



Representations of Rural Women in Susan Glaspell's *Trifles*

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Abstract

Rural American women usually appear as marginal characters in mainstream early twentieth century literature. Susan Glaspell, however, sought to represent the lives and hardships of the simple rural women residing in various regions in America and forgotten by society. In *Trifles* (1916) the characters were molded after real people residing in the American countryside and the protagonist resembles a real woman involved in a sensational murder case that Glaspell covered during her early days as a journalist. Consequently, most critics link the domestic murder to the playwright's ideals of advocating political rights for women. Moreover, the play written in 1916 preceding the Nineteenth Amendment in 1920 is indicative of cultural transformations in American society. Critical opinion, however, varies and *Trifles* is often regarded as a one-act drama focusing on the individual hardships of women and therefore does not reach an apogee of a political play. However, the play's vivid description of the daily lives of rural women in America and their individual struggle with patriarchy emphasize the play's insistence on the importance of gaining political rights for women as a major theme. The present paper suggests that a reading of the political themes as relevant because the historical setting and the precise account of rural American women living in 1916 were accurately portrayed in the exposition.

Key words: Domesticity; Space; American; Glaspell; Women; Rural; Twentieth century; Representation; Feminism; Minority; Regional writing; Drama; Literature

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As a representative of an early twentieth century American text, *Trifles* (1916) becomes important in revealing important facts about social views of women and their domestic roles. Yuval Davis in *Gender and Nation* states that "women especially are often required to carry this 'burden of representation', as they are constructed as the symbolical bearers of the collectivity's identity and honour, both personally and collectively" (Davis, 1997: 45). Susan Glaspell pays particular emphasis to the setting and especially to the home of rural women as a place, where power relationship takes place and as Hanna Scolnicov (1994) in *Women's Theatrical Space* states:

The social position of women as well as the exigencies of the plot often relegate the heroines to the indoors, in circumstances not unlike house-arrest...The house itself is so closely identified with the woman that entering the guarded house becomes a theatrical metaphor for sexual conquest (64).

Glaspell staged her heroine in a power struggle with patriarchy which emphasized the domestication of women as a source of security for the welfare of the household and the nation. According to mainstream culture maintaining traditional feminine behavior was often imagined as important in the stability of the home and if not observed often leads to disastrous consequences as in the example of Mrs. Wright. The house, closely identified with women and their environment, becomes important as a location of the domestic struggle. However, the violence in the Wright's home undermines old-fashioned perceptions that blame inappropriate female conduct as the reason behind the destruction of a stable home.

Susan Glaspell used domestic violence as a motif to arouse questions concerning motives that lead women, who are relegated to the house, to become physical aggressors. In *Trifles*, the simple farmhouse which appears as a background to this domestic violence situation becomes an instrument that directs the audience not to condemn the wife for the crime, as the motive displayed through the careful scrutiny of the domestic space reveals a life of abuse.

Mrs. Wright, similar to the other female characters in Glaspell's literary production, wanted to play a greater role than the ones prescribed by their society. Glaspell's protagonists belong to particular regions, such as the Woman from Idaho in *The People*, and the women were often portrayed as rebelling against traditional roles especially marriage which was an integral part of a rural existence. Susan Glaspell was socially and politically active and played an important role, as part of the Provincetown Players, in staging plays that deal with women, their problems and their environment. Yvonne Shafer considered Glaspell as part of "a radical group that believed in the New Thought and opposed conservative, small town politics" (Shafer, 1995, p. 36). Edwin Wilson in *Living Theater: History* comments on the group as part of serious theaters under the name, "Little Theater Movement," that was important as an alternative to commercial ones. The group incorporated a new production style, especially the designs of Robert Edmond Jones, who is associated with the "new stagecraft" movement in the United States. This new method of staging plays emphasized lighting and used only detail that reinforced locale, character or dramatic action (Wilson, 2000, p. 426). Glaspell illustrates the reason that prompted her to compose *Trifles* in *The Road to the Temple*. For Glaspell, plays should appeal to the audience's imagination and also represent the real life of individuals:

We went to the theatre, and for the most part we came away wishing we had gone somewhere else. Those were the days when Broadway flourished almost unchallenged. Plays, like magazine stories, were patterned. They might be pretty good within themselves, seldom did they open out to – where it surprised or thrilled your spirit to follow. They didn't ask much of you, those plays. Having paid for your seat, the thing was all done for you, and your mind came out where it went in, only tired. An audience, Jig said, had imagination. What was this "Broadway," which could make a thing as interesting as life into a thing as dull as a Broadway play? (148-9).

Her dissatisfaction with the state of the theater's inability to challenge the audience prompted her enthusiasm for experimenting in the theatre. However, her husband, George Cook announced that a play was going to be staged and in response to her objections he responded by saying, "You've got a stage, haven't you?" (153).

