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SofIA Project

*Trifles*

“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 in the twenty-first century, mere decades ago people accepted it as common and even a given. Women were viewed as “the weaker sex” and were denied basic rights, such as serving on a jury. In “Trifles,” published in 1916, Glaspell challenges the suppression still in effect during the time she lived, basing the play on a real-life occurrence of a woman on trial for murdering her husband. [Add more later] In the drama of “Trifles,” Glaspell uses symbolism and irony to demonstrate how men’s lack of empathy for women causes their downfall.

From the very first scene to the shocking discovery to the final line, Glaspell uses symbolism to reason her case about the detrimental effects of men on feminism. The initially timid female characters, Mrs. Hale and Mrs. Peters, stand apart from the male characters who appear to be in charge, Mr. Hale, the sheriff and the county attorney, as they warm themselves by the furnace in a now-abandoned home. The reader/audience instantly has an image in their head of the space between the two groups of characters. As Glaspell intended, the space symbolizes the difference between the men’s attitudes and the women’s. Glaspell continues to use space as a symbol throughout the first scene. After the men discuss their reason for exploring the home of Mrs. Wright, who is held in police custody due to suspicion surrounding her husband’s recent death, the conversation turns to the state of the kitchen, during which it is discovered that Mrs. Wright’s preservatives are cracked due to cold. When Mrs. Peters mentions how Mrs. Wright

expressed concern over this occurring, the male characters instantly remark on the apparent frivolity of Mrs. Wright, with Mr. Hale commenting how “women are used to worrying over trifles.” The two women are described as moving closer to each other at these words, further enhancing the difference between men and women while dually symbolizing how far apart women’s perspectives are from men’s.

[Add transition - something about Glaspell also using living things] The broken cage and the strangled canary, discovered by the women while quilting, represents a dual symbolism. Glaspell makes clear her intent by having this realization made by the female characters, as opposed to the male’s actively searching the truth. As inferred by Mrs. Hale and Mrs. Peters, and consequently the audience, Mr. Wright tired of the canary’s singing, so similar to how he broke Mrs. Wright’s singing, broke the cage and killed the canary. Likewise, Mr. Wright could be interpreted to symbolize the sexism that ran rampant at the time, which often broke through society’s moral codes (the cage) to preserve society by “strangling” women through marriage and forced duties. [Add more later - Mrs. Wright, “women’s rights”, bird - hidden in pocket at end]

The author also reasoned her case of the cause of men’s downfall through irony. Throughout the play, the men are mainly absent because they are seeking justice for the murdered Mr. Wright. The men’s allegiance to Mr. Wright is shown in the first main disagreement, when the county attorney marks on how Mrs. Wright did not seem to possess “the homemaking instinct,” and Mrs. Hale responds, “Well, I don’t know Wright had, either.” The men further criticize Mrs. Wright’s lack of upkeep, even as Mrs. Hale and Mrs. Peters defend it when both the men are present and absent. By the end of the story, it is the women’s loyalty to Mrs. Wright that shows to be triumphant over men’s, as Mrs. Hale and Mrs. Peters literally

uncover the circumstances of Mr. Wright's death. [Add more here] With the final lines, irony drips in the audience's mind as the county attorney "facetiously" remarks how they at least discovered that Mrs. Wright was not going to quilt it. Mrs. Hale, hiding the bird and "possible" evidence of Mrs. Wright's guilt in her pocket, replies that she intended to "knot it." Mrs. Hale's response has double meaning. She subtly hinted how Mrs. Wright had indeed "knotted" a rope when she strangled her husband, and the irony, while lost on the male characters, is obvious to the audience. However, Mrs. Hale's statement also stands for her earlier statement on how women distance themselves from each other but are the same in how they "all go through the same things." Similar to when Mrs. Peters understood Mrs. Wright's feelings about her strangled bird because she remembered the brutal murder of her kitten by a boy when she was young, the three main women in the story are "knotted" together by each other's experiences. Subsequently, Mrs. Hale and Mrs. Peters act as a jury and "knot" themselves together when they silently agree on Mrs. Wright's innocence of her crime by hiding the strangled canary from the prosecuting men. [Add more]

Written in a time when women were beginning to stand up for their rights but still faced suppression by society, Susan Glaspell sought to write out against her perceived crimes by men against women. [Add more]