

From courtroom to stage: susan glaspell's "trifles"

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Susan Glaspell was only twenty-four-years-old when she covered the Hossack murder in Indianola, Iowa as a journalist. It would be many years before Glaspell would write her breakout play *Trifles*, a play that bears remarkable similarities to the real-life murder of farmer John Hossack. Inside the wooden doors of the Indianola courthouse, young Glaspell had witnessed an event that would influence the rest of her life. To the residents of Warren County, the event that took place inside that courthouse was a trial to determine a woman's innocence; to Glaspell, it was a testament of American injustice towards women in society. When she sat down to write *Trifles*, there is no doubt that it was modeled on the events that took place during that Hossack trial. The line is drawn as Glaspell the journalist becomes Glaspell the artist, and she makes careful omissions and additions to her work. *Trifles* is not simply a retelling; instead, to better exaggerate her concern about sexism, Susan Glaspell made several changes for her play. The addition of Mrs. Hale, the dirty roller towel, and the canary emphasizes Glaspell's focus on the injustice of men's feelings toward women and their work. Glaspell first departs from the real Hossack story with the introduction of Mrs. Hale. In the play, Mrs. Hale is the stern wife of Mr. Hale, the man who inadvertently discovers the scene of the crime. When the men rummage through the house belittling Minnie Wright, Mrs. Hale is the one to retort. She is the voice of reason, "loyal to her sex" (Glaspell 5). Although aware of the men's sarcastic remarks, she never does much more than mutter under her breath. No parallel to Mrs. Hale appeared in the real Hossack murder case, in which very few women were called upon to testify. Mrs. Hale represents Glaspell herself - the only female journalist, who quickly noted the unequal treatment

women received in the courtroom. When women began to give their opinions in court, they were quickly silenced immediately, on grounds such as the claim that “ She [the witness, Mrs. Keller] wasn’t answering the question that had been asked” (Bryan and Wolf 146). The end of *Trifles* recalls the silence that Glaspell observed; however, “ their refusal to speak rings with the power of intention and choice” (Holstein 284). Like Mrs. Keller, they are not answering the question that was asked, but in this case the conscious choice to be silent suggests that contrary to men’s opinions, the women actually have something important to say. Another change Glaspell made to her play is the addition of the dirty roller towel. This seemingly inconsequential detail does much to advance the story’s preoccupation with sexism. The roller towel creates the opportunity for the County Attorney to make the condescending remark, “ not much of a housekeeper, would you say, ladies?” (Glaspell 4). This remark expresses the County Attorney’s expectation for all women to serve as housekeepers. Of course, there were not any dirty roller towels in the real-life Hossack farmhouse, for John Hossack was a stern man who was often susceptible to fits of rage, the worst of which he would threaten Margaret with “ physical harm,” calling her “ bitch” and “ whore” (Bryan and Wolf 114). Possibly intimidated by these tantrums, Margaret Hossack had to carry her weight in performing her house chores. Glaspell changed this aspect of Margaret when she created Minnie Wright, and she did so without sacrificing anything significant from the overall plot. By adding something as trivial as a dirty roller towel, Susan Glaspell created the opportunity for the audience to briefly see inside the mind of the County Attorney, who ironically “ at the end of the play [knows]

no more than at the beginning" (Holstein 283). Glaspell purposely makes the men pay for their ignorance by allowing the women, not the men, to discover the motive first. Lastly, the dead canary further emphasizes Glaspell's message by revealing the tension between Minnie and John Wright. The audience is led to assume that the canary died in John's forceful hand, and instantly feels the couple's strife and anger. In the words of Linda Ben-Zvi, John doesn't just kill the canary, Minnie's only comfort, but he also kills her "bird-like spirit" as well (153). Glaspell builds the imagery so beautifully that the audience can literally feel the years of abuse inflicted upon Minnie. A similar experience can be found in the Hossack case. There was no dead canary to illustrate feelings of abuse; however, there were many neighboring farmers who testified during the trial that John Hossack's anger frequently drove Margaret out of the house. For instance, local farmer Frank Keller testified that "there was no peace in [the Hossack] family" (Bryan and Wolf 42). Susan Glaspell could not put every fact of the Hossack case into her play. She had to create something that not only could be produced on stage, but was also a work of art that conveyed her message - that "women's voices are to be heard not as difference but as equally registered" (Ben-Zvi 162). Glaspell's inclusion of Mrs. Hale, a dirty roller towel, and the dead canary support that message well. They help Glaspell translate the irony she observed in the courtroom - the absence of women's voices to defend another, abused woman - to a play that reaches far beyond Indianola. Works Cited Ben-Zvi, Linda. "' Murder, She Wrote': The Genesis of Susan Glaspell's 'Trifles'." Theatre Journal, Vol. 44, No. 2, American Scenes. (May, 1992): pp. 141-162. JSTOR. Montgomery County Community College., Brendlinger Lib.

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