

Justice in Glaspell's "Trifles"

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Feminism, Justice, and the Gendered World of Trifles

In the early twentieth century, the movement of feminism introduced the issues of women's suffrage and equal employment opportunities as that of men into many conversations and pep-talk in the social circle for the very first time. This feminist movement was primarily focused on the practical achievements towards the legal fight for women's equal rights as activists campaigned for women's rights and suffrage through protests in artistic, political, and literary spheres. While a strong feminist, Glaspell was keenly interested in voicing the inequalities that were prevalent at that time, which she addressed in "Trifles" while inferring throughout the play that unquestioned dominance of "powerful men" while making justice makes them lazy, stupid, and unintelligent. Drawing on that, Glaspell's "Trifles" symbolically represents the demeaning view the men have for women by dramatizing the theme of justice in the hypocritical and discriminated male-dominated society.

Trifle, the title of the play, symbolizes something that is small and of little value as the whole play revolves around women being in the kitchen and men scrambling throughout the house looking for substantial evidence. As the story unfolds, male characters are portrayed as intellectually superior to their female counterparts, who are viewed as foolish, childish, stupid, and unintelligent as they are only concerned with the kitchen and other domestic duties. But, as a matter of fact, the women who are concerned with their kitchens and worry about their trifles discover the entire mystery behind the murder while remaining in the kitchen, whereas men cannot get a single clue or hint of a motive for the murder. Glaspell, through the female characters and the provocative character of Mrs Wright, makes a feminist leap while characterizing female characters, their behaviours, and their own way of searching for hints in order to let justice prevail.

Susan Glaspell's "Trifles" leaves the readers pondering as two female characters seem to throw over the substantial cause of justice by hiding and manipulating the piece of evidence that would have led to the establishment of the motive behind the murder. The two female characters stand subservient to the ethos of the society acquitting Mrs Wright by facilitating her space which was denied to the females by the male-dominated society in which they live. However, the play is contrived in the time when the early feminist movement was in the hype, but still, women happen to be utterly disempowered and marginalized as they are identified in relation to their husbands throughout the play. For instance, the women in "Trifles" are identified as Mrs Peters, Mrs Wright, and Mrs Hale in relation to their husbands but not with their own first names.

Male Authority and the Marginalization of Women's Knowledge

This is indicative of the fact that the marginalization between men and women was so prominent at that time that if the men approached the case of Mrs Wright, they would have certainly raised their voices to convict Mrs Wright. On the other hand, two female characters in the "Trifles" approach Mrs Wright and her case with the feminine perspective and present her character as a person who is not only very human and soft "She used to wear pretty clothes and be lively when she was Minnie Foster" (Glaspell) but an extreme provocative character that forced her to retaliate against the domination of Mr Wright, her husband, committing his murder. Hence, the women portrayed by Glaspell in the "Trifles" approach Mrs Wright and the crime from a feminine perspective imbued with sympathy and empathy, as per which justice in the play has been aptly served at the end.

While analysing the play, it is crucial to critically examine how male and female characters perceive justice differently based on gender bias and how this perception shapes their action and behaviour within their narrative. The male characters, represented by the county attorney, George Henderson, and the sheriff, Henry Peters, approach the murder case with an objective and logical mindset prioritizing the search for concrete evidence. While doing so, they disregard what they perceive as trivial matters dismissing everything that they deem unimportant and of no value, such as sewing materials and kitchen that a woman is always preoccupied with. However, they try to adhere to the traditional notions of justice while searching the clues with logic and concrete evidence.

Contrary to male characters' way of searching the evidence, female characters take a more empathetic approach to the case. Women representing female roles, Mrs Hale and Mrs Peters, take an understanding approach to the investigative matter as they are able to piece together the puzzle of the murder mystery. Female characters, as compared to their male counterparts while managing their trivial matters, observe and interpret the hints and clues left behind in Mrs Wright's kitchen. For instance, Mrs Peters and Mrs Hale immediately understand the symbolism behind the dead canary with its neck wrung in the birdcage (Glaspell). Later, when George Henderson, the county attorney of the case, questions Mrs Peters and Mrs Hale about Mrs Wright's demeanor upon hearing of Wright's murder, he dismisses their observations and deems them as insignificant to the investigation. These clues have significant meanings for them as women, which men in the play cannot fathom. Hence, the significant difference in the sense of justice between men and women is the female characters' empathy and understanding towards Mrs Wright.

Gender Assumptions, Evidence, and the Discovery of Truth

Furthermore, Susan Glaspell presents gender-based assumptions that hinder the characters, both

women and men in particular, from noticing important hints and clues while searching for evidence. These assumptions are actually stemmed from traditional expectations of society regarding gender roles and their specific behaviours, as the female characters are portrayed as conforming to the feminine stereotype of solidarity that is imbued with empathy and passivity. Contrary to female characters, the male characters are depicted as adhering to the masculine stereotype of independence and logical thinking. While females adhere to their roles in kitchens, men search for evidence, but the dichotomy between the genders creates a significant divide in the perception of male characters. This dichotomy prevents men from recognizing the significance of seemingly small and trivial details that would subsequently reveal important hints and motives behind the murder.

Moreover, the females portrayed in the play through Glaspell's lens of feminism are preoccupied with domestic tasks and duties, which leads to the events in which male characters in the play dismiss women's input, observations, and perspectives as inconsequential. The gender bias against women perpetuates the notion in the minds of male characters that women are incapable of participating actively in any investigation, so they cannot contribute valuable insights that can help solve the murder mystery. This dismissal and the division of perception in male characters lead to male characters underestimating the intelligence of women. This underestimation ultimately blinds the men to significant hints that can possibly and potentially lead to substantial evidence, and male characters could solve the murder case.

In conclusion, [Susan Glaspell](#) crafts the theme of justice in her play "Trifles" by conveying how the women in the story render justice to another woman Minnie Foster Wright while giving importance to trivial details and focusing primarily on understanding and empathy for committing the crime. For, as the male characters mock the female characters throughout the play, in the end, it is the women who solve the murder mystery of a husband killed by his own wife. The craftsmanship of Glaspell lies in Mrs Peters and Mrs Hale evaluating the case from a feminine vantage point in a male-dominant society in which justice is served rightly by the hands of the women.

Works Cited

Glaspell, Susan. Trifles. Walter H. Baker, 1916.