Communist, feminist, novelist?

By GLENN C. ALTSCHULER
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A biographer tries to resolve the mystery of Tillie Olsen’s writer’s block.

Tybile (Yiddish for little dove) Lerner was a precocious kid – and a hell-cat. Chosen to recite a poem by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow at the graduation ceremony for her elementary school in Omaha, Nebraska in 1924, she startled officials by sharing Spartacus’s speech to the slaves with her captive audience. At 15, “Tillie the Toiler” stole books from the public library, read Schopenhauer and Nietzsche, wrote poems, a murder story and a dime novel entitled *Dore Deirl Dickette*, the poor little sewing ripping girl, held imaginary conversations with Satan and Rabelais and played the part of Haman at the Jewish community center.

A labor organizer and a communist, Tillie became “the most sought-after” proletarian writer in the US in the 1930s with the publication of *Tell Me a Riddle*, a collection of short stories including “I Stand Here Ironing.” Forty years later, she reemerged as a feminist icon. In between, she struggled to complete the great novel that would alter the social consciousness of America and the world.

In *Tillie Olsen*, Panthea Reid, a professor emerita of English at Louisiana State University, tries to solve the riddle of Olsen’s nonproductivity. As early as her 50s, Reid suggests, Olsen had lost the ability to write. To “hide her terrible secret,” she became a prima donna and a serial fabricator. And she allowed feminists to explain, as Margaret Atwood did, that “she did not write for a very simple reason. A day has 24 hours. For 20 years, she had no time, no energy and none of the money that would have bought both.”

An inventive and indefatigable researcher, Reid provides a lively narrative of Olsen’s fascinating life: as a labor union “bigwig” in the ’30s, a victim of FBI surveillance in the ’50s and a civil rights, women’s rights, anti-Vietnam War activist in the ’60s and ’70s. Along the way she was also awarded the O. Henry Prize, became a teacher and writer-in-residence at several top American colleges and was the recipient of nine honorary degrees, National Endowment for the Arts fellowships, and a Guggenheim Fellowship.

Reid may be right about her subject’s writer’s block. But she is not always effective in evaluating Olsen’s enduring importance as a writer and as a critic of American society.

The “historical context” in the biography, alas, is little more than clutter. In the 1970s, Reid writes, in an all too typical passage, Tillie sent chapters of a novel to her literary agent, “was taken aback but pleased to learn that [Richard] Nixon had opened relations with the People’s Republic of China,” and then finished the afterword to a new edition of a work by Rebecca Harding Davis. Twenty pages later, Olsen is so obsessed with complaints about errors in one of her books, “she hardly noticed” when Jimmy Carter, Menachem Begin and Anwar Sadat signed the Camp David Accords.

More importantly, Reid lays out, but does not sort out, Olsen’s social and political views. She notes, without further comment, that Tillie, who had excused Soviet purges, denied atrocities and justified expansionism, was “distressed” when Nikita Khrushchev denounced Joseph Stalin as a despot and “appalled” when the Soviet premier brutally smashed the Hungarian revolution. But Reid stays on the sidelines, while Tillie’s former teacher wonders whether her retreat from radical politics in the 1950s reflected a tactical decision to stay below Sen. Joseph McCarthy’s radar screen or a substantive change, influenced by the apolitical writers she was reading.
Nor does she interrogate Olsen’s seemingly scattered observations about women’s rights. Within a short span of time, Reid points out, Tillie claimed that the central issue in post-World War II America was making women’s traditional positions as homemakers consistent with the fullest possible contribution to human society, declared that the “new job for jobless women” was to sweep away discriminatory laws and practices and insisted that women could remain politically active by “surrendering to motherhood” and influencing their babies.

Criticized for covering her politics with pabulum, she “acted unwounded” – and blasted the American Federation of Labor and California’s Department of Industrial Welfare for failing to shut down “piecework jobs” at appallingly low wages in laundry, food processing, textile and needle trades “slave shops.” Perhaps, Reid concludes, unhelpfully, Olsen “wrote too rapidly to think through the implications of her assertions.”

“There is no Tillie Olsen,” an editor once told her. “Your stories are the only identity you’ll ever have.” Olsen agreed. Asked what she’d do if forced to choose between Jack Olsen and her writing, she replied, without a pause, “I’d drop him in a minute.” That’s why it must have stung when critics told her to quit making excuses “and just do the work.” And why on New Year’s Day 1986, alone in her apartment, lying flat with her feet on a table to ease her back pain, Olsen wrote in her journal, “I have not done well with my life momma some things I am proud of some things were of use but I have not harvested dear one I have never written...”

Olsen died in 2007, just weeks shy of her 95th birthday. Some of her stories, Panthea Reid reminds us, were – and are – “of use.” And so, Tillie Olsen, the little dove who could be petty, vain and manipulative, may, at long last, be able to rest in peace.

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