

"trifles" by susan glaspell essay sample

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" Trifles" by Susan Glaspell is a play replete with symbolism part of this is in what is not said as much as it is in what is spoken. The play is about a farmer's murder. Mr. Wright was found dead with a rope knotted around his neck and the men believe his wife did it. When the play opens, she has already been arrested and taken away to jail and the farmhouse kitchen is abandoned. Nothing was put into order before the wife was taken away to jail. The sheriff enters first then the county attorney and Lewis Hale, a neighboring farmer. Mrs. Peters the sheriff's wife and Mrs. Hale the farmer's wife, stay close to the door. Without a word spoken, the audience can see the order in this society where men dominate the action. This image pattern of male dominance, opens scene one and sets a tone that the whole play follows. The theme of silence and voiceless is so strong that the third woman never appears on stage. The men dominate the action and speech while they are on stage, but they do not stay long. After quickly looking over the kitchen, they head off to the crime scene where they expect to find the evidence they need to convict the wife. They dismiss the trifles as " nothing important" " Nothing here but kitchen things." .

However, it is when the men go and search the crime scene for forensic evidence, that the women solve the crime by looking at the small, seemingly trivial details in the kitchen. They leave more unsaid than spoken but that does not mean it is not communicated soundlessly. It is clear they can do this because they relate to these small details of a bleak married life. The film of dust, smudges on towels and dirty pans all speak soundlessly to the two women about the third's containment where she had no visitors or children to free her from a callous husband. Mrs. Hale's comment that " Not

having children makes less work --- but it makes a quiet house.” carries the sense of voicelessness and quiet further on into the play.

Women move around and tidy things up as they do so, and that would have included dusting and setting out fresh towels. Mrs. Wright had not done that in a while. It was not something the men paid much attention to, but it spoke volumes to the women’s eyes. Small things like a loaf of bread on the counter instead of in the bread box, and one lone remaining jar of cherries add up to the women who do not need to say much to understand what they really mean about the woman who lived in that farmhouse kitchen. Much of what is communicated is in gestures and glances. The parenthetical stage directions make that clear in instructions like: MRS PETERS: (nervously), MRS HALE: I'll just finish up this end. (suddenly stopping and leaning forward) (MRS HALE starts to say something, looks at MRS PETERS, then goes on sewing).

They do talk about how the murder, and how needed a motive of “ something to show anger --- or sudden feeling” and one says, “ Well, I don’t see any signs of anger around here,” . This leaves the shared knowledge unspoken that the trifles the ladies are quietly cleaning up are evidence of omnipresent desperation. They wipe down the table, and look at Mrs. Wright’s quilt re-do and finish a section of that quilt that was started poorly. The emphasis subtly shifts when they discover a broken birdcage. Soon after, they find a pretty box with a dead canary whose throat had been wrung inside. Mrs. Wright’s innocence is no longer a part of the conversation. They know the broken birdcage and the dead canary are the evidence the men need to convict Mrs. Wright. The women bond together to hide the dead

canary that not only constitutes circumstantial evidence, it also symbolizes the wife herself. Their mutual understanding finally finds its way into words " She was kind of like a bird herself – real sweet and pretty, but kind of timid and – fluttery. How – she – did – change."

They share a final piece of unspoken irony shared when the Sheriff and the County Attorney discuss the quilt style. They found the farmer with a rope knotted around his neck. The quilt was not sewn, --- it was knotted..

Works Cited

Gaspell, Susan. " Trifles." 1916. One Act Plays. 29 10 2012 .