

A paper**Submitted by: Lecturer: Ikhlas Muhammed Nati****The underestimated power of woman In Susan Glaspell's Trifle****The Underestimated power of women in****Susan Glaspell's The Trifles****Abstract:**

This paper examines the theme of feminism through focusing on the female bonding as a means of gaining power .In this paper I'll prove that the America dramatist Susan Glaspell (1876-1948) makes a feminist leap as she portrays her female characters with an ample cunning to secretly and humbly triumph over male prejudice. She challenged those who believed that the United States offered freedom and equality by demonstrating that women were not treated equally since they were excluded from participating in the justice system except as defendants the underestimated power of woman in Susan Glaspell's *Trifles* (1916) which is written in the early twentieth century but it transcends time periods and cultures.

Trifle illustrates the common bond between women, even in the face of the law. The play proves that in the hard times people of a common bond usually stick together. The attention in this play is directed at the need for equal rights for women, and the role many men played in squashing that dream. And though Glaspell is an acclaimed feminist ,but her play does not contain the traditional feminist views of equal rights for both sexes. Glaspell begins to write openly about women's issues. She gives woman in her society much attention for they are frustrated creatures. They are considered as minor figures who are oppressed by people around them.

Mary Ann Fergsun in her *Images of women in Literature* argues that throughout the history the gendered roles place woman in the kitchen, serving meals, baking bread, and canning fruits and jellies. She was also expected to be a good mother to her children and a caretaker to her husband.¹ Many works of literature deal with gendered roles and their effect on society as a whole or on an individual as a person. Judith Fetterley suggests "The focus of most of this literature was on women and their lives...or, in other words . . . they chose to write about themselves"²

Glaspell's favorite theme was "the inherent conflict between the traditional requirement that a wife form her life around her husband's and a woman's need for discrete personhood. Veronica Makowsky suggests that Glaspell used her work as an

outlet to vent the anger she felt toward her husband's behavior . His rebellious spirit appealed to Glaspell, despite his irresponsible lifestyle: he drank heavily and was chronically unfaithful to her.³

Critics of the period described Glaspell as the mother of drama. Linda Ben-Zvi argues that in most of her works she tackles the issues of women in a "community passionately concerned with socialism and feminism . . ." ⁴ and was supported by a group of friends who were intellectuals, socialists, feminists and radicals . Glaspell herself was a founding member of Heterodoxy, a radical group of women activists who were prominent in the feminist movement of New York in the years 1910-1920. It was within this atmosphere Glaspell found encouragement for her interest in creating female characters who desired to free themselves from the stereotypical roles into which they had been cast.

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In her *Trifles* Glaspell covered the case of a real murder when she was working as a young reporter in a newspaper .The play tackled one of the important issues of that period which is the feminist perspective. The play takes place in a kitchen, the domestic sphere, and everything around reveal the lives of women.⁶

In the play, John Wright has been found strangled in his bed, and his wife, Minnie, has been suspected of committing the murder. These two main characters never appear in the play; instead, the play focuses on the county attorney, George Henderson, who has been called in to investigate the murder; Henry Peters, the local sheriff; Lewis Hale, a neighboring farmer; and Mrs. Peters and Mrs. Hale, wives to the two local men. While these three men were busy come and go around the farmhouse searching for clues, the two women discover bits of evidence in the "trifles" the suspect wife left in her kitchen: baking, cleaning and sewing. Because the men ignore the women's world, they remain blind to the truth, which is in front of their eyes. A "trifle" is something that is small, of little value or importance or of no consequence. Throughout the play, Glaspell uses dialogue which allows us to see the demeaning view the men have for the women. Mr. Hale declares that "Women are used to worrying over trifles"⁷ .

Men are trivializing the many tasks and details that women are responsible for. The irony of the play is that while the men are running around looking for clues, the women have discovered the key to the mystery among what the men consider silly women's work. In his ignorance of how crucial women's duties are, Mr. Hale implies their unimportance. In the former reference to his and to the sheriff's wives, he presents the argumentative

conflict that will prove prevalent throughout the course of the play. In the description of the opening scene of the play, Glaspell mentions that the abandoned kitchen of John Wright is gloomy and “left without having been put in order.... Unwashed pans under the sink, a loaf of bread outside the breadbox, a dish towel on the table--other signs of uncompleted work”⁸ . Marsha Noe in *"Reconfiguring the Subject/Recuperating Realism: Susan Glaspell's Unseen Woman"* points out that these tasks are “signs of an incompetent housekeeper to the officers of the court; to the women and to the audience these props help to establish the presence of a disturbed consciousness”⁹ . Actually, as I think the incomplete tasks in Minnie's kitchen symbolize, also, that she acted very soon after provocation, I mean after John's strangling of the bird.

