THE RUBRICS
Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies
Volume 6 Issue 7 August 2024
www.therubrics.in
ISSN 2454-1974

The Silent Jury: Domesticity and Justice in Susan Glaspell's *Trifles*

Dr. Meghraj N. Pawar
Associate Professor, Department of English,
KRM Mahila Mahavidyalaya, Nanded, MS, India.

ABSTRACT

This paper explores Susan Glaspell's 1916 one-act play, *Trifles*, as a foundational masterwork of the early 20th-century feminist literary movement. By examining the biographical context of Glaspell's career as a journalist—specifically her coverage of the Margaret Hossack murder trial—this study illustrates how Glaspell transitioned real-world tragedy into a poignant critique of patriarchal judicial systems. The analysis focuses on the dichotomy between the "official" masculine investigation and the "trivial" feminine domestic sphere. While the male characters dismiss the kitchen as a space of insignificance, the female characters, Mrs. Hale and Mrs. Peters, decode the domestic "trifles" to uncover the motive behind the murder of John Wright. This paper argues that Glaspell uses the discovery of the strangled canary and the erratic stitching of a quilt as symbols of Minnie Wright's psychological breaking point under domestic abuse. Ultimately, the research concludes that the play celebrates a "sisterly bond" and a moral code of empathy that transcends the rigid, often blind, letter of the law.

Keywords: *Feminist Literature, Domestic Violence, Patriarchal Society, Gender Politics*

FULL PAPER

Introduction

An eminent American playwright, novelist, journalist, and actress, Susan Keating Glaspell was born in 1876 into a farming family in Iowa, America. She spent her formative early childhood years immersed in the rural environment of her paternal farmhouse in Iowa. By the young age of 18, she began her professional journey by earning money as a journalist for a local newspaper. She pursued her higher education with great determination despite facing many social adversities during an era when it was widely considered that educated women were unfit for the institution of marriage. She excelled in her academic studies within the strictly male-dominated field of education. In those days, it was exceptionally difficult for women to work as professional journalists, but Glaspell pursued her passion regardless and established herself in the field. These early experiences of systemic discrimination shaped her future career path, leading her to become a powerful voice for the rights of women. Throughout her prolific career, she wrote a significant number of novels, one-act plays, and full-length plays. Her most notable works include *Trifles* (1916), *A Woman's Honour* (1918), *Inheritors* (1921), *The Verge* (1921), and *Alison's House* (1930). Today, Susan Glaspell is universally recognised as a pioneer feminist writer and is celebrated as America's first major female playwright. Her play, Alison's House, earned her the prestigious Pulitzer Prize. Glaspell focused deeply on gender and ethical issues within her contemporary society. Tracing the arc of Glaspell's extraordinary half-century writing career, Veronica Makowsky notes that she "broke the barriers against female journalists, advocated socialism," and placed "women's concerns on the stage as a playwright and actress" before becoming recognised as the most gifted playwright of the Provincetown Players (Makowsky 3). Due to her monumental contribution to American theatre, she is widely considered to be the "Mother of American Drama." Over the course of her life, she produced nine novels and fifteen plays to her credit as a professional writer.

The Historical Context of *Trifles*

The play *Trifles* is regarded as an ultimate masterpiece of the first phase of the 20th-century feminist literary movement. The play was first performed in 1916, a production in which Susan Glaspell herself took the stage to play the pivotal role of Mrs. Hale. The play presents the authentic talent and intelligence of women, which is often suppressed or ignored within a patriarchal society. It also highlights the psychological nuances of how women behave differently in the presence of other women compared to their behaviour in the presence of men. Traditionally, society expected women to assume a subsidiary or secondary role, but Glaspell demonstrates that, compared to men, these women are often more competent, observant, and intellectual. The play *Trifles* is famously based on a real-life incident that Glaspell covered during her time as a journalist. When the original report was

published, a woman named Margaret Hossack reported to the local police that strangers had broken into her home and murdered her husband. Glaspell, acting as a journalist, followed this case with great detail and wrote 26 stories regarding this cold-blooded murder of a husband by his wife, which in reality involved an axe. As Linda Ben-Zvi has thoroughly documented, Glaspell's immersive reporting on the Hossack case—from the initial crime scene through the full duration of the trial—formed the experiential and moral foundation from which *Trifles* would eventually emerge (Ben-Zvi 141–43). Her initial reporting presented the woman as a formidable and cold-blooded murderer, but Glaspell later changed her tone and perspective after personally visiting the Hossack farmhouse. She studied the murder case closely and became significantly more sympathetic to the wife's plight; subsequently, she began to report on Margaret as a meek and broken woman. The accused woman was eventually released due to the failure of the jury to reach a unanimous decision. This real-life incident served as the primary inspiration for Glaspell to write the play after she decided to leave her career in journalism.

