

Layers of significance in susan glaspell's "trifles"

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Layers of Significance in Susan Glaspell's "Trifles" Susan Glaspell's decision to change the title from "Trifles" to "A Jury of Her Peers" when converting it from stage play to short story ironically robs readers of a metaphor that not only mirrors the female characters' use of coded words and symbols (Lanser 414-15), but further highlights the gender mindsets of pre-1920's men and women, the dually interpreted setting, and the role of the canary as both a companion and a symbol. When Mr. Hale accuses women as "used to worrying over trifles," he is referring, literally, to the multi-layered dessert, but a second definition of "trifles" as matters of trivial importance is equally important to the play's interpretation. The multiple layers of a trifle represent the women's dialogue and actions that contain much more information than is recognized by the men, who never look below the surface, while the second definition refers to the insignificance the men associate with the tasks, minds, and needs of their wives. The women of "Trifles" operate on multi-dimensional levels of thought, observation, and speech. They discover meaning beneath trivial details overlooked by their husbands, and communicate with each other with coded verbal and non-verbal language that goes undetected by their husbands (Lanser 414-15). When the women, for example, discover the irregular ends of Mrs. Wright's quilt, they interpret it as a sign of distress, while the men see only matter for jokes and evidence of poor housekeeping; the same is true for the dirty towels and unorganized kitchenware. What the men dismiss as trivial proves to be of great importance; if the household were a trifle, the men would only see the frosting, while the women would be acutely aware of every layer down to the dish. Verbal clues slip by the men's notice just as easily. When

Mr. Hale mockingly asks the ladies to remind him what it is they found, he is unaware that his wife's answer refers to the method of murder, not the quilt. The title also contributes to Glaspell's portrayal of the gender mindsets of the early 1900's; the three males investigating the crime believe that the women, who actually solve it, should deal exclusively with matters of the kitchen - which would include the baking of trifles. The title also helps relay the mindsets of the time when interpreted as pertaining to trivial matters rather than dessert, for the men believe matters of the kitchen to be trivial when compared with the tasks men are meant to perform. "Trifles" is also an ironic title because it is the trifles, objects such as the quilt and the birdcage to which the men assign no importance, that lead the women to discover the motive. Because the men believe that women should concern themselves only with trivial matters of the kitchen, it is only fitting that the play is set in a kitchen. Unfortunately for the men, the insignificant "trifles" such as quilting, bread making, and cleaning turn out to be very significant in terms of finding the motive, and the men have never paid enough attention to these tasks to realize, as the women do, that the state of the house reveals Mrs. Wright's intense loneliness, motive, and several sudden knots in the monotonous pattern that has become her life. Had the men paid any attention to the work of their wives that they had automatically dismissed as trivial - or compromised their egos enough to consult their wives about these matters - they would have found the clues they came in search of. Instead they learn nothing of the motive, and remain completely aloof to the momentous world that lies beneath the surface. The Wright kitchen is gloomy, covered with faded wallpaper and equipped with an

almost malicious uncurtained window to the outside world, the view from which no doubt haunts Mrs. Wright as much as it draws her in. The rocker facing the window was likely her only escape from her mundane and suppressed life, but there is still a catch: the house is located in a hollow, obstructed from the road - a constant reminder of Mrs. Wright's permanent seclusion. It is these reasons that make her canary such an important companion. It was the only thing that kept her alive, that broke the silence of her lonesome days and reminded her of the woman she used to be before her husband slowly robbed her of her individuality. To Mr. Wright, however, the canary was trivial enough to kill. A man with this mentality must never have given any thought to his wife's feelings, to her needs, or to the stillness of her days. Mr. Wright saw his wife as a trifle; she was insignificant as a woman with needs and feelings, significant only as a wife. She was, like all of us, made up of complex layers that required more than just food and water, but Mr. Wright only cared to see the surface. He killed Minnie, as Mrs. Hale states, but he did not do so out of hatred, for he would have had to know her to hate her; he killed her though his misogynistic failure to ever truly see her. She was a plant that he had taken for granted, but lacking understanding, had pulled out of the sun and crushed its last source of nourishment. Works CitedLanser, Susan S. Radner, Joan N. "The Feminist Voice: Strategies of Coding in Folklore and Literature." *The Journal of American Folklore* 100. 398 (1987): 412-425.