

Summary “I Stand Here Ironing”

The unnamed narrator, a mother, is ironing while speaking on the phone with an unnamed individual who is most likely a social worker, teacher, or counselor. The mother likens the back-and-forth motion of the iron to her own mental process as she considers the cautionary statement made by this outside party. The person has asked the narrator to help him or her understand the narrator's daughter, Emily, a young woman whom the person claims is in need of assistance. The narrator balks, wondering what she can possibly do to change the situation. She believes that she has no special insight into Emily's behavior simply because she is her mother. The narrator feels she would become mired in the abstractions of the situation, all the things she should have done or those things that cannot be altered. The narrator remembers how beautiful Emily was as a baby, then her awkward phase, followed by the blossoming of her beauty in her late teens.

The narrator states that she breast-fed Emily, then questions why she cites that fact first in pleading her case to the unnamed “you.” When Emily was eight months old, the narrator was forced to leave her in the care of a neighbor. Emily's father had left unexpectedly, unable to bear the family's poverty. The narrator recalls running home from work to retrieve Emily, who always cried when she spotted her. Eventually, the narrator sent Emily to live with her father's family. Emily returned to her mother's care when she was two, but the narrator worked long hours and placed Emily in day care. The narrator is still angry that she had no other choice. Emily would find any excuse to stay home from nursery school with her mother. The narrator recalls an old neighbor gently telling her that she should smile more at Emily. The narrator was more joyful in her treatment of her other four children and fears she is responsible for Emily's somber nature.

Despite her restrained temperament, Emily displays a talent for comedy and acting. The mother recalls sending Emily away to another's care a second time and Emily's

subsequent return, this time adjusting to a new stepfather. The narrator and her second husband often left Emily alone for hours. Emily was sick with the measles when the narrator went to the hospital to have another daughter, Susan. The illness left her thin, weak, and prone to nightmares. The narrator tries to comfort Emily now, in the present, but it is too late. Suffering from tuberculosis at another point in her life, Emily was sent to a convalescent home, where she could be better cared for. During twice-monthly visits, the narrator had to shout to Emily, who stood on a balcony some distance away, because all the parents were forbidden from getting too close to their children. Emily returned home frail, distant, and rigid, with little appetite. She disliked the way she looked and had few friends and little luck attracting boys' attention. The family moved frequently, and Emily's feigned illnesses meant she was often absent from school, where she was labeled a "slow learner."



In rare peaceful moments, Emily and Susan played together. Otherwise, the girls were at odds. Susan would retell one of Emily's jokes in front of company to the praise and admiration of all. Emily's physical development as a teenager was slow, and her self-esteem issues deepened. The crying of the narrator's infant son, Ronnie, interrupts her reverie, and she cradles the child. She resumes her examination of Emily's life, serving as mother to her four younger siblings during and after World War II and helping to get the chaotic brood off to school, where Emily was lost in her classes. Good at imitations and comic performances, Emily, with the narrator's encouragement, entered and won the school talent show. She tearfully phoned the narrator at work to tell her the news. Emily began performing widely, blossoming into a talented performer. But without the money and encouragement to develop her talent, her potential remained unfulfilled.

In the story's present moment, Emily returns home and fixes herself something to eat. The narrator assures the person she is addressing that Emily will be fine just as she is.

She then lists the multiple reasons Emily had a rocky childhood and hopes that Emily will come to view herself as a valuable creation.