

A historical perspective on "trifles"

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The play *Trifles* by Susan Glaspell depicts the repressed roles of women in 1916 and holds underlying tones of the feminist movement shown through the two female lead characters, Mrs. Peters and Mrs. Hale. This play paved the way for female writers in many areas, especially in journalism and playwriting. Performed at the turn of the century, Glaspell's work depicted the events that were still going on at the time, and was used as a feminist tool by Glaspell to show the repression that was still so prevalent.

Glaspell refused to go with the societal grain that people held for women of her time, which is shown by her life's journey. Susan Glaspell, born in 1876 in Davenport, Iowa, was a woman who rebelled at most societal expectations of her time (Ozieblo). She graduated from Drake University in 1899 and then continued on to work for her local newspaper the *Des Moines Daily News*. Glaspell married her husband just three years before the play was performed. Unlike most women of her time, who were repressed by society, Glaspell was not restricted to household duties. She was discovered as a writer when she covered a case about a woman who murdered her husband, the Hossack Case. She then went on to write the play *Trifles*, which is loosely based on this trial. This became what she was most known for as a writer, even today, and Glaspell also turned the work into a short story, "A Jury of Her Peers" (Ozieblo). She became a respected author with many articles published in sophisticated magazines, a number of short stories, and a novel that was published in 1909 (Ozieblo). Because of her status as a well-known and respected author, Susan Glaspell was able to portray her feminist feelings through her writing so it would actually be seen and heard by the public.

Glaspell, using the trial that she covered during her stint as a journalist, was able to write the play through feminist lenses. This case, known as the Hossack case, was a very large case and the newspaper published more than two dozen articles about it from December 1900 to April 1901 (Bryan). This case involved a woman who allegedly killed her husband in cold blood. Because of the repression that was still going on for women at the time, Mrs. Hossack, the wife and alleged murderer, did not receive much, if any, support from the outside. The article "Goes to the Grand Jury" by Susan Glaspell states "Public sentiment is still very much against the prisoner, Mrs. Hossack" (Brady). While it was never fully developed in the testimony of a Mr. William Haines, it is known that "the public generally accepts the story to that effect as true and will sympathize with the county attorney in his efforts to convict the woman" (Bryan). Being a woman, Hossack did not have much of a chance in the way of getting a fair trial, so she decided not to appear for her preliminary hearing and went straight to the grand jury. Hossack did not have a fair trial in that she was not governed by a jury of her peers as the law states, but instead a jury of men who most likely wanted to convict her (Bryan). This was the same for the trial of the character, Mrs. Wright, in Glaspell's play *Trifles*.

Glaspell did not agree with the outcome of the trials of Mrs. Hossack and used her play to depict her dislike in the way it was handled, as well as depicting the two sides of the feminist movement through her two female characters. The two women described in the play are very opposite in nature and in physical appearance. While setting the scene of the play, the stage directions describe them as "The SHERIFF's wife first, she is a slight wiry

woman, a thin nervous face. MRS. HALE is larger and would ordinarily be called more comfortable looking" (Glaspell 1156). Glaspell is setting these women up in such a way so the reader is aware of the two differing physical appearances, which could in fact represent the two differing personalities of the feminist movement at the time. Mrs. Hale represents the people like Susan Glaspell who were very outspoken about the feminist movement and wanted to provoke change in the United States for women and fight for their rights. Mrs. Peters on the other hand, represents the quieter women in the United States who do not know how to find their voice yet and for the most part have identity only through their husbands. The fact that while Mrs. Hale is given a name and described as " comfortable looking", while Mrs. Peters is only identified as " the SHERIFF's wife" and as having a " nervous face" shows how little say Mrs. Peters has in her life and her home.

Throughout the play, the male characters treat the women as if they are stupid. They brush them off as silly and the things that they concern themselves with as stupid. At one point Mrs. Peters makes a comment about how Mrs. Wright will be upset if her preserves freeze and the jars broke. The men make light of this and the Sheriff comments " Well, can you beat the women! Held for murder and worryin' about her preserves" and instead of defending his wife," to which Mr. Hale responds with " Well, women are used to worrying over trifles" (1158). They do this again when Mrs. Hale comments on some quilting of Mrs. Wright's. She comments " It's a log cabin pattern. Pretty, isn't it? I wonder if she was goin' to quilt it or just knot it?" To this, the Sheriff steps in and makes fun of the women saying " They wonder if she is going to quilt it or just knot it" (1160) and the men laugh. This

continues throughout the whole play showing the reader the disregard that the men have for the women. Glaspell is showing the men as unsupportive of the women, using the men in the play as a metaphor for the men and husbands during the feminist movement who scoffed at the women and their wives who were trying to stand up for their rights. There is also a metaphor in the bird that the women find that belonged to Mrs. Wright. The women talk about how lonely Mrs. Wright was and that she must have gotten the bird to keep her company and to sing, but the bird is dead. This is a metaphor for Mrs. Wright who may have just discovered her voice in her marriage and Mr. Wright killed it, or put a stop to her standing up for her rights.

Ultimately, Glaspell gives the women the upper hand in the play by giving them the evidence that the men need for the trial to convict Mrs. Wright without question. The women take a stand in the final pages of the play by deciding to hide the evidence that they have found from the men. Glaspell turns the table and makes the men look stupid when they brush the women away, not giving them any credit for finding anything of use, when in fact they have found the motive for the crime. The County Attorney asks the women what they have taken to bring to Mrs. Wright in prison. When he sees what they have he responds with " Oh, I guess they're not very dangerous things the ladies have picked out. No, Mrs. Peters doesn't need supervising. For that matter, a sheriff's wife is married to the law" (1164) as if to suggest most other women so need supervising while brushing off the piece of evidence that Mrs. Peters has in her possession. Glaspell uses Mrs. Peters to hide the evidence at the end very deliberately as if to show the woman who

used to be meek and quiet as finally taking a stand for another woman in a small way. This is Glaspell's way of encouraging women to speak up and stand up for themselves and other women in a discreet way.

Glaspell's work incited many women to start their careers in writing, as well as other careers and helped to move the feminist movement in America along a little further. This play, along with other works of hers, inspired many women across the country and still inspire women today for the feminist movement that is still so prevalent. Her way of tying in feminist ideals and feelings into her work was very bold, making her one of the great female writers of her time.

Works Cited

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