

Trifles: murder and mrs. hale

[Law](#), [Crime](#)



Susan Glaspell's one act play *Trifles* is a clever tale which highlights the way in which women were dismissed in the early twentieth century and perhaps in some ways still today. Glaspell uses the scene of a terrible crime to engage the audience and then deliver her social message. This play is mostly about the way in which women in her day were ignored. The play takes place in a farm house in the Midwest during the present day, around 1916. Mr. Henderson, a county attorney, and Mr.

Peters, a sheriff, have come to the farm to investigate the strangling murder of John Wright. One of John Wright's neighbors named Mr. Hale discovered the body and found Mrs. Wright sitting downstairs acting in an odd manner. He has come to assist them with his testimony. Two women accompany them, the sheriff's wife Mrs. Peters and the neighbor's wife, Mrs. Hale. As the play unfolds, the men remain baffled by the lack of any evidence pointing directly to Ms. Wright as the killer. The case will not be entirely resolved due to an apparent lack of evidence of any motive.

The two male investigators see women's values and motivations in a disrespectful light - as mere trifles - and because of this attitude they fundamentally misunderstand the crime they are investigating and turn the two women into enemies who protect Mrs. Wright by tampering with the evidence. The men fail to see the household disarray as evidence. When entering the home, the poor maintenance in the household is apparent to all four characters in this play. The County Attorney exclaims, " Dirty towels! Not much of a housekeeper, would you say ladies? " (1114). The women defend Mrs.

Wright. Mrs. Hale responds, " Those towels get dirty awful quick. Men's hands aren't always as clean as they might be" (1114). And after the men are out of earshot, Mrs. Hale is clearly identifying with Mrs. Wright when she complains: " I'd hate to have men coming into my kitchen, snooping around and criticizing" (1114). Although all four characters recognize that the house is not well kept, but only the women immediately understand that something was terribly wrong. The men go no further with their interpretation of what the women instantly recognize as signs of discord in the home.

A central piece of evidence in this play is a quilt that is being made by the suspect, Mrs. Wright, at the time of the murder. Upon inspecting Mrs. Wright's things, Mrs. Hale and Mrs. Peters come across an unfinished quilt. It is Mrs. Hale who notices that the last section of the quilt is different. She points out to Mrs. Peters that the stitching in most of the quilt is well-developed and carefully knitted. This is in sharp contrast to the most recent piece of quilt. This final section has misplaced stitches and the poor workmanship which would happen under a high degree of emotional distress. Mrs.

Hale realizes this only moments after the county attorney complains about a missing piece of evidence explaining: " 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" (1121). Mrs. Hale and Mrs. Peters realize that they are, in fact, looking at the exact evidence the county attorney had in mind. Mrs. Hale quietly undoes the stitching. Another critical piece of evidence is the knot stitching in the quilt.

Early in the play, the sheriff scoffs at the silliness of women discussing the type of stitching used to construct a quilt in the middle of an important murder scene, exclaiming sarcastically, " They wonder if she was going to quilt it or just knot it! " (1116). The point of view of the sheriff is clearly one in which he belittles female concerns over such a small detail when what he sees as a real concern, such as murder, is in question. The sheriff and county attorney ultimately fail to realize, or even consider, the critical nature of this evidence.

At the end of the play, the sheriff takes a moment to tease the women a bit more about this topic. His sarcastic question about the quilting style is answered by a wicked pun from the author. Mrs. Hale explains that Mrs. Wright, instead of quilting it, was going to " knot it" (1121). Mrs. Hale and Mrs. Peters understand that this reference to a knot is in fact a direct reference to the way in which Mrs. Wright murdered her husband, by tying a knot around his neck and strangling him to death. She tied a knot in the quilt the same way she tied a knot around her husband's neck.

The irony of this pun is that this very evidence, seen as laughable by the county attorney, is actually central to the murder of Mr. Wright. Although the knot is right in front of his face, he would not be able to see the meaning of it in a million years. The most obvious piece of evidence missed by the male investigators is the singing bird. As the women are collecting clothing and items to bring to Mrs. Wright at the jail, they come across a bird cage. Three questions are immediately evident. First, why is there a bird cage but no bird?

