

Title: Domesticity and Rural American landscape in Susan Glaspell's *Trifles*

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Abstract:

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The play written in 1916 precedes the passage of the Nineteenth Amendment in 1920. Therefore, most critical work on the play revolves around the link between Minnie Wright's situation as a possible murderess and the playwright's ideals that advocate the political rights for women. The play written by a female playwright about a woman and involves two major female characters is in a sense takes a biased stance about the relationship of women as it is inscribed by a dominant decadent male figure that makes the female give up her feminine qualities. Other critical opinion finds the play as passive in its advocating overt political campaign for women's rights. *Trifles* could be possibly interpreted in light of arguing for or against equal rights for women. However, the play's often overlooked emphasis is its vivid description of the daily life of women living in the forgotten rural farmlands of America and the way this is related to insights into the emotional life of all the characters and especially the women involved. The research involves a historical perspective on the real situations of rural American women living in 1916. The daily life of a farmer and his wife as well as a women's role both on the farm and in the family are of vital concern to the political debate that evolve in the play.

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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”(45). American literary texts from 1865-1945 exemplify major tensions in American society and culture that emerged after the Civil War. In consequence, realism and naturalism that permeated literary productions at the turn of the century have been regarded by critics as “a critical response to the conditions of late-nineteenth century American life”<sup>1</sup>. As a representative of an American text of that era, *Trifles* becomes important in revealing important facts about society and its view of women, especially those forgotten ones playing their domestic roles in various rural regions. The home become a place, where power relationship takes place and as Hanna Scolnicov 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).

Modern American playwrights have staged their heroines in a power struggle with the patriarchal demand that sees in the domestication of its female population a source of security for the welfare of the household and nation. Maintaining traditional feminine behavior, according to popular social codes, was often imagined as important in the stability of the home and if not observed often leads to disastrous consequences. The

house, closely identified with women and their environment, became important as a location of the struggle between the alleged female “owner” and the real proprietor, the head of the household. The ensuing brawl reveals and repeatedly undermines old-fashioned and naïve ways of regarding the lack of observance of appropriate female conduct, as an instigator of disaster in the downfall of a stable home.

Male and female playwrights used domestic violence in the homes of individual families as a motif to arouse thinking and allow for understanding behind motives where women are the physical aggressors. Susan Glaspell’s *Trifles* (1916), Lillian Hellman’s *The Little Foxes* (1938), Eugene O’Neill’s *Desire Under the Elms* (1924), and *Mourning Becomes Electra* (1931) present female characters, from various social backgrounds, committing acts of domestic violence. Using the house as a background to this domestic violence situation, playwrights gear the audience not to condemn the wife for the crime, as the motive as displayed through the careful scrutiny of domestic space is a reaction against a life of abuse.

Glaspell’s characters, in drama and fiction, were rural women that wanted to play a greater role than the ones prescribed by their society. Examples are numerous in her plays, often referring to a particular region, such as the Woman from Idaho in *The People*. Her female characters were women who refused to be a refuge of security or embody the ideals of the home as depicted by Bachelard. Karen Malpede states that earlier critics have noticed that Glaspell’s characters were “strong, vibrant, and rebellious.” This was a view that was shared by Yvonne Shafer who considered that

Glaspell as part of “a radical group that believed in the New Thought and opposed conservative, small town politics”(36). For Glaspell, marriage was an integral part of rural existence that can be described by Stephen in *Suppressed Desires* who declares to his wife Henrietta that his psychoanalyst Dr. Russell found “the confining walls are a symbol of my feeling about marriage and that their fading away is a wish fulfillment” (19). Glaspell has played an important role, as part of the Provincetown Players, in staging plays that deal with women and their problem as it relates to their environment.<sup>ii</sup> 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 alternatives to commercial ones. The group is 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 (426). Glaspell illustrates the reason that prompted her to compose *Trifles* in *The Road to the Temple*. For Glaspell, plays were an appeal to the audience’s imagination and life:

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. Events led her husband, George Cook, to announce that a play of hers was going to be staged and in response to her objections he responded by saying, "You've got a stage, haven't you?"(153).

