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Entering Sensational Pre-Feminist Discourse: Conjecture on the Intentions of Susan

Glaspell's *Trifles* and "A Jury of Her Peers"

On December 3, 1900, the people of Indianola, Iowa were instantaneously awe struck when Susan Glaspell, reporter for the *Des Moines Daily News*, broke the story of the Hossack murder. Roughly fifteen years after the original date of John Hossack's murder, Glaspell wrote the one-act play *Trifles* (1916) based on the case. Within a year of *Trifles*' publication, Glaspell reworked her original one-act play into the short story "A Jury of Her Peers" (1917), in hopes of reaching a larger audience. After reading Glaspell's works and becoming familiar with the Hossack case, many readers question why Glaspell chose to originally write *Trifles*, and later "A Jury of Her Peers." I propose Glaspell wrote these pieces to both comment on beginning notions of first wave feminist ideas, as well as to enter into the popular genre of sensationalist novels, resulting in a breakthrough in her career as a playwright and short story writer and more publicity brought to the trail of Margaret Hossack in the Hossack murder case.

The time period in which Glaspell partially grew up and wrote in is termed the Progressive Era, spanning from 1890-1920. As Karen Smith states in *New Paths to Power*, "The Progressive Era did not bring women either liberation or full social

Comment [1]: haley.graves:
Excellent title

Comment [2]: daniel.haggerty:
There's something awkward about this phrasing, though I can't exactly tell you how to fix it. My problem is that I can't tell if you mean that readers question why she wrote one, then the other, or if readers question why she wrote both. It's unclear to me.

Comment [3]: daniel.haggerty:
Breakthrough. One word.

Comment [4]: haley.graves:
This is a great connection of Glaspell's piece to the time period, but I think this sentence could be better suited if it was split up.

Comment [5]: daniel.haggerty:
Partially grew up? Also, just "wrote" not "wrote in." You already say the "in" when you say "the time period in which." You wouldn't say "the time period in which she wrote in;" its redundant.

and political equality, but it was nevertheless an era aptly named, for it was a time when an unprecedented number of women began to find new paths to power and fulfillment (22). As a result, one can suspect Glaspell's "path to power" was through her writing career. Coming from a homegrown family amongst the first to settle in Davenport, Iowa, Glaspell was raised with fairly strict, and perhaps stereotypical, roles of men and women. However, Glaspell broke out of these gender roles through her continued education at Drake University, and newspaper columnist turned playwright turned freelance writing careers (Theodore; Bryan, xiii).

Essentially, in beginning her career during the Progressive Era, Glaspell seemingly inherently strayed from stereotypical gender roles and notions of the private versus public spheres (Theodore). While Glaspell did not specifically voice political opinions or support, except in what readers can gather from her prose, one could argue that *Trifles* and "A Jury of Her Peers" lend themselves to the premature notions of the Woman's Movement circulating at the time. Readers can then also see Glaspell using these pieces to enter into the discourse of infantile feminism. As a result, both pieces show the main characters, Mrs. Hale and Mrs. Peter, experiencing both an epiphany moment in regards to Minnie Wright's (the character based on Margaret Hossack) oppression, and then a moment of helplessness as they fall back into their private sphere of gendered oppression. These works challenge gender stereotypes while the female characters defy their realms of confinement in the patriarchal society. Yet, they inevitably enforce these gender stereotypes as well, as Mrs. Peters and Mrs. Hale fail to act upon their epiphany, sinking into the private sphere of the patriarchy. Glaspell is predicting the force of liberation that the

Comment [6]: daniel.haggerty:
Pick one.

Women's Movement is fighting for while reminding readers that the emancipation of "feminine bondage" is impossible while the patriarchy is at the reigns of society.

Furthermore, Glaspell also uses the Hossack murder trial to inevitably entertain her readers. While commenting on the Women's Movement, Glaspell also, perhaps unknowingly, enters a genre of fiction known today as sensationalism. Sensationalism, while popular with readers across the ages, was negatively received with original critics. Classic critics felt "its object is an intensely commercial one" and that "it appeals not to the sympathies of the educated few, but those of the general public" (Pykett, 30). Quite frankly, one could propose that sensationalist novels were negatively received by the "educated few," who would be criticizing the work, because these educated critics were most likely males, living in a patriarchal society that privileged the educated male and looked down upon the majority of the population, made up of the uneducated and the female. Sensationalist fiction was primarily addressed to females, and therefore, the genre was seen as feminine (Pykett, 32).

Both *Trifles* and "A Jury of Her Peers" fit this realm of sensationalist fiction as they can function as a "reaction against realism in its mixing of 'the incredible' and the documentary, its refusal to stay within the proper sphere of acceptable character types in domestic settings" (Pykett, 33). Glaspell's depiction of Margaret Hossack via the character of Minnie (Foster) Wright does just that, as all aspects of her character work against the stereotypical gendered roles of oppression within the private sphere.

Comment [7]: daniel.haggerty:
Furthermore OR also. Pick one. Not both.

Additionally, the sensationalist genre was largely produced by female writers, and therefore “dismissed as merely a feminine form – a form which was not only deviant, but also threatening and dangerous” (Pykett, 34). The sensationalist genre brought forth and exemplified the power of female writers, and as it was widely sought out by its female readers, it posed as a threat to the traditional male writers of patriarchy. Glaspell, along with former female writers, pushed against the patriarchal dominance of literature, as they refused to be contained within the private sphere, and chose to enter into the public sphere. In this sense, Glaspell was voicing her opinion on the **Woman’s Movement**, by writing and entering into the genre of female-dominant sensationalist fiction. Readers can also argue that Glaspell provided a voice for and drew attention to the case of Margaret Hossack, as she forced readers to take a long, hard look at the system of patriarchy through *Trifles* and “A Jury of Her Peers” by striking a chord of empathy in the women populating the sensationalist fiction audiences.

All in all, Glaspell was mindful and revolutionary in her intentions of write *Trifles* and “A Jury of Her Peers” as readers can see that their **pathways lead to so many different paths**. Glaspell inconspicuously lent her voice to the feminist actions taking place in the early 1900s, as well as aided in the success of the ever-popular sensationalist genre, which still holds popular today. Essentially, Glaspell did not use her writing career to just write, but rather she used it to voice her own opinions and predictions about the future of her own society, and create an **interweb** of sympathy for struggling farm women, rallying for equality in their soon to be **over-turned patriarchy**.

Comment [8]: daniel.haggerty:
Women's.

Comment [9]: daniel.haggerty:
Awkward.

Comment [10]: daniel.haggerty:
What does this mean to you? To me this means the internet.

Comment [11]: haley.graves:
Great ending to an excellent paper. I really enjoyed the connection to the trial and the proposal of the connection to the sensational style of writing. Great job!

Works Cited

Bryan, Patricia L., and Thomas Wolf. *Midnight Assassin: A Murder in America's Heartland*. Chapel Hill, NC: Algonquin of Chapel Hill, 2005. Print.

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Smith, Karen Manners. *New Paths to Power: American Women, 1890-1920*. New York: Oxford UP, 1998. Print.

Theodore, Terry. "Susan Glaspell." *Magill's Survey of American Literature, Revised Edition* (2006): 1-5. *Literary Reference Center*. Web. 17 Nov. 2013.

Comment [12]: daniel.haggerty:
Looks pretty good, Kyra. Though I have absolutely no idea what I'm talking about. Good use of sources, but you might need to explain how a historical perspective adds to a reading of the work.

Works Consulted

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