Gender Politics and Symbolic Irony

Through her play *Trifles*, the playwright offers a sarcastic commentary on contemporary gender politics and the failings of the overall judiciary system. Based on the real incident involving the murder of an abusive husband by his wife, the play became a masterpiece in American literature by exposing the stereotypical and limited image of women in society. The title *Trifles* itself is deeply ironic and symbolic, as it highlights the subsidiary and supposedly trivial position of women in society, despite them often being more competent than their male counterparts. In this world, women are treated as second-class citizens whose concerns are dismissed. However, the women in the play successfully find the motive for the murder, a task which the male investigators and the jury are unable to accomplish. These women effectively disrupt the conventional image of male intellectual superiority. They solve the complex case on the basis of what the men call trivial evidence, yet they choose to conceal these findings from the law enforcement officers. As Suzy Clarkson Holstein argues, the play "represents a profound conflict between two models of perception and behaviour," grounded in fundamentally different ways of inhabiting and reading the domestic space—a difference the male investigators are culturally conditioned to overlook (Holstein 282). This action showcases the deep empathy these female characters feel for the accused woman, whom they recognise as a victim of domestic violence and cruel treatment at the hands of her husband. The play concludes with the affirmation of a sisterly bond among the females, who share a unique understanding of the specific pains of being a woman in a restrictive world.

The Investigation and the Trifles of the Kitchen

The play opens with the investigation into the murder of John Wright, who was found dead, allegedly killed by his own wife, Mrs. Minnie Wright. To

investigate the details of the case, the county attorney, Mr. George Henderson; the sheriff, Henry Peters; and a neighbouring farmer, Lewis Hale, arrive at the farmhouse. They are accompanied by two ladies, Mrs. Peters and Mrs. Hale. Throughout the scene, the men assume a position of self-importance within the legal system and downgrade the women at every possible step. They openly mock the two women for focusing their attention on the trivial matters of the kitchen and other daily domestic tasks. Mr. Hale provides an account of the initial incident when Minnie told him about the discovery of her husband with a rope around his neck. She claimed at the time that she was in a sound sleep beside her husband when the murder occurred. While discussing these serious matters, Mr. Hale contemptuously comments: "Women are used to worrying over trifles." The men also make derogatory comments regarding the messy state of Minnie's kitchen. Mrs. Hale, standing her ground, reminds the men that "there is a great deal of work to be done on a farm." The males relegate the women to the sidelines because of the untidiness of the kitchen, a judgment which is strongly but subtly opposed by the females. This androcentric dismissal of the domestic sphere as a site of meaning is precisely what Annette Kolodny identifies as the broader cultural problem of "gender and the interpretation of literary texts"—the failure of a dominant interpretive community to recognise that the signs and symbols produced within a woman's world require a specifically female literacy to be decoded (Kolodny 452–53). Mrs. Hale and Mrs. Peters begin to take the side of the arrested woman. Eventually, the men leave the "trivial" things to the women and exit the kitchen to inspect the actual scene of the crime upstairs.

The Journey of Minnie Foster

Left behind in the kitchen, Mrs. Hale and Mrs. Peters begin to think more sympathetically about the accused Minnie Wright. As a neighbour, Mrs. Hale narrates the history of Minnie Foster's life before her marriage. The journey from being Minnie Foster to becoming Mrs. Wright was not a joyful one, but rather a painful and isolating transition. Minnie lived a very unhappy married life because of the harsh and ill-tempered nature of her husband, Mr. John Wright. Mrs. Hale describes Minnie's past happiness in the following words: "She used to wear pretty clothes and be lively, when she was Minnie Foster, one of the town girls singing in the choir. However, that—oh, that was thirty years ago." She also expresses her deep sympathy for the accused, Minnie and criticises the cold nature of the law in the following words: "Locking her up in town and then coming out here and trying to get her own house to turn against her!" She narrates the strict, oppressive nature of John Wright and the resulting humbleness of Minnie's personality. She describes Minnie's married life as horrible, lonely, and completely broken. Minnie lived all alone in the farmhouse without the company of a loving person. She had once loved singing and had worked as a choir member in her youth, long before her marriage silenced her. This silencing of Minnie's earlier self resonates with Elaine Showalter's broader argument that women writers—and by extension women in life—have long been forced to operate within a cultural framework that

systematically suppresses their individual voices and identities, rendering their inner lives invisible to the male-dominated institutions surrounding them (Showalter 11–12).

