

Chris Duffy: The Feminist Evidence in Susan Glaspell's *Trifles*

Duffy 1

Chris Duffy

Professor Barrina-Barrou

English 109-2

May 6, 2009

The Feminist Evidence in Susan Glaspell's *Trifles*

Despite its early publication date, Susan Glaspell's *Trifles* (1916) can be regarded as a work of feminist literature. The play depicts the life of a woman who has been suppressed, oppressed, and subjugated by a patronizing, patriarchal husband. Mrs. Wright is eventually driven to kill her "hard" (Glaspell 1048) husband who has stifled every last twitch of her identity. *Trifles* dramatizes the hypocrisy and ingrained discrimination of male-dominated society while simultaneously speaking to the dangers for women who succumb to such hierarchies. Because Mrs. Wright follows the role mapped by her husband and is directed by society's patriarchal expectations, her identity is lost somewhere along the way. However, Mrs. Hale and Mrs. Peters quietly insist on preserving their own identities by protecting Mrs. Wright from the men who seek to convict her of murder.

Mrs. Wright is described as someone who used to have a flair for life. Her neighbor, Mrs. Hale, comments that the last time Mrs. Wright appeared happy and vivacious was before she was married or, more important, when

General thesis statement

More specific thesis offering analysis, with supporting evidence

Analysis of Mrs. Wright through perspectives of female characters

Source: Michael Meyer (Bedford/St. Martin's 2009)

she was Minnie Foster and not Mrs. Wright. Mrs. Hale laments, "I heard she used to wear pretty clothes and be lively, when she was Minnie Foster, one of the town girls singing in the choir" (1052). But after thirty years of marriage, Mrs. Wright is now worried about her canned preserves freezing and being without an apron while she is in jail. This subservient image was so accepted in society that Mrs. Peters, the sheriff's wife, speculates that Mrs. Wright must want her apron in order to "feel more natural" (1052). Any other roles would be considered uncharacteristic.

This wifely role is predicated on the supposition that women have no ability to make complicated decisions, to think critically, or to rely on themselves. As the title suggests, the men in this story think of homemaking as much less important than a husband's breadwinning role. Mr. Hale remarks, "Well, women are used to worrying over trifles" (1051), and Sheriff Peters assumes the insignificance of "kitchen things" (1050). Hence, women are forced into a domestic, secondary role, like it or not, and are not even respected for that. Mr. Hale, Sheriff Peters, and the county attorney all dismiss the dialogue between Mrs. Peters and Mrs. Hale as feminine chitchat. Further, the county attorney allows the women to leave the Wrights' house unsupervised because he sees Mrs. Peters as merely an extension of her husband.

Even so, the domestic system the men have set up for their wives and their disregard for them after the rules and boundaries have been laid down prove to be the men's downfall. The evidence that Mrs. Wright killed her husband is woven into Mrs. Hale's and Mrs. Peters's conversations about Mrs. Wright's sewing and her pet bird. The knots in her quilt match those in the rope used to strangle Mr. Wright, and the bird, the last symbol of Mrs. Wright's vitality to be taken by her husband, is found dead. Unable to play the role of subservient wife anymore, Mrs. Wright is foreign to herself and therefore lives a lie. As Mrs. Hale proclaims, "Why, it looks as if she didn't know what she was about!" (1053).

Mrs. Hale, however, does ultimately understand what Mrs. Wright is about. She comprehends the desperation, loneliness, and pain that Mrs. Wright experienced, and she instinctively knows that the roles Mrs. Wright played—even that of murderer—are scripted by the male-dominated circum-

Analysis of
role of women
through
perspectives
of male
characters

Discussion of
Mrs. Hale's
identification
with Mrs.
Wright

stances of her life. As Mrs. Hale shrewdly and covertly observes in the context of a discussion about housecleaning with the county attorney: “Men’s hands aren’t always as clean as they might be” (1051). In fact, even Mrs. Hale feels some guilt for not having made an effort to visit Mrs. Wright over the years to help relieve the monotony of Mrs. Wright’s life with her husband:

I might have known she needed help! I know how things can be—for women. I tell you, it’s queer, Mrs. Peters. We live close together and we live far apart. We all go through the same things—it’s all just a different kind of the same thing. (1056)

Mrs. Hale cannot help identifying with her neighbor.

In contrast, Mrs. Peters is initially reluctant to support Mrs. Wright. Not only is she married to the sheriff, but, as the county attorney puts it, “a sheriff’s wife is married to the law” (1056) as well. She reminds Mrs. Hale that “the law has got to punish crime” (1056), even if it means revealing the existence of the dead bird and exposing the motive that could convict Mrs. Wright of murdering her husband. But finally Mrs. Peters also becomes complicit in keeping information from her husband and other men. She too—owing to the loss of her first child—understands what loss means and what Mrs. Hale means when she says that women “all go through the same things” (1056).

The women in *Trifles* cannot, as the play reveals, be trifled with. Although Glaspell wrote the play over ninety years ago, it continues to be relevant to contemporary relationships between men and women. Its essentially feminist perspective provides a convincing case for the necessity of women to move beyond destructive stereotypes and oppressive assumptions in order to be true to their own significant—not trifling—experiences.

Discussion of Mrs. Peters’s identification with Mrs. Wright

Conclusion summarizing analysis

Work Cited

Glaspell, Susan. “Trifles.” *The Compact Bedford Introduction to Literature*. Ed. Michael Meyer. 8th ed. Boston: Bedford/St. Martin’s, 2009. 1048–57. Print.