In her novel *Yonnondio* Tillie Olsen shows nature in two opposing ways: Nature is an escape from the harshness of reality and yet a source of destruction, death and desperation personified as a monster or evil being. Both these views dominate the lives of the Holbrook family: the forces of nature destroy the hopes and dreams of the family; yet, ironically, in nature they find relief, hope, and pleasure.

At the outset, a harsh nature dictates the mood of the Holbrooks' life: "Outside the wind gibbered and moaned. The room was suddenly chill. Some horror, some sense of evil seemed on everything." The Holbrook family live in constant fear of the sound of the miner's rescue bell. Each day, Jim and the other men go down into the mines where they are under the complete control of nature. A cave-in, explosion, or other accident could occur at any moment. Through Olsen's imagery the mine becomes a monster, a great black hole in the earth which swallows up the men and leaves mothers and children alone. The mine has intestines—it sucks men in and chokes them, taking away their breath.

Olsen shows nature as evil in other ways as well. The Holbrooks leave the mines for farm life, but fall comes and nature once again exerts its power and takes vengeance on the family: "The wind started a laughter in the fallen dead leaves, stirred them round and round senselessly in a mocking mimicry of being alive, rose in mocking laughter through the trees that beat up over the sky." Nature laughs at the Holbrooks, assuring them that life won't be any better for them on the farm. In the bitter cold Mazie's and Will's tears freeze. The ground becomes cold and unyielding; snow covers the earth "ghost white at night"; and nature's wrath once again makes life for the Holbrooks unbearable.

Even in March, the earth is ugly, pregnant—like Anna Holbrook. The soiled snow melts from patches of ground which look like dirty sores. Leaves like scabs hide the violets, and even these spring flowers resemble bruises. The trees are fat with buds; clouds are swollen. With the coming of spring, nature is about to give birth, but only to breed more evil, destruction, and death.

By midsummer, the Holbrooks have moved again and the new season brings with it sweltering heat: "The white fierce heat throbbing when the city's breathing is the drawing in of a scorching flame and the pavement on the bare feet of the children is a sear; when the very young and the very old sicken and die, and the stench cooking down into the pavements and the oven houses throbs like a great wave of vomit in the air." The heat of summer works on the Holbrooks, testing their physical health and mental stability, choking and cooking them.
air is heavy and it "clamps down like a coffin lid over the throbbing streets; a mocking bitterness in old old words: is it hot enough for you?" Nature, in its intense heat, once more mocks the Holbrooks' worsened situation and makes the new life, too, miserable for them.

(6) The hot wrath of nature snuffs out life everywhere. The earth is parched and cracked, the corn stiff and dry. Great dust columns swirl in the air hitting Anna and the house as if to bury her alive and bring her back to the dust of creation. For even after nature has stolen life from a creature, it continues to devour the entire being until it is once again a part of the earth from which it was originally created. As Erina tells Mazie, "When you die your soul goes to hell or heaven but your body gets et and stinks." Nature then, in this first view, is a cruel and harsh force; it is realistic. It is a giver but also a taker of life; it is an evil power which spares no one in the end. Like an almost human force, nature sadistically teases and molests men, robbing them of hope, dignity, and life.

(7) But nature in Yonnondio also has a more positive role. For the Holbrook family, and especially for Mazie, nature serves as an escape from the cruel realities of life. In nature, one can find freedom, hope, and happiness. Springtime brings with it life, rebirth, and peace. For instance, when the family is leaving the mine for the farm, the air is pure and soft, birds and jack rabbits are abundant, and there is laughter. In the wagon Mazie is delighted: "The wind came over her body with a great rush of freedom; freedom and joy tingled to her hair roots." At this point in their lives, the Holbrooks are free from the fear of the bell, no longer restricted in the black mine. On the farm Mazie goes out into the field and pushes herself into the earth. She watches the stars as they dance in the sky, and she daydreams. These feelings of freedom and contentment become buried deep within the Holbrook children's hearts, and when times are hopeless, they yearn to be back on the farm. The children desire to be in harmony with nature and to hide from the pain of reality.

(8) When the Holbrook family moves into the city, Jim goes to work at the slaughter-house. The stench of slaughtered animals hovers in the stagnant air making life miserable. Jimmie complains about the odor and threatens to run away to the farm, but Mazie yells back at him that they are on the farm: "Mazie did not see; still she lived on the farm in June; in early June, when a voluptuous fragrance lay over the earth." All around her, reality entraps and chokes her, but Mazie ignores it and envelops herself in a beautiful dream.

(9) In the city after her miscarriage, Anna grows weaker and sicker. Occasionally, she too slips out of reality into her own fantasy world. In one dream, the clouds become a white bridal wreath in the blue sky sending her back to when she was a girl and had dreams of what her life would be. But always one of the children
disrupts her dream and brings her back to reality.

(10) As she becomes sicker Anna neglects the house duties, and, like Mazie, has a need to be "out under a boundless sky, in unconfined air, not between walls, under the roof of a house." Being close to nature for her is an escape from her pain and problems. Outside, she can find a relief and pleasure lacking in the confines of the house.

(11) Once, during rent week when there is little to eat in the house, Anna takes Mazie, Ben, and Jimmie looking for dandelions. In this adventure, Anna becomes completely absorbed in nature and the outdoor life. Anna teaches the children how to make a chain out of clover and shows Mazie how to suck the honey out of catalpa blossoms. Anna sings songs, acts as if she were alone, and has a "remote, shining look on her face, as if she had forgotten them, as if she had become someone else, was not their mother any more." When Mazie tries to bring her mother back to reality, Anna remains caught in her enjoyment and "Mazie felt the strange happiness in her mother's body, happiness that had nought to do with them, with her; happiness and farness and selfness." Nature here symbolizes the freedom that Anna and her family can't experience realistically: "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 unfoldings, wingedness, boundlessness." This scene, in which Anna and her children experience freedom and relief from the cruelty of the real world, is the last time we see true happiness in the family. After this event, the evil side of nature dominates the lives of the Holbrooks, and hopelessness and pessimism replace the freedom and happiness.

(12) Ironically, nature tears the Holbrooks apart, but also gives them hope and relief. The evil, destroying part of nature robs the family of their dignity and dreams. But flowers, trees, stars, and the sun all bring relief from the hardships of life and serve as a symbol of life and hope. For the Holbrooks, though, the evil side of nature remains dominant; the peaceful view only appears occasionally and for a short time before the family is jolted back into reality. This seems to be an indication that life for the Holbrooks will never get better, but continue to worsen. Nature is slowly confining them and smothering their life's breath, stealing their lives, bringing them back completely to itself.