The Moral Jury and the Discovery of Evidence

The two women begin to collect the items that Minnie had requested from her home. Although they are not the official jury appointed by the state to solve the case, the playwright effectively hands over the responsibility of a "peer jury" to these women. They study the environment from a moral and human point of view rather than a strictly legal one. They feel the profound pain of Minnie's loneliness, isolation, and long-standing agony. They discover sewing material in a basket intended for a quilt. They observe the stitching and wonder whether Minnie was "weaving" or "knotting" the final pieces. When the men return briefly to the kitchen, they again mock the "trifles" that the women are discussing. The women, however, understand the androcentric interpretation of the world that the men represent. The men completely ignore the trivial things which are, in reality, vital pieces of evidence in the case. The women find that the quilt was not properly woven compared to the other pieces, which serves as a clear indication that Minnie was mentally and physically disturbed at the time. They observe these small things very carefully and interpret them through a female perspective. As Judith Fetterley observes in her analysis of Glaspell's companion prose work, the men in such narratives "can not imagine the story behind the case" because they enter the domestic scene "bound by a set of powerful assumptions"—chief among them the equation of textual and evidential authority with the masculine point of view (Fetterley 148).

The Symbol of the Canary

The women eventually find a damaged birdcage and wonder if Minnie had kept a bird. They think deeply about the cage and the missing bird, but cannot initially conclude how the bird died or where it went. During this discussion, Mrs. Hale blames herself for not visiting Minnie's house more recently to provide support. Eventually, they find a small, decorative box in which a dead bird is found. The dead bird was carefully wrapped in a piece of silk. They discover that the violent twisting of its neck killed the bird, the exact method by which Mr. Wright was killed with a rope around his neck. The two women have effectively solved the case, but they intentionally hide the little box from the men, who are still unable to find any evidence of a motive. The women come to realise why Minnie killed her husband: she loved the canary bird for its singing, which reminded her of her own past. Mr. Wright must have killed the bird, taking away the last shred of Minnie's happiness. Minnie killed her husband when the situation finally went beyond her limits. Karen Alkalay-Gut argues that the women's decision to suppress this evidence is motivated not by mere loyalty but by the recognition that the existing concept of law makes a genuinely fair trial impossible for Minnie—a woman whose motivations and inner world fall entirely outside the interpretive framework of the male legal

system (Alkalay-Gut 6–7). The two women look at the case on moral grounds rather than from a legalistic point of view. They have sorted out the puzzle, yet they intend to hide their findings from the law.

Conclusion

Susan Glaspell's *Trifles* remains a cornerstone of American drama because it successfully deconstructs the gendered biases of the early 20th-century legal system. By elevating "trifles"—the domestic details of a woman's life—to the status of critical evidence, Glaspell proves that the private domain is just as politically and intellectually significant as the public one. The transformation of Mrs. Hale and Mrs. Peters from submissive observers to a insubordinate "peer jury" highlights a profound shift from legalistic judgment to moral empathy. Their decision to protect Minnie Wright is not an act of lawlessness, but a recognition of the systemic isolation and domestic abuse that the male characters are culturally blinded to. Glaspell's transition from a journalist reporting a crime to a playwright advocating for the silenced female voice allows the play to transcend its 1916 setting. It serves as a timeless reminder of the power of sisterhood and the necessity of looking beneath the surface of social expectations to find the truth. It solidifies Glaspell's legacy as a pioneer who challenged the patriarchal status quo, ensuring that the "trifles" of women's lives are never again dismissed as insignificant. As Mrs. Hale poignantly says at the end of the play: "We live close together and we live far apart. We all go through the same things—it is all just a different kind of the same thing."

References

Alkalay-Gut, Karen. "Jury of Her Peers: The Importance of Trifles." *Studies in Short Fiction*, vol. 21, no. 1, 1984, pp. 1–9.

Ben-Zvi, Linda. "'Murder, She Wrote': The Genesis of Susan Glaspell's *Trifles*." *Theatre Journal*, vol. 44, no. 2, 1992, pp. 141–62.

Fetterley, Judith. "Reading about Reading: 'A Jury of Her Peers,' 'The Murders in the Rue Morgue,' and 'The Yellow Wallpaper.'" *Gender and Reading: Essays on Readers, Texts, and Contexts*, edited by Elizabeth A. Flynn and Patrocinio P. Schweickart, Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986, pp. 147–64.

Holstein, Suzy Clarkson. "Silent Justice in a Different Key: Glaspell's 'Trifles.'" *The Midwest Quarterly*, vol. 44, no. 3, 2003, pp. 282–90.

Kolodny, Annette. "A Map for Rereading: Or, Gender and the Interpretation of Literary Texts." *New Literary History*, vol. 11, no. 3, 1980, pp. 451–67.

Makowsky, Veronica. *Susan Glaspell's Century of American Women: A Critical Interpretation of Her Work*. Oxford University Press, 1993.

Showalter, Elaine. *A Literature of Their Own: British Women Novelists from Brontë to Lessing*. Princeton University Press, 1977.