

Feminist criticism of triffles

[Sociology](#), [Feminism](#)



The "Trifles" of Feminism The bone of contention for feminist theory is centered at the treatment of women living in a patriarchal society. Feminists raised questions about why women were being forced into a position of subordination and their affairs looked at with marginal importance. Susan Glaspell's story "Trifles" depicts the plight of women and their subordination while subversively commenting on the negative effects this had on the female psyche. "Trifles" begins with an investigation into the murder of John Wright, which takes place at his farm house. His wife, Mrs. Wright, is found at the crime scene and put in jail. She asks three of her friends, who are wives of the detectives investigating, to collect her apron and shawl. While the men scamper about trying to solve the crime of who did it, the women rifle through Mrs. Wright's belongings in search of her request. Noticing simple things out of place in the home or the trifles (as the men call it), they inadvertently find clues that reveal Mrs. Wright to be the murderer. It is said, the devils in the details which proves to be accurate in this situation. Glaspell's story is a commentary on the societal values of women at the time and their roles in the home. By using theorists such as Gilbert and Gubar, Fetterly, and Irigaray, one can see how Glaspell uses a feminist critique to call to question the inequalities of women and highlighting the detriment this subordination has on females. "Trifles" embodies the problems of alienation women faced in the hands of a patriarchal society. Julie Rivkin and Michael Ryan say "the subject of feminism was women's experience under patriarchy, the long tradition of male rule in society which silenced women's voices, distorted their lives, and treated their concerns as peripheral" (527). We see this in the beginning of "Trifles", "Mrs. Peters: Oh, her fruit; it did

freeze. She worried about that when it turned so cold. She said the fire'd go out and her jars would break. Hale: Well, women are used to worrying over trifles" (Glaspell, 1043). The women's voice is silenced by the man's failure to recognize her concerns as legitimate. When presented with a concern from a woman, instead of paying attention, the men dismiss the women and their observations and silence them from speaking further. This alienates the women, placing them in a lower status. Of this Luce Irigaray say, " A direct feminine challenge to this condition means demanding to speak as a (masculine) " subject", that is, it means to postulate a relation to the intelligible that would maintain sexual difference" (570). By Glaspell participating in the canon of literature and bringing attention to the female issue of subordination, she is challenging and demanding to speak in " masculine" terms, as literature was dominated by males. According to Judith Fetterley " American Literature is male. Our literature neither leaves women alone nor allows them to participate" (561). Glaspell shatters this. She is participating in a genre of art that was viewed as predominantly male. Also, she not only gave her female characters a participatory role, they had the most important role, while the men were secondary and almost needless. Speaking to the " silencing of voices" Glaspell writes, " Mrs. Peters: [looking in cupboard] Why, here's a bird cage. [Holds it up] Did she have a bird, Mrs. Hale? Mrs. Hale: Why I don't know whether she did or not-I've not been here for so long... She used to sing real pretty herself" (1047). It goes on to read about Mr. Wright, " Mrs. Hale: But he was a hard man, Mrs. Peters. Just to pass the time of day with him-[Shivers.] Like a raw wind that gets to the bone. [Pauses, her eye falling on the cage.] I should think she would ' a

wanted a bird. But what do you suppose went with it? " (1048). As Rivkin and Ryan state, as mentioned above, the man silences the woman. Mr. Wright silenced Mrs. Wright, not allowing her to sing, "distorting" her life. Judith Fetterley believes that there is a certain amount of "power that marriage puts in the hands of men"(563) and "ownership of women is invoked as the index of power"(564). Because Mrs. Wright was so changed by her husband, "Mrs. Hale: She-come to think of it, she was kind of like a bird herself-real sweet and pretty, but kind of timid and-fluttery. How-she-did-change" (1048), she was not only isolated in her home with her husband but her life was devalued, therefore she changed. Mr. Wright wanted her to be silent which is reminiscent of what Gilbert and Gubar say that a woman should be waiting "silently, without calling attention to her exertions" as it would detract from her focus on others (601). "Triffles" also reads, "Mrs. Hale: I might have known she needed help! I know how things can be -for women. I tell you it's queer, Mrs. Peters. We live close together and we live far apart. We all go through the same things-it's all just a different kind of the same thing. " (Glaspell, 1049). Here Susan Glaspell is pointing out the alienation that is a prevalent feeling amongst women. This feeling is induced by the patriarchal society that does not allow them to have a life of their own. Glaspell's character Mrs. Wright sacrifices everything because that's what her husband demanded, which was the status quo. Gilbert and Gubar also state "For to be selfless is not only to be noble, it is to be dead. A life that has no story..." (602). Mrs. Wright is the embodiment of these ideas. She is isolated, alienated, and quiet; she's expected to be angel-like. The angel/devil binary is discussed by Gilbert and Gubar. The idea is that women have two sides to

them. One side that is silent, submissive, obedient, and the other that is a monster, conniving, and deceitful (605). Though Mrs. Wright could be critically looked at as being a product of this angel/devil binary, more importantly Glaspell is challenging the male's role in this binary. Essentially she is pointing out that by men placing women in a submissive role they are contributing to this angel/devil behavior they are critical of. "The fact that the angel woman manipulates her domestic/mystical sphere in order to ensure the well-being of those entrusted to her care reveals that she can manipulate; she can scheme; she can plot- stories as well as strategies" (602). The woman can do no right. Fetterley points out "the sacrificial scapegoat is the woman/wife and the cleansed survivor is the husband/male. In such fictions the female reader is co-opted into participation in an experience from which she is explicitly excluded; she is asked to identify with a selfhood that defines itself in opposition to her; she is required to identify against herself" (562). Typically this is true because the male perception of women is that they should be angels, self sacrificing, subordinate but criticize this because they also believe the binary opposition to women is the devil. They are eliminating an identifiable character for the female reader, alienating them. Glaspell however, allows the female reader to identify with her female characters. In "Triffles" the women are doing "female things" looking about the kitchen, paying attention to the sewing, noticing the rotten fruit. Essentially everything that has to do with household matters. The men are outside looking for clues in the barn, completely unaware or unaltered by the fact that a woman could possibly have committed such an atrocious crime. After all, action is male and silence is