Isolationism is an important clue in the murder case. Mrs. Wright's farmhouse is located in a hollow, down in the woods, which puts her in a secluded place. Mr. Hale came to talk to Mr. Wright about a party telephone, but he said, “He put me off, saying folks talked too much anyway . . .”¹⁰ . This is an example of how Mr. Wright did not want himself and his wife to have contact with anyone in town. The image of the Party Telephone is a very significant symbol because of its relation to the question of justice. This matter unfolds at the end of the play where Mrs. Hale learns that the “greater crime...is to cut oneself off from understanding and communicating with others, and in this context .John Wright is the greater criminal and his wife the helpless executioner”¹¹ .

With the entrance of the five characters of the play, the women stand apart from the men who were clustered at the stove. The men were talking with each other in familiarity, working together and knowing one another. The women seem less acquainted and never call each other by their first names. But when the men made their first disparaging remarks about Minnie's housekeeping and women's “worrying over trifles”¹² ,the two women move a little closer together . This movement is a symbol of the women's bond, which will be indicated with the word “knot”¹³ later at the end of the play.

The image of the Jar of Cherries has many meanings. As Minnie's jars were in need for heat, they may symbolize to her life, which lacks heat also. Another meaning is concerned with the jar being out on shelf; Minnie herself was put on the shelf. She was alone and isolated until the coldness of her marriage and her life in general, broke her apart. According to the opinion of Beverly A. Smith in her *"Women's Work-- Trifles? The Skill and Insights of Playwright Susan Glaspell"* , “her secrets kept under pressure burst from their fragile containers. The single intact jar symbolizes the one remaining secret, the motive to complete the prosecutor's case”¹⁴ .

Another important symbol is associated with the image of the footsteps of the three men which have been heard coming down the stairs. The men enter and leave the room “physically crisscross the stage as they verbally crisscross the details of the crime, both actions leading nowhere, staged to show ineffectuality and incompetence”¹⁵. In this way, Glaspell undercuts their authority and questions their power.

Mary Ann Ferguson stresses that the names of the characters reveal the important points associated with the theme of feminist perspective; John and Minnie Wright are the two characters that are not seen. Yet their presence is felt through the conversation between Mrs. Peters and Mrs. Hale. John and Minnie Wright, actually, provide the inciting incident for the play. The name Wright refers to social stereotype of women seeking right¹⁶.

Glaspell intends a “Pun on the surname marking her (Mrs. Wright's) lack of rights, and implying her right to free herself against the societally sanctioned right of her husband to control the family...”¹⁷

So, the two names represent the roles of men and women in the larger society. Minnie's name has a double significance, “Minnie” being “mini” or “minimized,” which was descriptive of her relationship with John and in general of women's relationship with men. Then the name of “Minnie Wright” refers to the minimal right the woman has in her society.¹⁸

The image of Minnie before she got married is that “she used to wear pretty clothes and be lively when she was Minnie Foster...”¹⁹ this is how Mrs. Hale describes Minnie to Mrs. Peters. She talks about Minnie again saying: “I wish you'd seen Minnie Foster when she wore a White dress with blue ribbons and stood up there in the choir and sang”.²⁰ The image of Minnie Foster is used to show, by contrast, what John Wright had done to her. “How—she—did—change,”²¹ says Mrs. Hale.

John Wright abused Minnie by denying her personality and Individuality, and eventually Minnie kills John to escape that abuse. Bryan D. Bourn points out that:

By extension of the analogy between the Wrights
and men and women in general, the idea is that it
is only a matter of time before women who are
forced to subjugate themselves to a male dominated
society get fed up and seek revenge on their

oppressors.²²

Taking the name of the husband is also important in *Trifles*. Mrs. Hale and Mrs. Peters are not given first names. The role that society has cast them in is one that is defined by their husbands. Mrs. Peters, who is married to the sheriff, is viewed in those terms, not as an individual. The county attorney even says “ for that matter a sheriff's wife is married to the law”²³ . Mrs. Peters herself tries to fulfill that role, saying, “Mrs. Hale, the law is the law”²⁴ . She tries to reinforce that identity until she is faced with the brutality of what John Wright did to Minnie. She says, “I know what stillness is. The law has got to punish crime, Mrs. Hale”²⁵ . The difference is that she is talking about the crime committed against Minnie, not the murder.

