling enough, especially since Emily loves comedy, too. Emily's fear of clocks underscores their symbolic weight and reiterates the oppressive, even frightening role that time sometimes plays in this story. Perhaps the narrator's own anxiety about time has transferred to Emily, or perhaps Emily is anxious for her own reasons—that she perceives herself as out of synch with others, for example.

The **clock** "talked loud again" the night the narrator gave birth to Emily's sister Susan. Emily became sick with measles then and prone to nightmares but, with a new baby, the narrator was too exhausted to comfort Emily when she woke in the night. Now, she eagerly offers Emily comfort if she hears her move around at night, but Emily no longer seems to need her mother's attention as she did during childhood.

Here, the clock talking on the night of Susan's birth shows how time brings inevitable change, which can be frightening and painful even as it brings growth. The narrator also seems to make a connection between giving Emily less attention and Emily pulling away, although having another baby and dividing attention between children is normal, so it's difficult to say that this has contributed to Emily's problems.

At one point, Emily's doctors convinced the narrator to send Emily to live at "a convalescent home in the country" to recover from her illness. While it was a "handsome place," they wouldn't let the narrator visit Emily much. When Emily made friends with another girl there, the administrators moved the girl to a different residence, and Emily remarked that, "They don't like you to love anybody here." While Emily and her mother regularly corresponded, Emily was not allowed to keep the narrator's letters, even though her mother tried to explain to the doctors how important it is to Emily to be able to keep things. Emily lived there for eight months, during which time she stopped eating and became frailer. When Emily finally returned home, she would not accept physical affection. "Food sickened her," the narrator notes, "and I think much of life too."

Emily's time at the convalescent home is perhaps the most vivid example of the narrator subjecting Emily to hardship at the direction of an authority figure. During her stay there, obedience overtakes self-expression completely, for both the narrator and Emily, as even simple acts of autonomy like making friends and keeping tokens of affection are stripped away. The dire effects of this experience on Emily's health and her relationship with her mother make a forceful statement about the danger of such complete obedience and indicate that even doing the "correct" thing can come with terrible costs.

As Emily got older, she continued to worry about her appearance: "thin and dark and foreign-looking," rather than a "replica of Shirley Temple." In part because the family moved frequently, Emily did not form close friendships with other children. At one point, she brought the boy she loved his favorite candy and couldn't understand why he still loved someone else instead, although the narrator doesn't believe that this kind of question has an answer.

Emily's middle childhood is defined in large part by various expectations placed on her by her female identity, particularly her constant concern over her appearance. This passage also underscores the unreliability of men—the narrator doesn't think it's worthwhile to contemplate rationally why a boy might feel one way or another.

In school, Emily was not "glib or quick," which made people think she was a "slow learner." The narrator often allowed Emily to stay home, even when she knew that Emily was faking sickness. Sometimes, she kept both daughters home, "to have them all together." These were the only "times of peaceful companionship" between Emily and Susan, since Emily developed a "corroding resentment" of her pretty and outgoing sister. Emily's physical development was slower than her peers' or her sister's, which estranged her from both and made her acutely self-conscious.

Emily's struggles with her appearance, coupled with her conflicted relationship with her beautiful sister Susan, demonstrates the ways in which societal standards for women and girls can turn even a close relationship like sisterhood into something toxic. The conflict between the sisters in turn increases the guilt that the narrator feels over Emily's unhappy childhood, expanding the pain of the situation into the female role of motherhood as well. This section also hints at the restorative value of disobedience, as the narrator describes the peaceful times that both daughters stayed home from school. Only defying societal expectations about what the girls should be doing creates a harmonious environment.

Ronnie, the narrator's youngest child, cries out to be changed, interrupting the narrator's recollections. While cuddling with his mother, he uses a nonsense word—"shoogily"—which Emily invented years before to express the idea of comfort, leading the narrator to remark on Emily's influence on the family. During the war years, the narrator was working, so Emily became a "mother, and housekeeper, and shopper." The narrator worries that the pressure of such domestic responsibilities made Emily suffer, especially in school, which she did not often have time for. In this period, however, "to make me laugh, or out of her despair," she began doing impressions of things going on at school, and the narrator encouraged her to perform at the school's amateur show, which she won.

