

The power of her
peers: critical and
feminist perspectives
on glaspell's story



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In the short story "A Jury of Her Peers," Susan Glaspell presents to the reader the harsh reality that midwestern women in the 19th century faced. Through this short story Glaspell demonstrated the lack of political rights that women had and the constant stereotypical confines that women were held to. Most were seen as nothing more than a housewives, or women who stayed home and look after the children while their husband worked, were compliant with their husbands will, and were okay with just being seen as an empty a shell of beauty with no substance. With this considered, Carolyn Eastman still reports that "the rise of nineteenth-century domesticity and true womanhood remains one of the most powerful and vivid narratives in Americans women's history" (Eastman, 250). The short story tells the story of Minnie Wright, who is accused of murdering her husband. While Minnie awaits trial, the sheriff, his wife, one of Minnie's neighbors, his wife, and a county prosecutor inspect her house in order to find evidence to use against Minnie. While the men search, the women are collecting personal items to bring to Minnie. While looking through Minnie's items the women find evidence through her little trifles that conclude and could convict Minnie of murdering by her abusive husband. In the end they decide not to tell on Minnie out of respect for Minnie's suffering. It is too be assumed that the men and husbands never find the evidence that they were searching for but it is certain that, although belittled for "worrying over trifles"(Glaspell, 710), Susan Glaspell was able to portray the natural intellect, loyalty, and wit behind the commonly unappreciated female character. This portrayal is praised widely and Elaine Hedges truly applauds Glaspell "reflectors of crucial realities in the lives of 19th and early 20th century midwestern and western women."(Hedges, 3) Although just a short story, "A Jury of her <https://assignbuster.com/the-power-of-her-peers-critical-and-feminist-perspectives-on-glaspells-story/>

Peers” exposes the reality that women face on an everyday basis through strong female characters. This short story divulges the real treatment and depiction of how the female character is usually displayed. It manages to disclose how even though repressed and restricted to the sexist ideals society holds, women are intellectual, loyal, and empowered.

It is very common in works for the female character to be under minded, overlooked, or as Stephanie Haddad would report, for “ events and actions to happen to women, usually for the sake of teaching a male character a lesson or sparking an emotion within him”. Often female characters are depicted as those in need of assistance or as a liaison for the information a man needs to get for his final goal. A majority of female characters never carry the role of learning the lesson or solving a case, but rather, the female character is used as symbol for a man to achieve his goals. Throughout world and literary history, women have been the step-stool for men to gather information, but what goes unnoticed is the acknowledgment of these women, and their constant success. In “ A jury of her Peers” Mrs. Peters was able to take notice of the smallest detail and piece together evidence that establishes Minnie as a murderer. When Mrs. Peter explains to Mrs. Hale the reason why Minnie would usually not keep her jars out for the night, her husband laughs at her and, said “ well, you can’t beat the women! Held for murder, and worrying about her preserves” (Glaspell, 710). When in fact Minnie normally does not leave her preserves out because “ she’s worried that when it turned so cold at night...the fire would go out and her jars would bust”. (Glaspell, 710) Mrs. Peters was able to recognize that this act was out of the ordinary and was actually pointing out that something must have kept Minnie preoccupied, or

else she would have put her jar away, per usual. Glaspell uses relatively female oriented items to portray evidence needed for Minnie's conviction, to illustrate the memory capacity and attention to detail the female character usually can see and interpret. Glaspell did this to further reiterate the selective knowledge that a woman holds. By not using male-oriented or items that can be recognized by both genders, such as knives, guns, and sheds, Glaspell sets out to prove the importance of highlighting the female characters cunning intellect. Glaspell used the kitchen, a token assimilation for women, as a location for a majority of key details in the short story.

Specific items in a kitchen can generally be recognized by a female, and that is why it was chosen as one of the major symbols of the short story.

