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English 305

October 28th, 2016

Trifles and Women's Stereotypes

In the play *Trifles*, Susan Glaspell studies the stereotypes of early twentieth century women's roles in society and the belief that women were too delicate to commit murder.

Women have always been placed in a box with their roles in society and expectations crammed inside. Mimicking a case she reported on from her journalism days, Glaspell reviews the women's plight in public scrutiny. Through the wives of the law officials present in the house where the murder takes place, Glaspell shows the issues that trail after women who rebel from the values that are thrust upon them from society. Glaspell's *Trifles* speaks about the stereotypes of women in a patriarchal society and debunking them or twisting them to show a light on the feminine view of women, murder, and straining against their societal image.

Glaspell fell onto the idea of *Trifles* through her journalism days of reporting on a similar case. She rallied people through her reporting to look at the other side of the accused woman's predicament and reason for the murder. As Linda Ben-Zvi comments on Glaspell's journalism of the murder, "Her paper seems to have charged Glaspell with two tasks: rousing the readership and insuring that the story stay on the first page. She accomplishes both" (Ben-Zvi 145). The Hossack case began December 2nd, 1900 with the murder of John Hossack by an axe in his sleep (Ben-Zvi 144). Hossack's wife claimed to have been sleeping next to him when the attack happened and was awoken after the fact. Police believed it was a burglar until the axe showed up in the family corn crib and marital problems were voiced by neighbors. After this discovery,

Mrs. Hossack was taken into custody. Glaspell followed the trials and became enthralled in the case. Originally, Glaspell reported what the public appeared to think: that Mrs. Hossack was crazy and an awful woman (Ben-Zvi 146). After Glaspell managed to gain entry into Mrs. Hossack's kitchen, however, her sentiment toward the case changed in favor of the wife. Using words such as "powerful" and "cold" in the beginning, she switched to words that connoted frailty, age, and maternal ideals toward the accused (Ben-Zvi 146). She was successful in turning the public opinion toward Mrs. Hossack until it was revealed that Mrs. Hossack had a child before she was married. Once this "dark secret" was revealed, the public saw Mrs. Hossack as a distrustful woman and found her guilty of murder (Ben-Zvi 151). Concluding her report of the trial, Glaspell soon resigned from journalism and turned to writing fiction. Though people were not fully convinced of a woman's ability to commit murder, they knew she did not uphold what society views as a proper woman and wanted to remove her from view. Having a child prior to marriage was scandalous and admitting to neighbors that marital problems existed all counted against the aging Mrs. Hossack. Even though it was apparent that Mr. Hossack abused his wife, the people appeared desensitized to her plight. Glaspell uses her days of reporting the case as inspiration to write *Trifles* and search for what Gerhard Bach refers to as her "life meaning:"

Life's meaning involves the individual's need to challenge life-destroying forces and on constructive traditional values in order to (re-) establish a mental stability and spiritual balance conducive to creative self-fulfillment and responsible social behavior... The antidote to this poison is rejection of rigid morals (Bach 38).

Glaspell is rejecting the idea of women's stereotypes in society. Women's capability to murder is brought into question as Glaspell searches for a sense of cohesiveness in what society believes and what women are capable of when pushed. A husband is murdered, men are looking into the murder while women stay in the background, and everyone wonders about the wife's true guilt or innocence. The idea of a women easily committing a horrendous crime could not be reached in the eye of society.

Society in the early twentieth century had a difficult time reconciling the idea of women committing horrendous crimes with the stereotype of women being docile, domestic creatures. In the book *The Madwoman in the Attic*, Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar illustrate the point of women being seen as angels when they uphold proper etiquette or demons when they rebel, mainly either as descendants of the Virgin Mary or of the witch-like crone of Lilith (Gilbert and Gubar 20, 30). According to conduct books, women were expected learn "submissiveness, modesty, self-lessness" to become what they believed to be angelic (Gilbert and Gubar 23). To rise to an angelic status, women had to be valiant housekeepers and self-less to their husband's and children's needs. Women are called the "weaker" sex and are held to a different standard than men. As Mr. Hale puts it in *Trifles*, "Women are used to worrying over trifles" (Glaspell 912). His comments immediately resort women to a lower standard than men. Even as the court attorney moved through the house, he would point out what he saw as a woman's job, stating, "Not much of a housekeeper, would you say, ladies?" to the accompanying women at the discovery of dirty towels and pans (Glaspell 912). From these supposed "trifles," Minnie Foster, the victim's wife, appears to be failing in her designated societal job and falling to lowly image. Judith Stephens reminds people of the division between men's and women's purposes in society in her gender analysis:

Nineteenth-century middle-class ideology constructed an image of Woman as a morally superior being especially suited for protecting her (female) domestic sphere from the corruption of society or the (male) work place. Accepting this conventional belief... relegated women and men to separate spheres... (Stephens 46).