To understand the play , it is necessary to understand its two major metaphors, as being significant symbols in the play. The first of these is the bird and birdcage metaphor. Mrs. Hale describes Minnie before her marriage to John as “kind of like a bird herself— real sweet and pretty, but kind of timid and— fluttery”²⁶ . Mrs. Hale and Mrs. Peters find Minnie's birdcage in the cupboard, but they do not realize the importance of it until they find the dead bird with its neck twisted to one side. The comparison here is between Minnie and the bird. Makowsky argues :“Through the traditional literary metaphor of the bird's song as the voice of the soul, the women acknowledge that John Wright not only killed Minnie's canary, but her very spirit”²⁷ .The bird is caged just as Minnie is trapped in the abusive relationship with John. John Wright figuratively strangles the life out of Minnie like he literally strangles the bird. Karen Alkalay-Gut assumes:

Minnie understood her husband's action
as a symbolic strangling of herself, ... It is not just
because he killed the bird, but because Minnie
herself was a caged bird...and he strangled her by
preventing her from communicating with others.²⁸

On the other hand, Makowsky points out that the bird symbolizes a “child-substitute for the solitary Minnie; the canary's voice was to displace the silence of a coldly authoritarian husband and replace the sounds of the unborn children”²⁹ . When John kills the bird, he kills the last bit of Minnie, and he makes a mistake in doing so. The broken birdcage that was found is one of the most profound symbols in the play because it represents Minnie’s liberation from John. Just like the bird, Minnie has now freed herself

from John by killing him .The broken birdcage represents Minnie's freedom from the restrictive role of "Mrs. Wright." Once she is free she takes her revenge for all of the years of abuse and oppression. She strangles the life out of John like he strangled her spirit and her bird. The birdcage metaphor also represents the role of women in society; the bird being woman and the cage is the male dominated society.³⁰

The second major metaphor is the quilt. The quilt is a symbol of Minnie's life. She has taken the scraps and put them into a nice, neat quilt. The block she was working on, however, was "all over the place!... It looks as if she didn't know what she was about!"³¹ Mrs. Hale argues that the messy sewing is a sign of nervousness, When John killed the bird; he destroyed the last bit of personality that Minnie had held for herself. She was angry and confused, and probably literally "didn't know what she was about"³² . To comprehend the play one may follow the technique of the housewives, who in making their comprehensive patchwork quilt, sort and sift through trivia and discarded material, match small scraps together, and then sew piece after piece into ever enlarging squares. The log cabin patchwork the women discover . . . is made exactly in this fashion: Rectangular scraps are sewn around the original square or rectangle, followed by a series of longer scraps which are measured to the increasing size of the quilt. .The general pattern is one that emerges with the quilt.

The question that is asked about the quilt is whether Minnie was going to "quilt it or just knot it"³³. This is the decision that Minnie had to make. She either would quilt it, meaning that she would go on enduring the isolation and abuse or she would knot it meaning that she would decide rejecting her life as it exists because that life was knot it and she would do something to change it.

Mrs. Hale and Mrs. Peters begin to understand and agree with Minnie when they see how John treated her, and how the law is treating her. Mrs. Hale sums up the women's feeling when she replies to the county attorney's question about the quilt, saying "we call it —knot it, Mr. Henderson."³⁴ Alkalay-Gut points out that this image "conveys the sense of knotting the rope around the husband's neck. Smith, in his comment about the "knot", suggests that "the bond among women is the essential knot."³⁵

The title, the images, the character names, and the metaphors all work together to paint not only a picture of Minnie's life with John, but by extension the lives of all women who live oppressed under male domination. In the play the male characters are regarded

intellectually superior to their wives, who are patronized as rather childish for their concern in domestic detail.³⁶

By focusing on the cruelties of Minnie's existence, her isolation, her lack of options, and the complete disregard of her plight by the courts and by society, Ben-Zvi feels that Glaspell concretizes the position of women in her society, moving the discussion beyond abstract problems of perception³⁷.

The playwright's tactics force recognition of the central issues of female powerlessness and the need for laws to address such issues. The women's arrogation of authority serves as an empowerment, as Ben-Zvi notes: "Not waiting to be given the vote or the right to serve on juries, Glaspell's women have taken the right for themselves"³⁸. Thus, the female enactment of judicial power subverts traditional concepts of law and justice.

Most critical readings of *Trifles* focus on female bonding as a means of gaining power; "Underlying this attitude is the assumption that . . . women's lives are individually trivial, and their only strength and/or success can come from banding together"³⁹. Such a premise defines women through masculine precepts and confirms the male value system, authenticating the power of the public sphere by the perceived need to replicate it. But, as evidenced in the ironically-named *Trifles*, where male disparagement proved male undoing as the women used their assigned invisibility to subvert the law and effect justice, women have a different kind of power. Women's power, subtle and indirect, is one of the original elements in *Trifles*. Bonding is both a manifestation of women's strength and its source; perhaps Glaspell wished to show the women of her time that they had more power than they realized. A male and female perception of judgment is then, the central to the play.

