
Trifles and A Jury of Her Peers: Critical Analysis

"Trifles" tells the story of Mr. and Mrs. Wright, without them ever being present. Instead, we are introduced to Sheriff Peters, Mrs. Peters, Hale, Mrs. Hale, and County Attorney Henderson, who try to uncover the truth behind the murder of Mr. Wright. Hale tells them that he came in to see Mr. Wright one day, but was met with Mrs. Wright telling him that he was dead. As they investigate, the true nature of Mr. and Mrs. Wright's relationship becomes more evident. The sexism from the male characters becomes more clear too. The women, Mrs. Peters and Mrs. Hale, do their best to defend Mrs. Wright when the men insult how her cupboards are messy and her towels are dirty saying how she had much to take on for she worked on a farm. The first signs of trouble bubble up to the surface when Mrs. Hale comments on how she hasn't been to the house in a year because it wasn't very "cheerful" due to Mr. Wright being in it. At one point, Hale says, "Well, women are used to worrying over trifles" (Glaspell 10). Trifles are defined as both a dessert and something unimportant. It's one of many lines that show the misogynistic views of men during this time period and how they viewed women to have more domestic roles and as an inferior group. In the blocking, it's shown how the women are always sticking close together and being dismissed by the men. As soon as the men leave to go upstairs, the women clean the mess in the kitchen and collect what Mrs. Wright wants them to bring to her in jail, but, unconsciously, start investigating the case on their own. They start recognizing the strange shift in Mrs. Wright's behavior, from "...one of the town girls singing in the choir" before her marriage to someone who doesn't participate in the community anymore (Glaspell 14). The men laugh at the women for inspecting Mrs. Wright's unfinished quilt and Mrs. Hale says, "I don't know as there's anything so strange, our takin' up our time with little things while we're waiting for them to get the evidence" (Glaspell 16). It's ironic because the women are the ones finding the real evidence by paying attention to the "little things" that are irrelevant to the men because they view women and the tasks that they do as lesser. Though both women care about what will happen to Mrs. Wright, Mrs. Hale is described as more resentful of the men when saying the aforementioned line while Mrs. Peters apologetically says how the men are "just doing their jobs." This moment shows the contrast between women, like Susan Glaspell, who were trying to break away from the conditioned mindset put upon them by society during this time and those who weren't of the more progressive ideals. Because of the quilt, the women pick up on how Wright's bad sewing must have meant she was nervous and start to question why she would be nervous. They then discover an empty birdcage. Mrs. Hale further expresses remorse about not having been there to support Mrs. Wright all this time. They comment on how she was like a bird herself, free, but then confined to a cage. Even though Mr. Wright was considered a good guy by the people in the town, Mrs. Hale says he was "...like a raw wind that gets to the bone" (Glaspell 19). When looking for sewing supplies to fix the quilt, they find a dead bird, which immediately creates tension between the women for what has occurred has started to make more sense. When the men come down, they don't say anything about this revelation and when the men leave, they express their sadness and fear. Mr. Wright wrung the bird's neck out, so Mrs. Wright did the same to him. Mrs. Peters thinks they need to tell the truth, but Mrs. Hale exclaims how the real crime is what has happened to Mrs. Wright all this time. Mrs. Hale says how women "...all go through the same things?it's all just a different kind of same thing" (Glaspell 23). As the men come down to leave, the women remain mum about what has occurred and, when they aren't looking, take the box with the bird, knowing the dire consequences Mrs. Wright would suffer.

“A Jury of Her Peers” is the short story Susan Glaspell wrote based on the murder of John Haddock and was released after her play, based on the same event, “Trifles.” Both are extremely similar, except that one is a short story and the other is a play. “A Jury of Her Peers” is also told more from the perspective of Martha Hale, who sympathized deeply with Minnie Wright having known a time when Minnie was happy. The lines in the play and the dialogue in the short story are practically identical, but the short story gives us much more detail into the behavior of the characters we have become familiar with through the play. Again, especially with Mrs. Hale, when we get a part of the short story like this: “The picture of that girl, the fact that she had lived neighbor to that girl for twenty years, and had let her die for lack of life, was suddenly more than she could bear” (A Jury of Her Peers -- Full Text). It becomes clearer to the reader how gut-wrenching this revelation is and how Martha Hale can sympathize with Minnie Wright’s pain. Another great moment is towards the end when the women silently decide what to do with the evidence: “...Martha Hale's eyes pointed the way to the basket in which was hidden the thing that would make certain the conviction of the other woman?that woman who was not there and yet who had been there with them all through that hour” (A Jury of Her Peers -- Full Text). It brings back the theme, that was present in Glaspell’s “Trifles,” of the women not being particularly close with Mrs. Wright, but knowing the truth of Mrs. Wright’s situation and how no men would be able to empathize with it in the way they did.