Even though Glaspell struggled at the beginning to find an appropriate scene for the play, the choice was

focused on finding a real domestic setting. The way Glaspell conceived the play shows the importance of domestic and the rural existence that gave shape to the domestic arrangement in the play:

So I went out on the wharf, sat alone on one of our wooden benches without a back, and looked a long time at that bare stage. After a time the stage became a kitchen—a kitchen there all by itself. I saw just where the stove was, the table, and the steps going upstairs. Then the door at the back opened, and people all bundled up came in—two or three men, I wasn't sure which, but sure enough about the two women, who hung back, reluctant to enter that kitchen. When I was a newspaper reporter out in Iowa, I was sent down-state to do a murder trial, and I never forgot going into the kitchen of a woman locked up in town" (154).

The significance of this passage has often been commented on by critics as it shows the playwright familiarity of the domestic situations in rural homes of her time. The bareness and gloomy kitchen mapped out in the exposition of the play show Glaspell's emotional involvement in the events. As Ellen Gainor points out, the passage is a significant indication in the play's construction based on the idea of the female spectatorship. Similar to feminist theater, the spectator's position is a site of human agency. Thus, the meaning of the play becomes evident through the unfolding of events (Gainor, 2001, p. 39-40). The play becomes universal and forces the audience to observe the events as beatific, erudite, and incendiary.

Glaspell's depiction of dreary rural female existence in the play also came from being a journalist which gave her access to the disadvantages of women and their role in the power struggle in their homes. Barbara Ozieblo, in *Susan Glaspell: A Critical Biography*, states that the play deals with the dilemma of womanhood and therefore, the audience members at Greenwich Village identify with these frustrations (Ozieblo, 1990, p. 83). According to Ozieblo, the play casts all the female figures as rebels, but the women are silenced because the play offers no solution (Ozieblo, 1990, p. 84). Moreover, Glaspell has managed through her absent protagonist to show woman's irrelevance in the world of men and that in order to awaken man's interest; woman had to resort to non-presence to successfully present a woman's case (Ozieblo, 1990, p. 137). Therefore, Glaspell came to the conclusion that the only available triumph for the silenced women is through friendship, or bonding with those of her sex (Ozieblo, 1990, p. 146). The gloominess of the countryside and the house would in fact support such a critical interpretation.

For Glaspell, the reality and harshness of rural life of women were familiar because her job as a journalist helped shape sympathy towards women. According to Ozieblo, Glaspell in her involvement with the origins of the play in the Hossack case for *Des Moines Daily News* held an initial hostility and orthodox attitude that helped sway the audience against the accused woman. Later on,

however, Glaspell became more sympathetic towards the end of the trial and tried to sway public attention, but without any results (Ozieblo, 1990, p. 28). Ben Zvi in her book entitled, *Susan Glaspell: Her Life and Times* as well as in her essay "Murder she Wrote," observes the genesis of the trial. She argues that Glaspell by having the women assume a position different from the absent female protagonist, the emphasis on the subjective nature of evidence becomes clear for the reader or spectator (Ben Zvi, 1995, p. 175). Moreover, Minnie Wright's absence compels the audience not to be swayed by her person, but rather by her condition as an abused wife driven to commit a terrible act. The few items that appear on stage the stove, chairs, and few rags create a powerful mis-*en-scène* with expressionistic touches to externalize Minnie's desperate state of mind while the men are offstage and their presence is manifested in the shuffling sounds. Ben-Zvi considers Glaspell's acting the role of Mrs. Hale as an apology because she refused to offer help at the time (p. 174). Other critical opinion such as Makowsky sees their rebelliousness as one of passive resistance (Makowsky, 1993, p. 63).

The few items on stage along with the gloomy portrayal of the dreary kitchen of a rural farmhouse in *Trifles* show Minnie Wright's neglect of the many domestic duties as a reality of the everyday average women and an indication of marital problems in the Wright's home. The scene, as indicated in the stage descriptions, emphasizes the forsaking of traditional household responsibilities, for the audience are given a full picture of "The kitchen in the now abandoned farmhouse of John Wright, a gloomy kitchen and left without having been put in order-unwashed pans under the sink, a loaf of bread outside the bread-box, a dish-towel on the table-other signs of incompleting work" (1203). The carefully selected description of a disconsolate and pathetic existence of a farmer's life intensifies the horror of the living conditions of the accused woman.

The accused woman does not appear on stage and is only introduced through a careful scrutiny of her kitchen. The play stages two women, Mrs. Peters and Mrs. Hale, in Mrs. Wright's private home in charge of providing Mrs. Wright with some of her personal items while she awaits trial. The two women speculate on the reason of her requesting an apron and finally decided that it was to "make her feel more natural." Mrs. Hale repeatedly voices her indignation at the sheriff and the other men, who were intruding on the woman's privacy. "You know it seems kind of sneaking. Locking her up in town and then coming out here and trying to get her own house to turn against her!" (1207). Veronica Makowsky in *Susan Glaspell's Century of American Women* regards the relative lack of action and plethora of ideas and meditative speeches in the play, as part of the restricted sphere of the domestic where a woman's life is mainly interior, inside her own

mind as well as inside her home (Makowsky, 1993, p. 60). Makowsky sees the rebelliousness of Glaspell's fictional women as private, while those of her dramatic heroines lead to the public sphere of demonstrations, court, and prison. The female protagonists compel the patriarchal world to consider their feelings and situation as something more than domestic trifles. Thus, many audience members witness women's ability to solve a murder case through "trifles" and find clues of Mrs. Wright's husband abuse through the compelling evidence that only the two female characters and members of the audience are allowed to observe, a mistake in her quilting work and a pet canary with a broken neck.