The place for women is in the home and men can venture out anywhere else. Another apparent job of a woman is to sustain a certain appearance. Despite her arrest, Minnie asks Mrs. Hale to bring her apron and shawl to jail. Such a request seems like another trivial woman desire, but as Mrs. Peters suggests, having such items will “make her feel more natural” (Glaspell 914). With this garments, Minnie will look and possibly feel more akin to what society expects of a woman. When women break the conventions of being docile, members of society are shaken:

Women who kill evoke fear because they challenge societal constructs of femininity-passivity, restraint, and nurture; thus the rush to isolate and label the female offender, to cauterize the act. Her behavior must be aberrant, or crazed, if it is to be explicable. And explicable it must be; her crime cannot be seen as societally-driven if the cultural stereotypes are to remain unchallenged (Ben-Zvi 141).

As with the original Hossack case, women who kill must be crazy because no women would have a sufficient motive to kill. Male authors, which Gilbert and Gubar analyze, would take such crazy women and relate them to Lilith, the mother demon. Women who rebel from society are cunning serpents bent on the destruction because of the “degeneration, disease, and death”

that is related to the female sexuality (Gilbert and Gubar 31). Running the risk of becoming known as a sort of monster, women are lead to fear their own sexuality and femininity.

Remaining a constant informer on the case, Glaspell revealed in her columns, "Friends of Mrs. Hossack are beginning to suggest that she is insane, and that she has been in this condition for a year and a half, under the constant surveillance of members of the family, and the members of the Hossack family were not on pleasant relations with each other" (Ben-Zvi 145). She demonstrated the belief of women's insanity in reporting what people believed of Mrs. Hossack, despite her apparent abuse. In *Trifles*, it is evident that some form of abuse is also present in Minnie's home. When Mrs. Hale comments on why she never stopped over, she admits, "I stayed away because it weren't cheerful... I never liked this place. Maybe it's because it's down in a hollow and you don't see the road. I dunno what it is, but it's a lonesome place and always was" (Glaspell 916). Delving deeper, Mrs. Hale says, "She used to sing. He killed that too" (Glaspell 918). From these admittances, Mr. Wright treats Minnie with no respect and isolates her from others and from what she loves. Living in that house alone with him suffocates Minnie with melancholy. Because Minnie is a woman, however, this will not be taken into account by the men in a forgiving light. As a woman in that society, she should not have acted on such aggressions and instead kept it caged inside.

Glaspell demonstrates how women are defined not as an individual but by their marital status through her use of dialogue instructions in the screenplay. In the dialogue tags, the two women are referred to only as "Mrs." Hale or "Mrs." Peters. Not once is their maiden name or first name mentioned. When they refer to Mr. Wright's wife, however, instead of calling her "Mrs. Wright," they switch to calling her Minnie Foster, her maiden name. Referring to Minnie by her maiden name returns some semblance of human rights and power to her after the men

look to deface her in their search of the premises. Reminiscing on the subject, Mrs. Hale says, “I heard she used to wear pretty clothes and be lively, when she was Minnie Foster, one of the town girls in the choir” (Glaspell 914). Through this comment, Mrs. Hale also implies that women are two different people, one before and another after marriage. As Glaspell reported in favor of Mrs. Hossack, the woman from the original crime, she referred to how she was “a wife attentive to her husband’s needs” to sway the people in her favor (Ben-Zvi 148). By supplying this detail, there was a greater chance of people sympathizing with Mrs. Hossack. As Gilbert and Gubar accentuate in their book, “a Victorian angel-woman should become her husband’s holy refuge from the blood and sweat that inevitably accompanies a life of significant action” (Gilbert and Gubar 24). Also, they establish how people believed that “woman exist only to be acted on by men as literary and sensual objects” (Gilbert and Gubar 8). In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries’ society, women were seen as a part of a conjoined whole of a man and unable to function in society when they were without. The men in the play demonstrate this as the county attorney decides he will not investigate what Mrs. Peters plans on bringing to Minnie: “No. Mrs. Peters doesn’t need supervising. For that matter a sheriff’s wife is married to the law” (Glaspell 920). Because of her marriage to the sheriff, the men believe that Mrs. Peters will behave according to who she married. A wife in that time was believed to never think against what her husband believes. Mrs. Peters shows the flaw in this way of thinking as she helps hide the evidence and acts unaware of what is happening.

