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SOfIA Project

Men's Pride Leads to Downfall in Glaspell's "Trifles"

"Well, women are used to worrying over trifles," says 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 sexism as common and even warranted. Since the male-dominated society considered women's tasks less important than men's, men 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 that male sexism causes a lack of empathy which leads to men's failures as much as it does women's.

From the first scene to the final line, Glaspell uses spatial symbolism to reason her case about the detrimental effects of men's stereotypes of women. According to the stage direction, 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 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. The men clearly believe they have a right to be in Mrs. Wright's home since no man lives there anymore, showing their lack of empathy for a widow.

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, areas that are considered the "man's place." They do not even consider investigating the kitchen, the area traditionally viewed as the "woman's place." Even when all of the characters are close to a crucial piece of evidence, the men's self-important agenda keeps them from discovering it. They are far away when the quilt is found to contain the strangled canary, detailed evidence that would validate that Mrs. Wright had motive to murder her husband. The location of the canary and the distance between it and the men 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' inability to empathize with women is 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 is solidified after they find the strangled canary and are abruptly interrupted by the men, who patronizingly ask if Mrs. Wright was going to "quilt it

or knot it.” After she and Mrs. Peters move closer together and reach a silent agreement, Mrs. Hale responds, “We think she was going to - knot it.” By withholding their newly uncovered evidence, Mrs. Hale shows how her and Mrs. Peters are “knotted” together: they are unified as women in their decision to keep evidence from the men. They understand the double-meaning of “knot it,” because they understand Mrs. Wright, a concept reflected by Mrs. Peters’s memory of when, as a girl, a boy murdered her kitten 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. The men’s sexist attitudes cause them to lose their needed evidence, because their emotional distance from Mrs. Wright’s internal conflict keeps them from showing empathy for Mrs. Wright and possibly understanding her thought process.

In addition to space, Glaspell used the the cage, the canary and Mr. Wright 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 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 goals. The reader already knows Mr. Wright was a fair but “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. Mr. Wright’s display of control over his Mrs. Wright by killing her bird and underestimating her paved the way to his own death

when she strangled him in his sleep, a crime of vengeance. Furthermore, when Mrs. Hale hides the dead bird to prevent the sheriff, the county attorney and Mr. Hale from seeing it, it is particularly significant that she chooses her pocket as its hiding place. Using her own body and clothing represents a woman herself protecting not only Mrs. Wright but women's rights by refusing to turn motive to an all-male jury. Mrs. Hale knows an all-men jury would not really be "a jury of her peers" because men would not empathize with her. The women's joint decision to keep the men out of the loop occurs 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 do not uncover any new evidence that would prove or disprove Mrs. Wright's guilt.

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. The failures of men are symbolized by the male characters: Mr. Wright is murdered because of his inconsideration for his wife, and the men who seek to convict Mrs. Wright fail to uncover evidence. 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?"