Glaspell's interest in the depiction of domestic violence in *Trifles* shows her feminist ideals of advocating female bonding and her professionalism as a journalist who tries to be objective in portraying murder. Rachel France considers Glaspell as a playwright who "has clearly pointed out the dichotomy between men and women in rural life" and "the two women, with their sense of higher purpose, band together to protect another woman from what is clearly the injustice of man's law when applied to women" (France, 1981, p. 151). Thus, for women the only possible avenue for struggle is through bonding together as several critics have noted. Noe considers the play as feminist and serves to unite woman in sisterhood when confronted by male oppression based on the new findings of scholarship especially as it relates the original case to the fictionalized murder (Noe, 2008, p. 154). Other critics, however, consider Glaspell's depiction of passivity of Mrs. Hale and Mrs. Peters as an element of the predicament of women. A patriarchal spectator, therefore, would be eager to condemn the woman, who murders her husband and Glaspell does entice the onstage lookers and characters to play a role in the criminality by making Minnie Wright's choices limited and by allowing Mrs. Hale to express her sorrow of not intervening sooner to aid her neighbor. Her plaintive mood and self reproach are shared by the majority of female spectators. Grief-stricken, Mrs. Hale, manages to deliver her emotional response to the audience.

Susan Glaspell seems to have encouraged the audience to share a role in investigating domestic violence. As Suzy Holstein demonstrates the play is "deceptively simple" and the perceptions of the men and women differ in their interpretation of the protagonist's action and guilt (Holstein, 2003, p. 282). Linda Ben-Zvi "Murder She Wrote: The Genesis of Susan Glaspell's *Trifles*" states that the cultural markings of a woman who kills as close to men. They evoke fear because the female acceptable codes are broken the women's transgressions becomes a theatrical thrill because a murderer "tests society's established boundaries" (Ben Zvi, 1995, p. 19). She cites other women writers who have female murderers, such as Sophie Treadwell's *Machinal* (1949) and

Wendy Kesselman *My Sister in This House*, but notices that Glaspell is different because she was involved, as a journalist and as a member of a rural community (Ben Zvi 1995, p. 22). The jury found Margret, the real murderess, in the Hossack case guilty because the attorney aroused the audience, by stating that the accused woman was pregnant before marriage and the jury reacted to questionable female behavior (Ben Zvi, 1995, p. 23). Glaspell also noticed the presence of many women in the trial, who were denied voice as jury because they were not allowed to serve as members. Thus, Wright is seen as a pun on the name because Minnie Wright did not have any rights similar to the woman in the original trial. The lack of physical presence on stage shifts the audience's focus on condition and motive and is also indicative of a silenced woman without any rights to present in her own defense. The absence also raises the question of the reasons behind spousal murder and since the protagonist is not there to answer the question, the reply would have to be construed by the spectator or reader.

The mis-en-scene suggests the harshness of Minnie's life and Glaspell marshals the evidence of Minnie's strangled life. Thus, the jury on the stage is confronted with evidence that justify the wife's right to act violently. The critical standpoint of the audience therefore, allows multiple inferences (Broun, 1916, p. 7). As a reviewer of all the plays of the season, Broun sees *Trifles* as the best. Also, contemporary staging of the play consider the silence onstage as integral in creating a sense of the isolation of the characters (Kastleman, 2012, p. 19). Furthermore, the play seems to condemn society's harshness towards women. We find an anxiety of representation because Glaspell allows neither the victim nor the murderer to appear on stage.

Glaspell wrote *Trifles*, a play and a short story, "A Jury of Her Peers" that represent women as violent to direct attention to the problems of rural American women, left behind. The popularity of her play remains up-to-date, with both the play and the short story the dreading terror of both female protagonists. Nevertheless, the adaptation involves the audience by confronting them with clues that vindicate the accused woman because the lack of rights seems to be the reason behind a gruesome violent murder. The play becomes a cautionary tale of a deeply politicized form for a nationalist discussion on the grotesqueness of the isolation of members of society and leaving the helpless without defense. Modern American theater becomes a place for an interpretation of the downfall and the transgression of Mrs. Wright's suicidal decision and the audience has to come to terms with the defiant deed. The trifles, which include the quilting, allude to the persistent cultural productions in America's rural areas, which has ironically fostered a deep sense of resentment and frustrations and culminated with domestic murder.

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