The way Glaspell conceived the play shows the importance of domestic as well as rural existence that gave shape to the domestic arrangement that was later to become 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 as very familiar of the domestic situations of her time.<sup>iii</sup>

Glaspell depiction of dreary rural female existence also came from her position as a journalist who has shown the disadvantage of women in the power struggle in their home. Barbara Ozieblo, in *Susan Glaspell: A Critical Biography*, states that the play

deals with the dilemma of womanhood and that a lot of the audience members at Greenwich Village identify with these frustrations (83). Moreover, the play casts all the female figures as rebels, but they are silenced because the play offers no solution (84). Her absent protagonist had impressed her of 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 (137). The only available triumph for the silenced women is through friendship, or bonding with those of her sex (146). Glaspell, in her involvement with the origins of the play, the Hossack case *for Des Moines Daily News*, where her initial hostility and orthodox attitude helped to sway the audience against the accused woman, became more sympathetic towards the end of the trial tried to sway public attention, but it was too late (28). Ben Zvi in her book entitled, *Susan Glaspell* as well as in her essay "Murder she Wrote," observes the genesis of the trial. She argues that by having the women assume a position, the emphasis on the subjective nature of evidence becomes clear for the reader or spectator (175). Moreover, Minnie Wright's absence compels the audience not to be swayed by her person, but rather by her assumed condition of an abused wife driven to commit a terrible act. The few items that appear on stage the stove, chairs, and few rags create powerful mis-en-scène with expressionistic touches to externalize Minnie's desperate state of mind. The men are offstage-their presence is heard by shuffling sounds undercuts authority and questions male-sanctioned power. She played the role of Mrs. Hale live close together..." maybe she refused to offer help at the time (174). However, Makowsky sees their rebelliousness as one of passive resistance (63).

The gloomy portrayal of the dreary kitchen of a rural farmhouse in *Trifles* shows Minnie Wright's neglect of the many domestic duties that were a reality of the every day average women, as an indication of marital problems in the household. 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 accused woman does not appear 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 (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 of her plays demand that the patriarch world consider their feelings and situation as something more than domestic trifles. Thus, many audience members might come to the conclusion that the women through “trifles” manage to solve the case and find clues that Mrs. Wright’s husband mistreated her, 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 that had a broken neck.

Glaspell’s interest in the depiction of domestic violence in *Trifles* is not only because of her belief in feminist ideals, but also of her journalistic principle in the necessity of giving a more balanced account of the female victimizer to other members of society. Rachel France considers that “in *Trifles*, Glaspell 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” (151). Karen Stein regards the scenario of *Trifles* as similar to the detective story, except that the women are the detectives. Solving the murder case becomes a collaborative work, which leads them to learn to be more collaborative to survive a hostile environment. Thus, for women the only possible avenue for struggle is through being together as several critics have noted. Noe considers the play as feminist and advocates the female mode of perception as valid and serves to unite woman in sisterhood when confronted by male oppression and, therefore, region becomes a metaphor for loneliness and isolation (32-9). This view is also shared by Ozieblo, who considers *Trifles* as one that explores the possibility of “female bonding”

and that her plays present an example of a rural woman that “challenges the prevailing patriarchal myth and pays the consequences”(73). Other critics, however, consider that Glaspell felt that women were being part of the problem. For Paran, Glaspell did not endow the female characters with any sense of heroism because “the women, too, are forced to acknowledge their complicity in Minnie Wright’s fate”(67). A spectator’s opinion, therefore, would agree that all members of society, both men and women, are eager to be against this woman, who murders her husband. Thus, the onstage lookers and characters play that criminality of making her choices limited and not intervening sooner to diffuse the situation.

