

# Alienation and isolation in trifles, a doll's house and andre's mother

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People within society are constantly alienated from not only their own lives, but themselves, and they forget their significance as an individual. There are contradictory moments that come along that allow the person to realize the strength that is lying within them, that allow them to take off the mask they put on due to fear. Trifles by Susan Glaspell, A Doll's House by Henrik Ibsen, and Andre's Mother by Terrence McNally are three reality reflecting plays that examine conflicts in certain characters' lives. Through the analyzation of the empowerment Mrs. Hale and Mrs. Peters experience due to their decision in protecting the imprisoned women in Trifles, the self-realization Nora wakes up to because of her husband's inconsiderate and vulgar reaction in A Doll's House, and the closure Cal obtains to not only his lover and Andre's mother, but also to himself, when he finally opens up to Andre's mother, this paper will aim to examine the struggles the characters of these plays end up going through to get out of the alienation they've been feeling. The important themes explored in these plays, such as sexism, belittling and manipulating others, sexual diseases, homosexuality, and the overall discrimination to people just because of them being who they are, are all themes that make these plays that much more realistic, and thus critical to examine so society can come to a better understanding of these characters' perspectives, as well as anyone who might have perspectives such as these characters.

Trifles, a play by Susan Glaspell, was a play written in 1916. 1916 was an era within United States when women were seen as second-class citizens; they weren't allowed to vote, attend as jury within court, were subject to domestic and verbal abuse often without anything being done about it, and were basically far from the social stance women have today (Pankhurst, 2013).

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Trifles, a play that tells the story of two women feeling empowered through protecting yet another woman who has been imprisoned. Throughout Trifles, the reader can see that the women aren't comfortable and informal as the men. The women stand by the door, don't talk much, and refer to men they probably had known all their life (since it's implied they live in a small town) as Mr. while the men make themselves comfortable as soon as they enter into the house, the Attorney General warming himself up on the fire, the Sheriff sitting down, etc. These things represent the gender differences of that era. " While the standard polarization of human beings in a crime story is normally determined by dividing the law abiding citizens from the criminal, the characters here are soon divided on the basis of sex differences" (Alkalay-Gut, 1984). The women comment on Mrs. Wright's fruit in a jar, which causes the Sheriff and the County Attorney to make belittling and degrading sexist comments to the woman such as " can you beat the woman", " women are used to worrying over trifles" (Glaspell, 1916). The mentality of the men within the play show that they care little for women's opinions and thoughts, and find them foolish for thinking of things such as fruit preserves when Mrs. Wright is on a murder trial.

It's shocking how no matter how disrespectful the conversation got between the Country Attorney and Mrs. Hale, Mrs. Hale didn't allow herself to be affected by it, and even rebelled against the men dominance in society by talking back to the County Attorney's comments. When the County Attorney seemed disgusted with the towels inside the house, commenting on how Mrs. Wright wasn't much of a homemaker, Mrs. Hale defended Mrs. Wright by stating that there's a great deal of work to be done on a farm, as if

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justifying the mess of the place. Furthermore, Mrs. Hale wisely stated that towels get dirty so easily because the men's hands aren't as clean as they could be, taking the blame off Mrs. Wright, and turning it towards men instead.

Mrs. Hale, who feels some remorse for Mrs. Wright, can sympathize with her when it comes to Mrs. Wright's fruits; Mrs. Hale, imagining the daily chores of living on a farm, and the state of unhappiness within the house which she recalled from her last visit, feels bad that Mrs. Wright's fruits will be a mess after all her demanding work in the summer. However, the men in the play, who represent the men of the society of that era, believe that the women are always concerned with trifles, hence the name of the play. The trifle things that the men are referring to is the worry Mrs. Hale has over her fruits, the singing of the canary and the happiness it provided to Mrs. Wright, the upset one gets over bad stitching, the very things that make everyone human, the feelings that people are entitled to at birth, and they are also the things that men belittle women over in this play. However, it is those very trivial things that ultimately reveal what happened in the crime scene. The trifles the women were concerned with reflects how society viewed women's opinions and thoughts at the time, nothing but trifles.