The setting of the play in the kitchen demonstrates the domestic cage women are put in and the limits that people endure before they snap. Dirty towels, broken preserves, and shaky needlework are all Minnie’s domain to watch over in the house. After further investigation of Minnie’s home, they discover a dead, strangled bird, a constant symbol of women in the

Victorian age. Playing with the idea of women being weak, domesticated creatures, a vast majority of literature displays this metaphor. Minnie is even referred to as a bird by Mrs. Hale: “She— come to think of it, she was kind of like a bird herself— real sweet and pretty, but kind of timid and— fluttery” (Glaspell 917). Mr. Wright’s strangling of Minnie’s canary represents the abuse Minnie must have endured and depicts the possible motive that lead Minnie to kill. When Mrs. Hale and Mrs. Peters begin to piece together the lonely clues that are left behind, Mrs. Hale speculates a motive: “If there’d been years of nothing, then a bird to sing to you, it would be awful— still, after the bird was still” (Glaspell 919). Without children and visitors, all Minnie enjoys is the bird and singing, both of which Mr. Wright extinguished. Losing these joys, something in Minnie is pushed to the point she breaks and strangles her husband like the way he strangled her bird, her only joy. Mrs. Peters agrees that there is a point in which people can be pushed to aggressive action as she reminisces on an incident from her youth: “When I was a girl— my kitten— there was a boy who took a hatchet, and before my eyes— and before I could get there... If they hadn’t held me back I would have... hurt him” (Glaspell 918). Using this memory, this acts not only as a motive but as a metaphor for “female’s helplessness in front of male brutality” (Ben-Zvi 156). The women realize that there is a moment in which people will act on buried aggressions to avenge or protect that which they love. Sympathizing with Minnie, the women begin to perceive the murder as less prominent. As their sympathy and understanding grows, the less the urge to show the men the evidence of the strangled bird.

In the end when the women decide to hide the evidence, they show their resistance to the system while leaving the belief of the frailty of women intact. When the men investigate, they miss key evidence because they cannot look at the women’s domain in a knowing light. They only know what society has lead them to believe: “The investigation and subsequent trial offer...

the process by which juridical attitudes toward, and prosecution of, women are shaped by societal concepts of female behavior, the same concepts that may have motivated the act of murder (Ben-Zvi 144).” Through their societal views, they are blind to the motives that can lead a woman to break society expectations and murder her husband. For the women present, they notice more. Mrs. Hale states, “I might have known she needed help! I know how things can be— for women... 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” (Glaspell 919). Women are connected in their constant battle with men and their beliefs that construct society. Each woman knows the struggle whether subconsciously or consciously. Despite their knowledge of what occurs, the women also see the judgmental views of men. Supporting the men’s view, Mrs. Hale says, “My it’s a good thing the men couldn’t hear us. Wouldn’t they just laugh! Getting all stirred up over a little thing like a— dead canary” (Glaspell 919). They know that the bird is key to what happened at the farm house, yet they still understand how the men would see it as another trivial detail. Because of their ability to notice the trivial details, the women have power over the men even if they do not point out their discovery:

By finding and concealing the incriminating evidence, the women win their own individual victory, but the system continues intact. It is as if Mrs. Hale and Mrs. Peters are playing out the standard "What Every Woman Knows" role, encouraging a smug complacency in their moral superiority, knowing they secretly have the "real power" while "permitting" the men to remain and function in socially acknowledged positions of power (Stephens 53).

Remaining silent on the evidence they find, the women protect both Minnie and the stereotype of women being docile creatures, inherently manipulating the men. By deceiving the men, the women illustrate Gilbert and Gubar's analysis of women having a "monster" within themselves while appearing to be angelic (Gilbert and Gubar 29). Through their deception, they break their designated angel status. Not only do Mrs. Peters and Mrs. Hale break from society but Minnie also "breaks out of that fateful pattern of meaningless and oppressive existence [of femininity] gaining at least an inner freedom..." (Bach 40). Minnie halts the abuse in her house before it can put an end to her completely. As the men come down from their investigation of the attic, the county attorney asks the women what Minnie was planning on sewing, believing that the shaky needlework was all that they found and were interested in. Mrs. Hale replies, "We call it—knot it, Mr. Henderson" (Glaspell 920). In answer to him, the women play along with what he expects and supply an answer he would approve, throwing him off what they really found. With the hidden strength the women gain, the murder of Mr. Wright empowers them.

In *Trifles*, women are empowered to break their stereotypes in underlying ways in which the patriarchy is oblivious. Mrs. Hale and Mrs. Peters gain power in the end when they successfully hide the strangled bird that would be the evidence to put Minnie away. The men remain naïve to the discovery as they put off what the women find and do as trivial due to their sexuality. With the men stuck in this perception, the women are able to protect Minnie and keep their own sense of societal expectations intact.

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