female. Gilbert and Gubar quote from Eichner, “ the ideal of significant action is masculine” and “ women are defined as wholly passive, completely void of generative power”(599). Because women are viewed as having no power the men overlook the evidence in the house; The house is for the women and their trifles. At the end of “ Trifles” the women find Mrs. Wrights dead bird, with a broken neck. Coincidentally the same way her husband was murdered. The bird is wrapped up in her quilt, when it is found the story reads, “ Mrs. Hale: [Jumping up] But, Mrs. Peters- look at it! It’s [sic] neck! Look at its neck! It’s all-other side to. Mrs. Peters: Somebody-wrung-its-neck” (Glaspell 1048). It is at this moment the women realize that Mrs. Wright has killed her husband. The attorney walks in and says “ [As one turning from serious things to little pleasantries] Well, ladies, have you decided whether she was going to quilt it or knot it” (Glaspell 1048). By asking about quilting or knotting he is referring to the stitching on Mrs. Wrights quilt. The quilt is one of the “ trifles” indicating Mrs. Wright as the murderer. Once again, Glaspell is drilling it into the readers head that the men think women’s concerns are unimportant. As the story goes on, the women allude to the fact that Mr. Wright could have played a hand in the death of the bird Mrs. Wright loved so. Glaspell continuously points out the domination and control of the men (Mr. Wright in this case) and the psychological effects it has on the women. “ Mrs. Peters: [In a whisper.] When I was a girl- my kitten- there was a boy took a hatchet, and before my eyes-and before I could get there- [Covers her face an instant.] If they hadn’t held me back I would have- hurt him”(Glaspell, 1049). Not only are grown men oppressive of women, it appears that Glaspell is also commenting on the societal values of child

rearing, pertaining to sex. The little boy is allowed to act violently (action is masculine) but the little girl has to be held back, and allow whatever grief she feels to overcome her with no outlet. This speaks to Rivkin and Ryan's idea of a constructionist or essentialist child rearing. In other words, are children taught their roles of femininity and masculinity or are they innate? By the child scenario given in "Trifles" Glaspell notes that the different genders abide by different ideals. The little boy (fulfilling essentialism) is allowed to be "active" fulfilling his innate desire to take a hatchet to the cat. The little girl is fulfilling the constructionist role. Her gender is being created when she is being told how to act, being held back and constrained, none of these being her first choice. As children, it would appear, little boys are able to act on their natural desires, while little girls have to grin and bear it. Of these two ideals Gilbert and Gubar say, "two perspectives began to form, one "constructionist" or accepting of the idea that gender is made by culture in history, the other "essentialist," more inclined to the idea that gender reflects a natural difference between men and women that is as much psychological, even linguistic, as it is biological" (529). These roles the children learn, carry with them into their adult lives where women are oppressed and men are free. This is another example of women being isolated from a young age. The last scene of "Trifles" is Mrs. Hale putting the dead bird in her pocket, keeping Mrs. Wright's secret. "County Attorney: No, Peters it's all perfectly clear except a reason for doing it. But you know juries when it comes to women. If there was some definite thing. Something to show-something to make a story about- a thing that would connect up with this strange way of doing it-" (Glaspell, 1050). The men in their

ignorance don't see what's in front of them. The evidence was there, they just let their social conventions detract from the situation at hand. In a way, Glaspell is making the male gender look foolish. By placing the evidence in conspicuous places, their inability to find clues is commenting on the narrow scope of males. " County Attorney:: Oh, I guess they're not very dangerous things the ladies have picked out. [Moves a few things about, disturbing the quilt pieces which cover the box. Steps back.] No, Mrs. Peters doesn't need supervising. For that matter, a sheriff's wife is married to the law. " (1050). As everyone leaves the scene they police suggest checking what Mrs. Peters is removing from the house. The attorney is almost amused at what he finds to be trifles that she is collecting (the apron, shawl, quilt) when she is in fact removing the evidence he was searching for. The women in this story feel bad for Mrs. Wright. They are not " married to the law" but dedicated to the common bond of the alienated woman. The law that the attorney says Mrs. Peters is married to, is a patriarchal law that oppresses women and makes them subjects of the system. These women's devotion truly lies with each other and their struggle to survive an oppressive society. If in marriage a woman is isolated and dominated, her only sense of self lies within the common struggle. Because she identifies with the sadness of Mrs. Wright she with holds evidence. Susan Glaspell's " Trifles" provides a solution to many of the inherent problems the feminist scholars bring to light. She writes about the alienation of women and how a patriarchal society is silencing. Women's voices are not heard and when they are, there opinions and concerns are dismissed, regardless of their importance. Glaspell uses the relationship between her male and female characters to exemplify this.

Glaspell challenges the notion of the male writers point of view in that she, simply by writing and challenging, is taking on the male characteristic of action as opposed to silence. She also plays with the duality of the notion of woman, angel and devil. She constructs a character that could be seen as the angel/devil, but subversively comments on society pushing the woman into these roles they find so disagreeable. This further leads into the idea of constructionist and essentialist where girls identities are constructed while boys are innate, causing a future of oppressive relationships.

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