

The unheimlich in susan glaspell's play trifles: a feminist interpretation of fre...

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Although published three years before Sigmund Freud's "The Uncanny," Susan Glaspell's play "Trifles" is a literary embodiment of Freudian techniques. The dramatic tension in "Trifles" is marked by an acute sense of the unheimlich, or uncanny, which Freud defines as: "uneasy, eerie, blood-curdling... everything that is unheimlich ought to have remained secret and hidden but has come to light." In this play, the three principle female characters — Mrs. Peters, Mrs. Wright, and Mrs. Hale — can be understood as personifications of Freud's ego, id, and superego. The symbolic unconscious appears in the text as the absent Minnie Wright, whose enigmatic presence is ingeniously presented as a lack of presence, as something not yet manifest. The unheimlich makes itself felt through Mrs. Hale and Mrs. Peter's eventual realization that they are deeply resentful of men and, from their anger, capable of justifying murder. Their realization coincides with the ego's realization of the repressed id, which creates an atmosphere of the uncanny in the text. "Trifles" is the story of women; it paints a picture of the female condition seen through female consciousness. The mind of Glaspell's play, its ego, superego, and id, belong to women, and men are intentionally excluded from understanding its metaphoric language. The text of the play and the events that unfold can be seen as emblematic of the linguistic system of the female mind. The character of Mrs. Peters functions as the play's symbolic ego. She is highly self-conscious, cautious to a fault because she distrusts herself, nervous, hesitant, and, until the end of the play, consistently uncertain. She wavers between defending Minnie Wright and defending the patriarchal law, appearing to have no concept of what she desires and no stable conscience or conviction when it comes to Minnie Wright. When Mrs.

Hale asks if she believes Minnie Wright killed her husband, Mrs. Peters answers in a frightened voice, " Oh, I don't know" (40). Mrs. Hale, however, is quick to judge: " Well, I don't think she did. Asking for her apron and her little shawl. Worrying about her fruit" (40). Mrs. Hale can be interpreted as the play's superego. She is ruled by her principles and convictions and, throughout the play, often speaks of her conscience. Reflecting on Minnie Wright, Mrs. Hale says mournfully, " I wish I had come over sometimes when she was here... I stayed away because it weren't cheerful — and that's why I ought to have come" (42). Later on in the play, Mrs. Hale cries, " Oh I wish I'd come over here once in a while! That was a crime! That was a crime! Who's going to punish that" (44)? As the play's symbolic superego, Mrs. Hale is also speaks directly to Mrs. Peters and urges her to think with a conscience: " 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" (44). When the ego uncovers the unheimlich in the id, the uncanny is realized. It is the moment when the unconscious elements surface and materialize into a form recognizable to the individual consciousness. In " Trifles," the unheimlich is uncovered when Mrs. Peters, the play's ego, decides that Mr. Wright's murder is acceptable. Her dawning realization comes after she finds the dead canary, Minnie's cathexis, and recognizes the shape of Minnie's anger: " When I was a girl — my kitten — there was a boy took a hatchet, and before my eyes — and before I could get there... If they hadn't held me back I would have... hurt him" (43).

Transference is at work here; through self-reference, the character Minnie

becomes comprehensible. Freud postulates that this sense of doubleness or duality is inherent in the uncanny and describes it as “ transferring mental processes from the one person to the other... so that the one possesses knowledge, feeling and experience in common with the other... so his self becomes confounded, or the foreign self is substituted for his own — in other words, by doubling, dividing and interchanging the self.” The uncanny appears when the ego recognizes aspects of the id that it never knew existed. The concept of recognition is significant, because it implies pre-established acquaintance and a certain level of inherence. Glaspell implies that all women share anger at their male oppressors, and if carried to an extreme, all women are capable of sharing Minnie’s murderous rage.”

“Trifles” comes from Mr. Hale’s line, “ Well, women are used to worrying over trifles” (38). It is a feminist play about men’s unwillingness to understand the female condition; it is about how women are disenfranchised, dismissed, and displaced by men in the social order. This calls to mind the Freudian notion of “ penis envy.” According to Freud, women enter the Oedipal phase when they discover their lack of a penis and blame the mother, turning to the father as a love object. However, far from supporting this notion of penis envy, Glaspell’s play denies it completely. According to Glaspell, men fear the power of women, to an extent that they constantly belittle their female counterparts to assure themselves of their own domination. Instead of blaming other women for their lack of a penis, the women in “ Trifles” bond over shared femininity. When Mr. Henderson demeans Minnie Wright by proclaiming that she is a poor housekeeper, Mrs. Hale defends her by saying, “ Those towels get dirty awful quick. Men’s hands aren’t always as clean as

they might be" (38). The blame is transferred from the woman to the man; it is not her dirty towels that are to be blamed, but rather his dirty hands. The play's linguistic metonymy is based on the world of women. The central metaphors of the play — the preserves, the birdcage, the quilt, and the knot — all inhabit a world that men derogate, but in "Trifles" these are the only objects that speak the truth. By examining these objects, Mrs. Hale and Mrs. Peters solve the mystery of Mr. Wright's death and protect Minnie Wright by keeping their knowledge secret, which simultaneously empowers their femininity and diminishes patriarchal control. The women become the ones with the power to exclude. Withholding their knowledge of the crime from the men is, in a sense, castration, because it renders them impotent to connect Minnie Wright to the murder of her husband. "Trifles" as a whole is uncanny, because it speaks for the minds of women, and assumes in Mrs. Hale's line, "We all go through the same things" that all women have repressed the same things, that all women — even if they do not realize it — harbor the same dangerous resentment at their male oppressors (44). The play closes when Mr. Henderson asks the women jokingly if they think Mrs. Wright intended to sew or knot her unfinished quilt. Mrs. Hale's sarcastic reply sums up in a sentence the doubleness, the uncanny, of this feminine language: "We call it — knot it, Mr. Henderson" (45). The castrating power of female withholding, the knot, the reference to the void, is the foundation of the play's unheimlich.—Works CitedBigsby, C. W. E., Ed. Plays by Susan Glaspell. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987.