Alkalay-Gut believes that the unfolding evidence not only unites the women, but highlights the division between "woman's concept of justice," which entails "social" and "individual influences, together with the details that shaped the specific act," and "[t]he prevailing law [which] is general, and therefore . . . inapplicable to the specific case."⁴⁰ As the "distance between the laws of the kitchen and the outside world increases,"⁴¹ the women realize that the breach "negates the possibility of a "fair trial"⁴² for Minnie Foster. Satisfied that Minnie's husband behaved so heinously that the "murder was totally understandable,"⁴³ they dispense justice by circumventing the law. According to Alkalay-

Gut, the women are "clearly secure" about the correctness of their actions; their "secretive manner is one of superiority"⁴⁴ .

Glaspell characterizes the men as not giving the women the credit they deserve for their hard labors every day. The three men in the play help to prove how in that time period men were completely superior to women. By showing these two points it makes us feel more sympathetic for the women because of how they are treated. The women always have to go along with what the men tell them, even if they disagree. Since the men are distinguished from the women, the women form their own alliance because they feel empathy for each other. The men and women have seemed to take sides against each other. By always trivializing what the women do, the men are actually working against themselves because the women decide not to give them the information needed to solve the case. The first view that Glaspell gives in *Trifles* is that the men are far superior or higher than the women. The men in *Trifles* show the expected character as we would hear about in the past before women had the rights which they have now. The attorney displays this past male figure the best. He is always looking down at the women and minimizing whatever they do. The evolution of the women's relationships illustrates the female ethos.

Phyllis Mael feels that the play's "moral dilemma highlights the innate differences between male adherence to theoretical principles of morality and female empathic ethical sense which considers moral problems as problems of responsibility in relationship"⁴⁵ . Although Mrs. Hale and Mrs. Peters draw closer as the men, using "abstract rules and rights,"⁴⁶ make comments that trivialize the domestic sphere, ethical solidarity comes only after Mrs. Peters moves from acquiescence to patriarchal law to empathy, thus effecting a change "from a typically male to a more typically female mode of judgment"⁴⁷ . This switch allows them to formulate a "redefinition of . . . crime"⁴⁸ which finds more culpability in their earlier failure to help Minnie than in their "moral choice"⁴⁹ to suppress evidence.

The absent woman, who is represented by the character of Minnie, makes a mockery of male authority; Noe points out the need to trace the chain of cause-and-effect behind Minnie's action before assigning guilt: "Alienated from her husband, powerless and silenced by . . . her marriage . . . Minnie is an unseen woman long before she murders John Wright"⁵⁰ . Unseen both literally and metaphorically, Minnie becomes a surrogate for all the invisible women in Glaspell's society.

CONCLUSION:

By using the characters, descriptive language, and symbolism Glaspell illustrates that one person's home and one person's way of living can also be an introduction to one person's private hell. Throughout the play discoveries are made to tell the audience that maybe things are not what they seem and that sometimes people must take a deeper look into what is around them. Mr. Hale, Mrs. Hale, Mrs. Peters, the county attorney, and the sheriff are the five characters of the play that introduce the audience to the crime that has just been committed. These five characters, while showing the audience, the house, and the background of the murder, they reveal how society was acting at that time and what was expected from the women.

Because Mrs. Wright follows the role mapped by her husband and is directed by society, her identity is lost somewhere along the way. However, Mrs. Hale and Mrs. Peters quietly insist on preserving their own identities by protecting Mrs. Wright from the men who seek to convict her of the murder. In this play, the apparent theme is the empathy the women in the plot find for each other. Looking at the play from this perspective we see a distinct set of characters and a plot. The three main characters, Mrs. Peters, Mrs. Hale and Mrs. Wright are all products of an oppressive society which denies them their right to think and speak freely, as in the case of Mrs. Peters and Mrs. Hale, and denies them their right to a happy, free life as in Mrs. Wright's case. I also feel the same sympathy for Mrs. Wright who had to endure her husband's abnormal personality. All she wanted was a companion and when her husband took it away from her, she killed him. I don't agree with her decision to kill him, but she was probably pushed to the point where she couldn't control her actions. Throughout history, a woman's role is to be an obedient and respectful wife. Her main obligation is to support, serve, and live for her husband and children. So, the men in *Trifles* feel that the women cannot think, cannot act, and cannot do any harm to their investigative work. However, the women find lots of evidence. They do think, act, and sabotage the investigation. They find the very evidence that the men are looking for. In most stories of this nature the men are the center of attention, but Glaspell opens our eyes to something new. Not only that the men do not solve the case, but they also aren't the center of attention. Even though the men were not using lots of demeaning dialogue and they are not patronizing the women, it is clear that they are using the traditional manly ways to put the women down.