According to Kathleen Wilson, "The kitchen is described as being in disorder with unwashed pans under the sink, a dishtowel left on table, a loaf of bread outside the breadbox, and other disarray. This gives the impression of no attention having been paid to cleaning up either recently or usually" (Wilson 3). By giving specific attention to these items Glaspell's makes the point that a female character placement in the kitchen is not always for the purpose of cooking or cleaning and that the female character does not always need to be focused on her task in the kitchen, rather she can have substance and could be focused on a higher or more important duty. This is supported when Mrs. Peters and Mrs. Hale notice a bucket of sugar on a low shelf. Mrs. Hale thought to herself about "the flour in her kitchen at home-half sifted, half not sifted. She had been interrupted and had left things half done. What had interrupted Minnie Foster"(Glaspell, 711). Glaspell uses the kitchen as a symbol to display how through Mrs. Peter and Mrs. Hales knowledge on

housekeeping, they were able to solve a murder a case and do anything a
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man can, or in this short story, couldn't do. The female characters weren't in the kitchen to cook, clean, or cater, they were there to problem solve and investigate, something the male characters of the short story didn't think to do.

Glaspell also used Mrs. Peters husband to present how men in novel often discredited the a females characters information with the belief that because it is from a woman, it is not vital to their task. With this technique, Glaspell allowed the reader to truly understand Mrs. Peters importance, intelligence, how crucial she was in the investigation. This element, as Elaine Hedges would assert, " challenge the prevailing images and stereotypes of women as " fuzzy minded" and concerned only with " trifles," and for its celebration of female sorority, of the power of sisterhood.". If Mrs. Peters husband took what she had to say seriously, perhaps him along with the other men of the novel, would have gained the evidence they needed to convict Minnie. It was the men engaging and promoting the stereotype of women not having anything of substance to say, that lead to their failure in the case. Glaspell's satirical tone emphasizes this claim and much like the novel " A Madwomen in the Attic" uses irony to demonstrate how intelligence isn't often correlated with females, despite their constant strife. " The Madwoman in the Attic" presents an analysis that most females are criticized for being intelligent. It goes on to sarcastically report that society would rather prefer only cherubic and angelic women that only have " a life without external event's... a life whose story cannot be told as there is no story." (Gubar & Gilbert, 22) Gilbert and Gubar illustrate the realistic stereotype of females as void and empty despite the knowledge they may have in their lives or " stories"(Gubar &

Gilbert, 22). "A Jury of Her Peers" seeks to reject the lens Gilbert and Gubar portray and illustrate the female character as one who has substances.

Glaspell's short story also praises and demonstrates the devotion and bond that women have to one another. Mrs. Peters and Mrs. Hale worked together to conclude everything that led up to the murder of Mr. Hale. Phyllis Mael supports this in noting that "it is unlikely that had either woman been alone, she would have had sufficient understanding or courage to make the vital decision, but as the trifles reveal the arduousness of Minnie's life (and by implication of their own), a web of sisterhood is woven which connects lives of all three" (Mael, 281). This expresses how the women, especially Mrs. Peters who is "married to the law" (Glaspell, 713) were dedicated to protecting their friend and fellow female. In Stephanie Haddad's article she criticizes male authors for allowing women to be "objectified, used, abused, and easily discarded." and in regards to multiple novels that include death, "None of the women survive the novel, save another female or help another female, and if they live it is to serve a very specific function and impact a man's life." (Haddad, 4). Both Mrs. Peters and Mrs. Hale agreed they would tamper with the evidence to keep Minnie out of prison. With this Glaspell presented a short story with friendship as its root context. If Mrs. Hale wasn't friends with the Mrs. Peter and Minnie she would have never gone to the house with her husband. In that case her along with Mrs. Peters wouldn't have searched for motive, unlike their husbands that only searched for proof, and this leads the reader to wonder, would the end of the novel have the sense of ease and "happy ending" knowing that the women did tamper with the evidence and that Minnie may be going to prison after living 20

years of isolation and abuse. Off of the strength of friendship these women risked being arrested and having their reputations tarnished. Furthermore, these women have not seen Minnie in a long time, but still considered her a close friend to break the law for her, and even though she killed a man, lie for her. This demonstrates how the female character either doesn't have a large enough role to make such a decision, or pick in favor of a man. Glaspell set out to prove that much like in reality, the female character is trustworthy, and devoted to the uplifting of their own gender.