The inspiration behind “Trifles” and “A Jury of Her Peers” came from Glaspell’s time working for the Des Moines Daily News and reporting on the Margaret Hossack case. On December 3rd, 1901, John Hossack was murdered by a blow to the head with an ax. Investigators originally believed it to be a burglary, but there was no evidence to support it. His wife, Margaret Hossack, claimed that she did not see or hear this attack, despite being in the same bed as her husband. After John Hossack’s funeral, Margaret Hossack was arrested for the crime, but took the arrest calmly. She didn’t have support from the people in the community, and news of her and her husband’s arguments started coming out. As Glaspell observes in one of the articles she wrote, Margaret Hossack “...looks like she would be dangerous if aroused to a point of hatred” (“Midnight Assassin :: Patricia Bryan and Thomas Wolf”). But according to her neighbors, Hossack claimed that her husband often got angry with her and abused her, and she worried that he would end up killing her or their children. Margaret Hossack was found guilty and was sentenced to life, but their decision was rebuked over a technicality and the second trial was unable to reach a verdict. She ended up dying in 1916, which would end up being around the time when Susan Glaspell’s “Trifles” would open.

Susan Glaspell began her writing career after graduating from Drake University and reporting at the Des Moines Daily News. She then left journalism to continue writing short stories on her own. Glaspell met George Cook in 1913, married him, and moved with him to Greenwich Village, which at the time was known for being quite artistically and politically liberated. That is where she began writing plays. In 1915, Glaspell and Cook founded the Provincetown Players in Provincetown, Cape Cod. The goal of the Provincetown Players was to have actors, directors, and playwrights to create work with no restraints. During the time she was at the Provincetown Players, she wrote eleven plays and “...more plays by women writers than any other theatre of the time” where produced there (The International Susan Glaspell Society). Cook and Glaspell eventually left the theatre over the Players all having different ambitions and intentions. They went to live in Greece, but Glaspell returned to the United States after Cook had passed there. Stimulated by her time in Greece, Glaspell wrote “The Fugitive’s Return,” a novel about a woman reclaiming her life after having not fully lived it in a meaningful or fulfilling way. In the 1930’s, she continued working on plays for a company, but eventually returned to Provincetown

to continue working on novels after having felt controlled by the regulations placed on her.

According to The International Susan Glaspell Society, "Glaspell's plays and fiction portray feminist issues such as women's struggle for expression in a patriarchal culture, the loving yet fraught relationships between daughters and mothers, and female friendship as an essential part of women's growth toward autonomy and selfhood." The themes Glaspell covers in many of her works relate to women going through issues and journeys that are still applicable in the present. "Trifles" brings to light the issue of domestic abuse by telling the story of a woman who had been in an abusive relationship that completely changed who she was and was unwilling to say she killed her abuser because of the repercussions she could face as a woman.

In the early 1900s, when the murder of John Hossack occurred and Susan Glaspell wrote "Trifles," the Woman Suffrage Movement was occurring. What launched this movement was the Seneca Falls Convention in New York in 1848. This movement focused on suffragists demanding women get the right to vote. To get politicians to listen to them about other legislation they wanted to pass, women had to become enfranchised. In 1920, the 19th Amendment was ratified and women won the right to vote. This time could also be referred to as the "first wave" of feminism where women primarily sought political equality.

The "New Woman" was a term used to describe women during the period of 1890 to 1920, who defied the standard gender roles prescribed to women by seeking greater freedom. Women created organizations to gain women's suffrage, were college-educated, did not concern themselves with having to get married, and sought work outside of being a housewife. They created their own power to alter their lives socially, politically, and economically. It also focused on women separating themselves from male authority. The "New Woman" "...is more than a good mother, a good wife, a good daughter. In fact, she need not be none of those because she can stand independently" ("A Definition of the 'The New Woman' from Alice Freeman Palmer: The Evolution of a New Woman, a 1993 Biography by Ruth Bordin"). However, the image of the "New Woman" shifted over time. It started with the "Gibson Girl," which was more of a beauty ideal rather than an ideology. While the "Gibson Girl" did symbolize women getting more educational and work opportunities, she still applied to societal standards and was relatively conservative. Only in the 1910s did a more political side to the New Woman come to fruition. This new woman was more synonymous with women wanting to gain political power and, particularly, the right to vote.

In Julie Taymor's production of Igor Stravinsky's opera "Oedipus Rex," Oedipus Rex is depicted in two ways: one as the performer portraying Oedipus by singing and interacting with other characters and the other as a dancer, on a separate platform, doing movements that could be interpreted as "inner" Oedipus or Oedipus' thoughts. As an artist, that is what my vision would be based on for if I were to do a production of "Trifles" by Susan Glaspell. Instead of creating an "inner" version of a character on stage, I would like to bring Mrs. Wright into the play through movement. Because the characters on stage speak about her and point her out in specific areas on the stage, I would want her to be doing those tasks while also evoking the pain she feels from being in an abusive relationship. She wouldn't speak as a signifier of women's voices and opinions being considered inferior to men's during that time, and also not being able to express to others that she was being abused. The specific style of dance done in Julie Taymor's production is known as "Butoh." It seems to be hard to define, but is said to focus "...on primal expressions of the human condition rather than physical beauty" ("Butoh: the Dance of Death and Disease"). I want the same visceral feeling I got from watching Butoh in

“Oedipus Rex”, but I don’t think I would want to stick to the style of Butoh. I imagine a myriad of styles showing her highs, whenever the women on stage reminisce about her days as Minnie Foster, and her lows, when the revelation of what she did is uncovered and all her pain is released.

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