NOTES

1 Mary Anne Ferguson, *Images of Women in Literature*, (University of Massachusetts, Second Edition by Houghton Mifflin Company, Boston 1977), p.1.

- 2 Judith Fetterley. "Introduction", Provisions: A Reader from 19th-Century American Women. Ed. Judith Fetterley. (Bloomington:Indiana UP, 1985.) P.7.
- 3 Veronica Makowsky. Susan Glaspell's Century of American Women: A Critical Interpretation of Her Work. New York: Oxford UP, 1993.p.21.
- 4 Linda Ben-Zvi. "'Murder, She Wrote': The Genesis of Susan Glaspell's Trifles ,(Theatre Journal44 ,March 1992): P.141.
- 5 Veronica Makowsky,p.21.
- 6 Ben-Zvi, p.146.
- 7 BenZvi ,p. 160.
- 8 Makowsky, p. 24.
- 9 Noe, Marsha Noe, "Reconfiguring the Subject/Recuperating Realism:Susan Glaspell's Unseen Woman".(American Drama4 ,spring 1995), P.36.
- 10 Thomas Wolf, & Patricia L. Bryan, "Origin of the Play" (Internet modified 22Apr. 2006. 2pages , Midnight Assassin ation HomePage:<http://www.algonquin.com/catalog/?isbn=1565123069>),p.1.
- 11 Susan Glaspell, "Trifles ", Types of DRAMA Plays and Essays. Eds. Barnet, Berman,(Burto.Glenview, USA: library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data, Scott, Foresman and Company, Illinois/ Boston / London, Fifth Edition 1989), P.401.
- 12 Ibid, 401.
- 13 Noe, 39.
- 14 Beverly A. Smith "Women's Work-- Trifles? The Skill and Insights of Playwright Susan Glaspell". (International Journal of Women's Studies 5 March 1982), P.84.
- 15 Karen Alkalay-Gut, "Jury of Her Peers: The Importance of Trifles".(Studies in Short Fiction21, Winter 1984), P.8.
- 16 Ferguson,p.11.
- 17 Ibid,p. 40.
- 18 Ibid, p.42.
- 19 Susan Glaspell, Trifles,p.400.
- 20 Ibid,p. 403.
- 21 Ibid, p.403.
- 22 Bryan D. Bourn, "A Feminist Criticism of Susan Glaspell's Trifles ", (Internet modified 18 Apr, 2006.3pages.Home Page: <http://www.ukans.edu/wcb/schools/CLAS/engl/dsteward/6/forums/forum1/messages/48.html>),p.152.
- 23 Ibid, p.154.
- 24 Susan Glaspell,Trifles; 402.
- 25 Ibid, 405.
- 26 Ibid,p. 404.
- 27 Makowsky,p.24.
- 28 Alakaly-Gut,p.5.

- 29 Makowsky,p.62
 30 Ibid, p.61
 31 Susan Glaspell, Trifles; p.404.
 32 Ibid,p.403.
 33 Ibid, p.404.
 34 Ibid, p. 403.
 35 Alkalay-Gut , p.2.
 36. Skaggs, Peggy. "Kate Chopin: 1851-1904." The Heath Anthology of American Literature.(Vol.2 Gen. Ed. Paul Lauter. 2nd Ed. Lexington: D.C. Heath, 1994.) ,P.635.
 37 Ben- Zvi,160.
 38 Ibid ,p.161.
 39 Ethel Snowdon, The Feminist Movement,(Collins, 1913),p.16.
 40 Alkalay-Gut; p. 4.
 41 Ibid; p.3.
 42 Thomas Wolf& Patricia L. Bryan "Origin of the Play"
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 HomePage:<http://www.algonquin.com/catalog/?isbn=1565123069>), p.2.
 43 Susan Glaspell ,Trifles , p. 399.
 44 Alkalay- Gut,p. 1.
 45 Phyllis Mael, "Trifles : The Path to Sisterhood." (Literature/Film Quarterly17 ,1989), P.281.
 46 Susan Glaspill,Trifles,p.400.
 47 I bid , p.404.
 48 Sara Willis Parton, "Fannie Fern: 1811-1872". Provisions: A Reader from 19th -Century American Women. Ed. Judith Fetterley.(Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1985.), P241.
 49 Mael ,p.284.
 50 Noe,p.284.

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