Second, what happened to the door of the bird cage? Of course, this leads to the third and final important question: if the bird is missing, where is it? Within a few minutes, the women discover the fate of the bird. They find the pet hidden away with great care. It is wrapped in silk inside Mrs. Wright's fanciest sewing box. Clearly this was a type of burial, a shrine to a beloved pet. The women make all of the central connections between the dead bird and the crime that the men are investigating. They immediately realize that the singing bird was Mrs.

Wright's only companion. Mrs. Peters notes that the hinge on one side of the door has been ripped out and not fixed as if someone broke into the cage to kill the animal. They see clearly that the bird's neck was broken and understand that this beloved pet was killed out of sheer meanness by the overbearing; soul-crushing Mr. Wright. Mrs. Peters volunteers a story about one of her own pets that was killed by boys that she knew when she was younger. They instantly understand that Mrs. Wright murdered her husband in retaliation for this brutal act.

They see that this was the motive behind this murder. The bird in this play is a reminder of the care-free, singing, younger Minnie Foster who has now become the lonely, miserable Mrs. Wright. Mrs. Hale's recollections link the bird to Mrs. Wright. She explains to Mrs. Peters that when she was single years ago, Minnie Foster was well known in the community for being pretty, well dressed, and singing like a bird in the choir. Mrs. Hale observes, recalling Minnie Foster's singing, that " he killed that too" (1120).

The central misunderstanding in this play is the male investigator's inability to grasp the meaning of the readily available evidence. As the title suggests,

the men see women's work and women's concerns as mere trifles. The men comment on the poor housekeeping in the home but do not seem to understand why or how it is related to the murder they are investigating. The men fail to see why the bird cage is crucial evidence. The men investigating the crime make no effort to examine the quilting done by Mrs. Wright. The women, on the other hand, see all of these things in stark relief.

They understand that the shabby condition of the home and the poor housekeeping criticized by the male investigators reflect the increasing alienation and despair of Mrs. Wright. The women instantly see the significance of the quilt. They recognize the incriminating nature of the emotional distress reflected in the shoddy last section of the quilt. They also find the crucial evidence of the case by inspecting the sewing box. The women find the murdered bird. When they do, they immediately see that the bird is the lynch pin of the case. The bird is the motive.

The bird explains, both in terms of meaning and in the reality of its broken neck, what actually happened to John Wright. He murdered the bird, so she murdered him. The blindness of the men to the nature of the crime and their condescension to Mrs. Wright emboldens the women at the scene to destroy evidence. Both Mrs. Hale and Mrs. Peters make it clear that they blame themselves for having been poor friends to Mrs. Wright. Perhaps Mrs. Hale puts this best when she says " I stayed away because it weren't cheerful—and that's why I ought to have come" (1118).

They even resolve to bring Mrs. Wright her bottle of preserves as a token of their concern and understanding. Subsequently, Mrs. Hale destroys the evidence of the poor stitching on the last quilt segment. She does this

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because she realizes that this is actually incriminating evidence because it reflects Mrs. Wright's emotional state. Following this, both Mrs. Hale and Mrs. Peters further tamper with the evidence by hiding the dead bird. When the men asked what happened to the bird, Mrs. Hale lies: " We think—the cat got it" (1119). Mrs. Peters could contradict Mrs.

Hale. By not doing so she is also agreeing to lie and assisting Mrs. Hale in the destruction of evidence. In the final scene, both women attempt to hide the body of the bird and Mrs. Hale succeeds. They realize that the men are blind to the real motivation and nature of this crime. They are unafraid to destroy evidence which they know the men are too self-absorbed to find on their own. The play *Trifles* is a play about the lack of perspective men have for women's issues. At every turn, evidence for this crime is available and plain to see.

The male investigators fail to see the evidence of the murder because of their disrespect of things that are important to women. In addition, by being so dismissive and callous, they turn the two women who actually understand the crime against them. In the end, they fail to see much of the evidence. The women hide the remaining evidence easily. The women truly understand the crime and are certainly not going to assist in the prosecution of a woman who they realize has been treated so poorly. Glaspell is telling us to beware seeing other people's work, hopes, and dreams as trifles.