Here, Emily is explicitly drawn into the domestic labors that have so deeply impacted the narrator throughout the story. Not only do the many repetitive tasks of the family's impoverished life keep the narrator from fully supporting Emily, they also burden Emily directly when she has to perform those same tasks herself. This transfer of the burden from mother to daughter highlights the way that poverty and its labors can turn even a loving home into a site of oppression. At the same time, the narrator notes that Emily has been able to transform family life in her own way, inventing words like "shoogily" to express and expand the positive aspects of the family's life. It seems, then, that the narrator's burdens have actually transformed somewhat in being passed to Emily, which indicates that the passage of time can lend growth and liberation even as it keeps individuals caught in repetitive cycles. The benefits of growth over time are echoed in the narrator's observation that, as Ronnie grows up, she may finally become more focused on herself as the needs of her children fade into the past.

The narrator remarks that Emily's newfound gift made her "Somebody," but it left her "as imprisoned in her difference as she had been in anonymity." When Emily began performing at schools and events, the narrator could barely recognize her daughter onstage, since performing transformed her so thoroughly, making her confident and commanding. The narrator knew Emily could "do something" with her gift, but she didn't know how to make that possible, since she didn't have the money or knowledge to support her. Because of this, Emily's gift has "clogged and clotted" as much as it has been used and developed.

The previous sections of the story have highlighted the danger of obedience, but this section, in contrast, highlights the danger of expansive self-expression. The narrator focuses on the difficulty that Emily will face as she attempts to develop her gift, difficulties that are again defined in part by the family's lack of economic resources. It seems, then, that there may not be a way for either the narrator or Emily to make a truly "correct" choice; this section indicates that both obedience and self-expression come with risks and unexpected costs.

Emily runs happily up the stairs and enters the room where the narrator is **ironing**. Cheerful and talkative, she jokes about the fact that her mother is always ironing. Even though this is one of her "communicative nights," Emily tells her mother "everything and nothing," and the narrator reflects that Emily is "lovely" and perhaps she doesn't need help after all—she will "find her way." Emily makes a joke about dying from an atomic bomb and goes to bed.

Throughout the story, the narrator has been ironing, which demonstrates the powerful, even eternal nature of domestic labor in their lives. However, this is the first time readers actually see Emily, and she's not the troubled, brooding girl the story has led readers to expect—she's happy and charismatic and seems to love her mother, which suggests that maybe there's not much wrong with Emily at all.

The narrator can no longer endure "dredging up the past," and she can never "total it all": Emily was "seldom smiled at," her father left, her mother worked, she was thin and dark in "a world where prestige went to blondeness and curly hair and dimples," she was slow and anxious and the family was poor, the narrator was a "young" and "distracted" mother, and Susan "seemed all that [Emily] was not. The narrator laments that her own "wisdom came too late," and Emily "has much to her, and probably little will come of it." To the unidentified person asking after Emily, the narrator says to "let her be"—"there is still enough left to live by," even if Emily's life isn't all it could have been. The narrator simply hopes that Emily will "know that she is more than this dress on the **ironing** board, helpless before the iron."

While the narrator's life seems defined by ironing (and the domestic labor that it represents), she dares to hope that Emily may escape that same constriction. In fact, Emily has already done so: Emily has reached the age of nineteen without marrying or giving birth as her mother did at that same age. Time, then, is both restrictive and generative, and it may lead Emily out of the constraints of poverty even as it has drawn her into them in the past. Similarly, the narrator has succeeded in doing what she initially thought impossible by relating the story of Emily's childhood. She still feels guilty about her failures, but she seems also to have reached an understanding that there is no correct interpretation of the facts, no way to know the true impact of all of her choices. Rather than giving up hope in the face of this overwhelming, unknowable reality, the narrator concludes with the statement that even if Emily's life cannot be perfect, it can still be an improvement over her mother's.

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