# Feminist interpretation of Susan Glaspell’s Trifles

Susan Glaspell’s play titled *Trifles* is about the murder of Mr. Wright where the sheriff and the County Attorney are condescending at the women of the crime only to later realize that without their participation, intuition and “trifle” minds, the murder mystery would not have been solved. Apparently, it was the women’s attention to details that actually helped solved the murder mystery. The subtle conflict between the men and women in the story will be analyzed using the lens of feminism as an analytical device. *The characters in the story composing of the sheriff and the County Attorney, Mrs. Hale, Mrs. Wright and Mrs. Peters may be solving a murder mystery but they are also in fact involved in gender tussle where the battle of the sexes assumed that men have intellectual superiority over women*. The men’s condescending attitude of the female characters in the play actually just reflect the patriarchal society of those times which to some extent even extends until today in the form of “glass ceiling” (Morrison et al 15). The play however, showed that women were more capable than men as it is them who actually solved the murder mystery.

The first obvious condescending attitude of the men against the women in the narrative is gender stereotypes. Patriarchal and early societies assume that men should play a more important role in society and that is reflected in the play. That it is expected that it should be the men who should be doing more important roles because they are more capable than women. Thus, it was not a coincidence that when authorities were called to solve the murder mystery, the people of authority were males composing of the sheriff and County Attorney and accompanied by Mr. Hale. There, the men displayed their domineering attitude by dismissing the women evident with the statement of Mr. Hale who said that while someone should be “held for murder and she worryin' about her preserves” (Glaspell 982) adding further that “Well, women are used to worrying over trifles” (Glaspell 982). The men’s demeanors were also authoritative and dominant where they contrast themselves not to be bothered by small talk and quilt which proved to be not helpful in solving the murder mystery. Such, part of their dismissive attitude is not to engage themselves with any informal talk with the women believing that it is below their station to talk to them. The men stuck to formalities of the investigation to reinforce their belief of themselves that they are better and more professional than women.

In addition to be domineering and dismissive attitude of the men, the sheriff and the County Attorney were also preoccupied in criticizing the household skills of Mrs. Wright instead of solving the murder case. During their investigation, they saw the disheveled and untidy kitchen which led them to assume that Mrs. Wright is not a good housewife. Their attention was particularly drawn to the tidiness of the stove where the presence of grime made them believe that Mrs. Wright is not a good wife. These actuations of the investigators show that during the early 19th century, women were generally thought to be domesticated and whose value depends on how they perform their household duties (Eagly et al 712). She was only expected to do household chores and should be good at that. Such, when the kitchen was smelly and dirty, they criticized her for being a bad housewife never mind if Mr. Wright was an abusive husband. It seemed to the investigators that being an abusive husband is more acceptable than being an untidy wife which unfortunately, was the dominant mindset during that time.

Despite the superiority complex shown by the men and their condescending attitude to Mrs. Hale and Mrs. Peters, it is actually the women who are doing real investigative work while the men are stuck on their judgmental minds and cannot go beyond the obvious so that the murderer can be discovered. This is evident with the actuation of the sheriff whose job was to keenly observe the crime scene and interpret them to be able to solve the murder mystery. Instead, he dismissed critical clues that might lead to solving the case. For example, when going into the kitchen, he just dismissed the Wright’s kitchen saying that there is “nothing here but kitchen things” (Glaspell 982). The kitchen was in fact indicative of the struggle which the broken bird cage is connected to. In contrast with the investigators, Mrs. Hale and Mrs. Peters paid attention to details like the busted jar of preserves and the ruined canary cage that eventually led to the identity of the murderer of which the men dismissed as trifles. And instead of passing judgment on the surrounding of the people around them, the women were actually asking the right questions such as “what was needed for the case was a motive; something to show anger or-sudden feeling” (Glaspell 984) as motive is important in identifying who the murderer was. The women also put themselves in the shoes of the killer which how an insightful investigator should solve a murder case by asking “what do you suppose she was so nervous about?” (Glaspell 985). They were able to connect all the clues in the house and was able to put together all the clues that the dead bird is actually what prompted Mrs. Wright to kill her husband when they noticed “somebody-wrung-its-neck” (Glaspell 987). In contrast, the men who were condescending and dismissive of the women to be merely involved in trifles were actually the ones who were incompetent as they failed to find and discover the clues that could lead to solving the murder mystery. The clues were right on their face but because of their sense of entitlement that they should be able to figure it out because they are men, they instead found nothing and could have identified the murderer if Mrs. Hale and Mrs. Peters were not around.

In conclusion, Susan Glaspell’s *Trifles* is not simply about solving a murder story but is also an illustration of society’s unfair and condescending attitude towards women which unfortunately still persists today. The men are expected to fulfill the important roles and are expected to be dominant over women. The women on the other hand are expected to be relegated to secondary roles as they are preoccupied with trifles. And being preoccupied with trifles, they are expected to be less capable than men. As shown in the play *Trifles,* the dismissive attitude of men towards the women and their criticism over the kitchen and its disheveled arrangements made them look frivolous as they failed to see beyond the obvious. Instead, it was the women who solved the murder because their “trifle” mind was able to figure out the motivation of the murderer who had enough of her husband’s abusive tendency. The strangled canary in the cage provided them the clue that Mr. Wright strangled it which prompted Mrs. Wright to murder her husband. But despite this help from Mrs. Hale and Mrs. Peters in identifying the murder suspect, the men still failed to convict Mrs. Wright in court because the Mrs. Hale and Mrs. Peters hid the evidence that would pin down Mrs. Wright in court. The men should have treated the female characters in the play with respect to convict the culprit but they still continued to play their brand of trifles in the court where the women this time worked against them and failed to convict Mrs. Wright.

## Works Cited

Eagly, Alice H., and Valerie J. Steffen. "Gender stereotypes stem from the distribution of women and men into social roles." *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 46.4 (1984): 735.

Glaspell, Susan. “Trifles”, 979-990. Print.

Morrison, Ann M., Randall P. White, and Ellen Van Velsor. *Breaking The Glass Ceiling: Can Women Reach The Top Of America's Largest Corporations?*. Pearson Education, 1987.