When the women come across the wringed neck of the bird do they begin putting all the things they saw together to come up with the conclusion that Mr. Wright put the bird in the state. " It is unlikely that had either woman been alone, she would have had sufficient understanding or courage to make the vital decision, but as the trifles reveal the arduousness of Minnie's life

(and by implication of their own), a web of sisterhood is woven which connects the lives of all three enabling Mrs. Hale and Peters to counter patriarchal law, a decision particularly weighty for Mrs. Peters, who as she is reminded by the district attorney, is married to the law". (Mael, 1989) Mrs. Peters then recalls the time when a group of boys had killed her kitten with a hatchet, and remembers the feeling of wanting to hurt him, and how she would've hurt him if she hadn't been held back. Not only does this scene show how Mrs. Peters had been treated unfairly by guys before, but it also shows how she can also sympathize with Mrs. Wright. 1916 wasn't an era such as this one when one could call up or text their friend when they're feeling down, sad, or upset; Mrs. Wright was unhappy in her marriage, she was all alone in a house that was located far enough that no one wanted to really go out of their way to visit her, and any friends she did have turned away due to the aura of her life and her house. All this stress must've built up enormously for Mrs. Wright.

Mrs. Peters herself seems to fit the society of that day very well; although Mrs. Peters and Mrs. Hale are finding important clues about the motive in the crime scene without noticing it, such as a half clean half messy counter, a quilt that had bad stitching, a bird cage with a broken hinge and door, and a bird with a wringed neck, she still believes what they're doing is merely trifles. Mrs. Peters apologetically states that the men have awfully important things on their mind, feeling bad about the things they're worrying about, and undermining their role within this house, which is a representative of society. The women also note how Mrs. Wright's house has an uncheerful aura about it, and how it's so lonesome; this symbolizes the isolation of Mrs.

Wright herself. Mrs. Wright seemed to be leading an unhappy life with a husband who was generally a cold person, and it seemed that her husband got rid of the only type of joy Mrs. Wright had, her canary. The women state that Mrs. Wright used to be a cheerful woman who sang in the choir and laughed about. Comparing how Mrs. Wright used to be, and the state Mrs. Wright is described in right now, the reader can see how a life full of oppression through sexism and inequality can leave a person isolated, and hopeless, as Mrs. Wright had been.

The canary was Mrs. Wright's source of happiness. Canaries are known to sing, and it was said that Mrs. Wright used to sing in the choir herself, when she was remembered to be happy, thus, the canary here symbolizes the past of Mrs. Wright. She most likely gets a nostalgic joy out of the canary's songs and singing. Even if the authorities concluded that Mrs. Wright murdered her husband, which is correct, it doesn't tell the full story of what happened there, it doesn't tell the background that led up to that point, that allowed for a motive to build. It is only Mrs. Wright, Mrs. Hale, Mrs. Peters, and all the women of that era that can understand why Mrs. Wright did what she did. It is because of this that Mrs. Peters and Mrs. Hale decided to lie, such as saying a cat probably killed the canary when they knew the Wrights didn't have a cat, and protect Mrs. Wright by trying to hide the motive.

A Doll's House by Henrik Ibsen is yet another play that focuses on the gender differences between men and women in the 20th century, however, A Doll's House brings in a much more distinct perspective than the one introduced in Trifles. A Doll's House opens with the Nora happy and in high spirits, which

quickly changes when her husband, Torvald, enters and begins to treat Nora like a child, rather than a wife, which to seem usual between them. Torvald is introduced as a character who thinks little of his wife and finds her high spirits foolish. His statements and actions reveal that he doesn't think much of women's thoughts, and finds them incapable of thinking ahead, and being wise. This is further shown when Torvald then tries to soothe Nora who had gotten upset by his actions, soothing her as if someone might soothe a child. Him treating her like a child can also be seen with the nickname he gives her, squirrel; he seems to only call her that when he thinks she's doing something stupid such as eating macaroons or sulking. Also, Tarvold always seems to lecture Nora on not mixing business with pleasure, and not having debts.