Susan Glaspell seems to have encouraged her audience to share in this new experiment in dealing with domestic violence. 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 they go in opposition to femininity(19), but it is also a theatrical thrill because a murderer “tests society’s established boundaries.” She cites other female writers who have female murderers, such as Sophie Treadwell’s *Machinal* and Wendy Kesselmn *My Sister in This House*, but notices that Glaspell is different because she was involved, as a journalist and as a member of that community (22). The jury found the women 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 (32). Glaspell also noticed that there were a lot of women, who were denied voice as jury. Also, the choice of Wright is seen as

a pun on the name because Minnie Wright did not have any rights. Her lack of physical presence on stage shifts the audience's focus on condition and motive and is also indicative of a silenced woman that has no rights to present in her own defense. Her absence also raises the question of why do women kill, since she is not there to answer the question, the reply would have to be construed by the spectator or reader. The mis-enclosed scene suggests the harshness of Minnie's life and Glaspell marshals the evidence of Minnie's strangled life. Thus, the jury on the stage and the ones who observe them from the audience presume the wife's right to take violent action against violence. The critical standpoint, therefore, would be according to Brun is that there are multiple inferences.<sup>iv</sup> Furthermore, the play seems to take a more introvert attitude towards criticizing society's harshness two women. We find that anxiety of representation because neither the victim nor the murderer appears on stage.

Glaspell wrote *Trifles*, a play and a short story, "A Jury of Her Peers" that deal with spousal murder 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 produced in film versions. Though the film version of the short story differs in its focus on the dreading fear of both female protagonists, the focal point remains on involving the audience in finding clues to vindicating the accused woman a real life member of the audience and as a consequence find the lack of rights as the reason behind such a situation.

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<sup>i</sup> Pizer in his introduction to *The Cambridge Companion to American Realism and Naturalism*, 15.

<sup>ii</sup> Important as she is in the history of modern American drama, some books fail to mention her important contribution, such as Oscar Brockett's book entitled, *Century of Innovation: A History of European and American Theatre and Drama Since the Nineteenth Century*.

<sup>iii</sup> Ellen Gainor in *Susan Glaspell in Context* considers this passage as significant in the play's construction on the idea of spectatorship. Like feminist theatre criticism, the spectator position is a site of feminist agency. Thus, through spectatorship the play's drive of action, unfolding of character and revelation of meaning occurs (39-40).

<sup>iv</sup> Heywood, Broun. "Best Bill Seen at the Comedy: Washington Square Players Set New Mark in Skill." *New York Tribune* 14 November 1916:7 in Papke, Mary. *Susan Glaspell: A Research and Production Book*. Westport: Greenwood Press, 1993. Broun reviews all four plays as second bill of season and sees trifles as the finest. He was impressed by the play's purposeful indirection.

Glaspell's play *Trifles* besides joining to this mainstream phenomenon of presenting murder stories definitely has a gender-based social conflict in its centre, because "women who kill evoke fear because they challenge societal constructs of femininity" – passivity, restraint and nurture, thus the rush to isolate and label the female offender, to cauterize the act. Susan Glaspell in her biography of her husband George Cram Cook offers a brief comment on the genesis of her play, *Trifles*. She tells that they needed a play for the Provincetown Players and her husband urged her to write one. She claimed it was based on an actual murder case she covered as a reporter of the *Des Moines Daily News*. The play *Trifles* was written by Susan Glaspell in 1916. This play takes place in one house, the house of Mr. and Mrs. Wright. The play opens with three men and two women entering the Wright's abandoned house. There is unfinished business everywhere you look. These people are at this house to investigate what happened in the murder of Mr. Wright. Mrs. Wright has been taken to prison and is thought to be guilty of the murder. The ladies are here with their husbands in order to gather a few things that Mrs. Wright might want or need, and the men are there to investigate the actual murder and determine who did it. Mr. Hale had come by the previous morning to speak to Mr. Wright, and that is when he found Mrs. Wright sitting in her rocking chair pleating her apron.