Although, it could be said that Minnie's abusive circumstances increased the reader admiration for Mrs. Hale and Mrs. Peters decision on their moral dilemma, but by Glaspell including Mrs. Peter and Mrs. Hale journey to Minnie conviction, it allows the reader to gain an appreciation for the females and their intellect. Furthermore, the decry of the women by their husband makes their discovery even more interesting. With every detection the women made the story of Minnie and the hold she was in with her husband is revealed. Mrs. Peter and Mrs. Hale proved the misogynistic view and symbolic cage that a stereotype has been create for women. All the women husbands acted like Gubar & Gilbert impractical notion that " man must be pleased; but him to please/is woman's pleasure". (Gubar & Gilbert, 23) With keen eyes and skill Mrs. Peter and Mrs. Hale were able see that Mr. Foster forced Minnie into isolation, with the belief that she would be fine with it because he enjoyed the quiet, believed she would be content staying at home cooking and cleaning all day, and finally be pleased with everything because he was pleased. With this information the reader see's the drive behind Minnie's rage and loses and sympathy that may have been created

for Mr. Foster. Glaspell short story sets out to uplift the female gender and to allow the reader to view some of the struggles that female face. This goal can't be achieved if the reader has societal formulated bias, contracted from stereotypes, towards the murdered male character.

Hedges inserts the claim that “ Glaspell uses a technical term from the world of women's work in a way that provides a final triumphant vindication of her method throughout the story. If, like Mrs. Hale and Mrs. Peters, the reader can by now engage in those acts of perception whereby one sees into things, [and] through a thing to something else,” (Hedges, 10) The humble task of Mrs. Peter and Mrs. Hale knotting the quilt becomes resonant with this claim. Minnie has knotted a rope around her husband's neck and is finally freed from his cage, and by Mrs. Hale and Mrs. Peters not sharing they're newly discovered information with their husbands have tied a knot that solidifies the women as one empower group of women. All three women are saying no to male authority, and in so doing they have knotted or bonded themselves together. With this short story Glaspell was able to show the reader what women as a gender are impacted by day by day, and as said earlier within the essay, prove how even though repressed women are intellectual, loyal, and empowered

With this in mind Jo Freeman's novel, *Women; A Feminist Perspective* raise the point that “ there is no reason to assume that the family goals that young women have been taught to value are any less important than the achievement goals so stressed for young men. If members of either gender group chose to compromise work, especially women, the economic cost of such choice would be substantial.” (Qtted. in Eccles 1987) This meaning that <https://assignbuster.com/the-power-of-her-peers-critical-and-feminist-perspectives-on-glaspells-story/>

although women should not be confined to these stereotype women also can be elevated in the fact that even in the roles women are placed in women excel and have a more important task then give credit for. Glaspell pays especially attention to the role Minnie had in her house, and all that went into keeping up with her housewife lifestyle. When the women are describing unusually unkept kitchen, Glaspell is exhibiting to the reader all that Minnie must do while her husband is away. First Mrs. Hale described Minnie's home as a " never a cheerful place" hinting that as the women of her house it was her task to bring cheer through her homemaking. Furthermore the wives discuss the various things that should have been corrected such as broken stove, a rocking chair of " a dingy red, with wooden rungs up the back" (Glaspell, 712), a dirty towel in the kitchen, a that chair sagged to one side, and even, when the women collect some of Minnie's clothes to take to her in prison, the sight of " a shabby black skirt"(Glaspell, 712) that reminded Mrs. Hale of the " pretty clothes"(Glaspell, 712) that Minnie wore as a young girl before her marriage. This demonstrates some the smallest details that as a housewife, a woman had to take care. Usually it was done in isolation as well. Elaine Hedges notes that " Glaspell's story reflects a larger truth about the lives of rural women. Their isolation induced madness in many. An article in 1882 noted that farmer's wives comprised the largest percentage of those in lunatic asylums" (Hedges, 4) Minnie lived in this detached enclosure for 20 years, and seeing that Mrs. Hale and Mrs. Peter can detect all that was incorrect in Minnie's home, proves that the women complete these complex task as well, while continuing to strive. Even though the workload seems large and constant, the female characters persevered and still continued accomplish more then the male characters.

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Inequality persists due to the acceptance of separate gender roles more than any other factor. Although proven women still are strong, intelligent and, devoted to their gender because society doesn't seek out and command women for their achievements " Women's careers will still be considered secondary, and wives still bear the disproportionate responsibility for the home, children, and relationship (Freeman, 152). Society continues to endorse separate gender roles and short stories like Glaspell's " A Jury of her Peers" seeks to uplift women even through the social confines they face daily.

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