Nora herself seems to realize the child role she plays in their marriage, and enjoys doing so, as she likes the attention, being materialistic, and spoiled. “The maturity level Nora exhibits demonstrates that the relationship between Torvald and Nora is more like father and daughter than husband and wife; she whines at Torvald, exhibits poor judgment, does not care about the consequences of her actions, and immaturely shuts her ears to unpleasant thoughts, placing her hand on her mouth and exclaiming, ‘ Oh! Don't say such thing!’ when Torvald presents a hypothetical tragedy” (Wiseman, 2010). Even in the opening of Scene 1, Nora was described to be among a pile of gifts, merry and in high spirits. When her friend Linde comes over, the reader can sense how Nora is trying to prove that she's independent. It's the turning point of the play; finding out about Nora's loan and her dishonesty to her husband, seeing her curiosity for the independence Linde has, her

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mysterious ways of hiding who the loaner is. Linde, a woman who doesn't depend on a husband and who works hard to survive, displays many differences from Nora. Nora, trying to prove that she's independent as Linde, reveals a secret of how she got a loan, and that it wasn't from her father. She does this because she's curious about what it's like to have independence as Nora does. This being a time era when women were oppressed, it's imaginable that a woman couldn't take out a loan without the knowledge of her husband or father. Thus, Nora taking out the loan without telling either her husband or her father shocked Mrs. Linde. However, Nora didn't tell Linde everything; she didn't reveal who she received the loan from, and Linde was left guessing.

Krogstad, who is the person Nora received a loan from, seems to be some type of villain within *A Doll's House* because he threatens Nora that if she doesn't make sure he gets a promotion, he will reveal the fact she got a loan from him to her husband. Moreover, he lets her know that he's aware she has forged her father's signature to get the loan, and he'll let her husband know of this as well. Krogstad only seems like a villain until he meets Linda again who sparks a redemption within him, a sort of resurrection of feelings. Krogstad seems to be the villain of the play because he seems to get a sick pleasure out of playing with Nora's emotions. Although Linde met Krogstad to stop him from threatening Nora, and in eventuality, giving Torvald a letter that reveals the truth, Linde decided to allow Torvald to find out the truth, so Nora doesn't need to be wanting independence anymore, but so she can be independent.



When Torvald sees the letter, he's angry and disappointed in his wife, degrading her and insulting her, as well as her family. Torvald blames Nora's father for passing on his horrible DNA onto his daughter (Ibsen, 1879).

Although Nora took out the loan for her husband and his health, he has no remorse for her at all. Nora, who can't emotionally handle the situation states how she'll be leaving him and the children. Torvald is outraged and reminds Nora of her role as a wife and mother. The vulgar, ruthless, and mean-spirited reaction of Torvald finding out these news broke Nora's spirits, but it made her stronger as well. Nora came to realize she is a wife and a mother, but before all else a human being. Her idealistic speech at the end of the play was not only a self-realization scene for Nora, but also a yearning for every other woman who is in Nora's position to stand up for themselves, and not let the inequality go on. Linde, who works hard and seems to be the dominant role in both her friendship with Nora and her romantic relationship with Krogstad, is the initial reason as to even why Nora had a curiosity for independence. There are many shocking reactions of the audience and society of the time this play was released. It couldn't be believed that Nora left her children, her rich husband, her comfortable home, and her lifestyle just to find herself.

Andre's Mother is a powerful play that tells the story of a young man having to tell his deceased's boyfriend's mother about his death. The play opens with a group of people standing, each with a balloon in their hand, and these people are Andre's mother, Cal, Andre's boyfriend, Arthur, Cal's father, and Penny, Cal's, sister. One comes to quickly realize through Cal's revelation that these balloons represent the soul of Andre, and as they let go of the

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balloons they are saying their final goodbyes to Andre, and allowing his soul to ascend up to the heavens. From Cal's initial loss of words when he couldn't find the words to say his goodbye to Andre, to his nostalgic memories of Andre playing Hamlet within the theater, the reader can tell that Andre and Cal had a strong bond.

Although the play's name is Andre's Mother, Andre's mother, who is present in the play, doesn't have a single line, and stays silent throughout the play; almost as if still disapproving of her son's sexual preference, and of generally what happened to him. Penny, who let's go of her balloon and says her goodbyes rather quickly, remembers Andre's laugh and finds joy in its memory, probably bringing the same effect to Andre's mother. Arthur, who as a parent understands Andre's mother, tries to lighten her mood without avail, and let's go of his balloon as well.

