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SOFA Project

*The Pride Begets the Fall*

“Well, women are used to worrying over trifles,” says the character of Mr. Hale in Susan Glaspell’s play, “Trifles.” While demeaning women and their concerns is criticized as sexist in the twenty-first century, mere decades ago people accepted it as common and even a given. Since the male-dominated society considered women’s tasks less important than men’s, men subsequently treated women with a lack of consideration. In the 20th century drama “Trifles,” Glaspell challenges the suppression in effect during her lifetime, basing the play on a series of news stories she wrote about the real-life court case of a woman prosecuted for murdering her husband. In “Trifles,” Glaspell uses symbolism to show how sexism causes a lack of empathy and obscures men’s understanding of women’s motivations, ultimately causing men’s failures.

From the first scene to the shocking discovery to the final line, Glaspell uses symbolism to reason her case about the detrimental effects of men’s stereotypes of women. The initially timid female characters, Mrs. Hale and Mrs. Peters “...come in slowly, and stand close together near the door,” clearly displaying a reluctance to enter a widow’s empty home. However, as Mr. Hale, the sheriff and the county attorney “go at once to the stove,” they discuss what happened the previous day. When Mr. Hale had first knocked on the door to request Mr. Wright’s help, he tentatively entered when he thought he heard “come in”; now that Mr. Wright is gone, Hale and his male companions have no qualms about entering the house that now belongs solely to Mrs. Wright. The different movements of the characters and resulting space symbolizes the difference

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Technically w/ MLA, should not be italicized (I think)

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**Comment [2]:** johnr:  
probably not necessary...more or less "fluff"

in attitudes between the men, who barge into an empty house they now know belongs to a woman, and the women, who hesitate to infringe upon another woman's privacy. Glaspell continues to use space between the male and female characters throughout the play as a symbol of men's ignorance towards women. To find "something to show anger, or--sudden feeling" that would prove the suspected Mrs. Wright's guilt, the men search the bedroom, barn and yard, leaving the women to their own devices in the kitchen. Even when all of the characters are close to a crucial piece of evidence, the men's self-important agenda keep them from discovering it. The men come from the bedroom to go outside, deriding Mrs. Hale's remark, "I wonder if she was going to quilt it or knot it." When the quilt is found to contain the strangled canary, detailed evidence that would validate that Mrs. Wright had motive to murder her husband, it is particularly symbolic of the disadvantages sexism has for men. Too keen on examining the broad picture as opposed to the details of a woman's life, the male characters' ignorance proves to be their downfall in their mission to uncover what happened the day before.

Glaspell additionally uses dissipating space between the two women as a symbol of their growing bond and eventual silent agreement. When Mrs. Peters mentions how Mrs. Wright expressed concern over her preserves being cracked, Mr. Hale comments how "women are used to worrying over trifles." Since they never refer to each by first name, it is implied that the women are not on familiar terms. However, at these words, Mrs. Hale and Mrs. Peters "move a little closer together." Their growing bond comes full circle by the turning-point of the play. When the women find the strangled canary hidden in the quilt, they are abruptly interrupted by the men, who patronizingly ask if Mrs. Wright was going to "quilt it or knot it." When Mrs. Peters responds, "We think she was going to - knot it," it is the first act of defiance she, the woman who has shown deference to the men throughout the play, initiates against the men. By

withholding their newly uncovered evidence, Mrs. Peters is showing her refusal to allow the men to prosecute her peer. Mrs. Hale and Mrs. Peters are “knotted” together by each other’s joint experience of discovering Mrs. Wright’s guilt. This concept is reflected by Mrs. Peter’s memory of how she felt when, as a girl, a boy murdered her kitten with a hatchet and she would have “hurt him” if not held back. The women’s open-mindedness to a member of their own gender leads to their own power, as they are the ones who find the final clue, deduct what happen and silently agree to “clear” Mrs. Wright when they decide not to reveal what they found. The men’s sexist attitudes cause them to lose their needed evidence, because the women do not trust them to show empathy for Mrs. Wright.

In addition to space, Glaspell used physical objects as symbolism to further support that sexism and its resulting ignorance hurts men. Mrs. Hale and Mrs. Peters find an empty birdcage and, later, its former inhabitant murdered. The reader already knows Mr. Wright was a fair but “a hard man” from Mrs. Hale’s descriptions of him. The cage’s door has one hinge broken, “as if someone must have been rough with it.” As evident to Mrs. Hale and Mrs. Peters, and consequently the audience, Mr. Wright killed the canary. The bird could be interpreted as symbolizing Mrs. Wright, who was “a bit like a bird herself.” When the canary is murdered by Mr. Wright, a physical representation of men’s power, it illustrates the often fatal power men have over women’s dreams and actions. His blatant display of control over Mrs. Wright by killing her bird and his underestimation of her paved the way to his own downfall when she strangled him in his sleep, a crime of vengeance. The cage symbolizes the sexism that ran rampant at the time. Like the cage limited the canary and its freedom, sexism prevented women from becoming too independent and achieving their personal endeavours. Furthermore, when Mrs. Hale hides the dead bird to prevent the sheriff, the county attorney and Mr. Hale from

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I'd take out the "a"

seeing it, it is particularly significant that she chooses her pocket as its hiding place. Using her own body and clothes represents a woman herself protecting not only Mrs. Wright but women's rights by refusing to turn potential motive to an all-male jury. Mrs. Hale **knew** an all-men jury would not really be "a jury of her peers" because men are viewed as superior. Their joint decision to keep the men out of the loop **came** about because both of them know that, if the men make the connection between the strangled canary and the strangled Mr. Wright, they would not consider hearing Mrs. Wright's side of the story. Because of their lack of empathy for Mrs. Wright's sad existence, the men fail to uncover any new evidence that would prove or disprove Mrs. Wright's guilt.

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knows (literary present tense)

**Comment [5]:** johnr:  
comes (literary present tense)

Written in a time when women were beginning to stand up for their rights but still were encircled by sexism, Susan Glaspell sought to write out against her perceived crimes by men against women. While the woman in the real-life trial was convicted of her crime and sentenced to life in prison, Glaspell sought to expose how men's self-important pride and sexist attitudes cause their own undoing. She succeeded by writing an alternate scenario of two women who discover the truth and choose to keep it from the prosecuting males. Due to the symbolism in the play and its ending, readers are left with an ironic taste in their mouths even as they consider the question, "Does sexism hurt just women, or hurt society as a whole?"

**Appendix: Link to enactment of "Trifles"**