When it's just Cal and Andre's mother who are left with their balloons, Cal finally feels obligated to do what he promised his friend. Cal seems dumbfounded as to how Andre's mother still can stay silent and show her disapproval, even after her son had to fight a battle against death all on his own. Cal revealed to Andre's mother that Andre died of AIDS, and died bravely (McNallay, 1994). No matter how bravely Andre fought, he was nevertheless frightened of his mother, and her disapproval. Andre's mother's disapproval represents the part of society who still can't cope with people being the way they are. Cal rants on about how it is because of these types of inconsiderate attitudes, such as the one Andre's mother has, that there is

a whole line of people who lead an unhappy life where their loved ones deny them because of how they are.

Cal referring to Andre's mother as Lulu's mother is a critical part of the play. It is almost as if when Cal states that Andre's mother reminds him of Lulu's mother does he gain the power and strength to tell her how his son died. According to Cal, Lulu's mother was this background character is a comic strip where her name wasn't even known. Lulu's mother was so "anonymous in her remoteness", and "so formidable to all her children" (McNallay, 1994). Cal referring to Lulu's mother/Andre's mother as anonymous is symbolizing she missed out on her son's life, and that her disapproval of her son wasn't worth it. Andre's mother follows the norm of society without even knowing why; it's because of such aimless and directionless, but extremist and close-minded beliefs and disapprovals that a society of inequality, and discrimination still exists. Instead of being there for her son, Andre's mother chose to disapprove of his choices, and let his life pass away due to beliefs with no foundation or ground.

As can be seen, people within society are always being affected by everything that takes place around them, and even though it might be unknown to them, society shapes the people of their time. Currently, society has evolved to a point when people are more expressive, open-minded, and aware of other's perspectives and feelings. However, such plays are still taught, are popular, and exist because so do the problems they present. The themes that were prominent in these plays such as gender discrimination, sexism, lack of feminism, homophobia, isolation, need for independence, and

wanting to be a human, are all problems existent in the current society that need to be addressed to. But thanks to the contribution of plays such as Trifles, A Doll's House, and Andre's Mother, society was able to gain awareness and even evolve to the point it has today.

There are contradictory moments that come along that allow the person to realize the strength that is lying within them, that allow them to take off the mask they put on due to fear. Trifles by Susan Glaspell, A Doll's House by Henrik Ibsen, and Andre's Mother by Terrence McNally are three reality reflecting plays that examine conflicts in certain characters' lives. Within Trifles, the analyzation of the empowerment Mrs. Hale and Mrs. Peters felt by lying about the evidence, thus the motive, and protecting the imprisoned women, due to knowing that it was only them who can understand why this murder could be justified, is a representation of the oppression women felt prior to the rights they had gained. The self-realization Nora wakes up to because of her husband's inconsiderate and vulgar reaction in A Doll's House is her wake up call that she had been living a lie and had merely been the doll of a stranger who she had three kids with; in order to rip this lie and throw the past away, she chooses to leave, and be independent, and ultimately learn and enjoy what being a human truly is. The closure Cal obtains to not only his lover and Andre's mother, but also to himself, when he finally opens up to Andre's mother is also the closure Andre's mother finally gets to Andre by the kissing off that balloon and letting go. Although Andre's mother can never fix what was broken with Andre again since he's gone, it's obvious she won't be the same disapproving person any longer.

This paper aimed to examine the struggles the characters of these plays end up going through to get out of the alienation, isolation, and oppression they've been feeling. The important themes explored in these plays, such as sexism, belittling and manipulating others, sexual diseases, homosexuality, and the overall discrimination to people just because of them being who they are, are all themes that make these plays that much more realistic, and thus critical to examine so society can come to a better understanding of these characters' perspectives, as well as anyone who might have perspectives such as these characters. In *Trifles*, the point of the story isn't justifying Mrs. Wright murdering someone, but instead it is to tell the story of how a woman that was once happy and innocent got to that isolated and desperate point. In *A Doll's House*, the point of the story isn't justifying Nora's forging her dad's signature, but instead is raising awareness against the types of unhealthy relationships one can be in, with an implication at the end to stand up for oneself. In *Andre's Mother*, the point isn't making the mother feel guilty, but rather, trying to show others another perspective which they haven't even thought of before.