The Significance of Symbolism in Conveying the Feminist Perspective in Susan Glaspell’s *Trifles*

A paper
Submitted by:
Assistant instructor
Latifa Ismael Jabboury
Abstract

This paper is devoted to the discussion of the Significance of Symbolism in Conveying the Feminist Perspective in Susan Glaspell’s *Trifles*. It contains four sections. The first section is an introduction about the writers who tackle the issues of women and pave the way for Glaspell and the coming writers to deal with similar themes and concerns. This section also tackles the "Provincetown Players" with which Glaspell involved as a playwright.

The second section exhibits the main symbols used in *Trifles* and the importance of these symbols to the whole theme of feminism. The third section discusses the feminist perspective in the play through focusing on the female bonding as a means of gaining power. This section illustrates the common bond between women, even in the face of the law.

The present study is rounded up with a Conclusion, which states briefly the main findings of the paper.
The Significance of Symbolism in Conveying the Feminist Perspective in Susan Glaspell’s *Trifles*

I. Introduction:

In today’s society, we generally view upon everyone as equal being who deserves equal rights. At the turn of the 20th century, this particular view didn’t exist. Men clearly dominated almost every aspect of life and women were often left with little importance. Throughout the history the gendered roles place the woman in the kitchen, serving meals, baking bread, and canning fruits and jellies. She was also expected to be a good mother to her children and a caretaker to her husband (Ferguson; 6-12).

Many works of literature deal with gendered roles and their effect on society as a whole or on an individual as a person. The nineteenth century witnessed the emergence of several prominent female literary figures, such as Kate Chopin and Fanny Fern. Like many other women writers, Chopin and Fern wrote about the inequality of the sexes and the inability of women to live their own lives without reliance on men. Judith Fetterley suggests that there exists "an extraordinarily rich, diverse, and interesting body of prose literature written in the nineteenth century by American women" (Fetterley; 1). The focus of most of this literature was on "women and their lives…or, in other words . . . they chose to write about themselves" (Fetterley; 7).

Kate Chopin and Fanny Fern represent two writers who are a part of this rich history. In her works, Chopin was concerned with exploring "relationships among . . . various classes and, especially, relationships
between men and women" (Skaggs; 635). Chopin’s favorite theme was "the inherent conflict between the traditional requirement that a wife form her life around her husband’s and a woman’s need for discrete personhood" (Ibid). This is seen in her short story "The Story of an Hour," where the main character, Mrs. Mallard, first experiences a rebirth when she is told that her husband has died in a train accident but then suddenly dies at the end of the story when Mr. Mallard walks in the front door. Like Chopin, Fern was first and foremost concerned with revealing the hidden lives of women. Fern demonstrated a "willingness to articulate that women’s point of view conventionally ignored or suppressed" (Parton; 246). Fern’s desire to explore women’s issues that at the time were thought unconventional marked her as forerunner in women’s literature and a source of inspiration for other female writers.

In this way, these female literary figures helped pave the way for female writers of the twentieth century. Glaspell, who struggled with similar themes and concerns, inherited a rich legacy from these women. Indeed, in New York Glaspell began to write openly about women's issues. Moreover, if we look back to Susan Keating Glaspell's biography who was born in Davenport, Iowa 1876, we find that the male figures in her family did little to influence her; instead it was the influence of her mother and grandmother who provided her the inspiration for many of the strong women characters in her plays.

Glaspell graduated from Drake University in Des Moines, Iowa, with a Ph. B. in Philosophy. After graduation she worked as a reporter for the Des Moines Daily News. In 1902, she left Des Moines to return to Davenport, where she began writing fiction. Her experiences at the paper provided her with enough material to quit her job and start this new career (Ben-Zvi;
While living in Davenport in 1909, Glaspell became involved with the freethinker George Cram Cook; they continued a close relationship that resulted in their marriage in 1913. Cook flouted social conventions: he proclaimed himself a nonconformist and advocated politically progressive ideas. His rebellious spirit appealed to Glaspell, despite his irresponsible lifestyle: he drank heavily and was chronically unfaithful to her. Makowsky suggests that Glaspell used her work as an outlet to vent the anger she felt toward Cook's behavior (Makowsky, 20-21). Thus, she found herself embroiled in conflicts with traditional gender roles, both in her life and in her writing. She espoused what were then considered radical politics: feminism and socialism. But her marriage problems were depressingly conventional. Even though her husband shared her progressive political beliefs, their marriage did not reflect them.

Glaspell and her husband spent their summers in Provincetown, and their winters in New York. While in Provincetown, in 1915, Cook, Glaspell and others started the "Provincetown Players"; a venue for American plays that were too experimental and controversial for Broadway. The Players were a remarkable gathering of actors, directors and writers. According to Ben Zvi, the main direction of the plays was established by Glaspell and Eugene O'Neill. They were the major talents produced by the Provincetown Players. Glaspell wrote most of her plays when she was with them. This period was the most influential and important time in the playwright's life. Undoubtedly because of the time shared with Eugene O'Neill. For some critics of the period, O'Neill was the undisputed father of American Drama, and Glaspell was the mother. At O'Neill's suggestion, "The Players" decided to move to New York (Ben-Zvi; 144-160). There, Glaspell experienced a major influence on her work. She was "living in a
community passionately concerned with socialism and feminism . . ." (Ben-Zvi 160) and was supported by a group of friends who were intellectuals, socialists, feminists and radicals (Makowsky; 24). Glaspell herself was a founding member of Heterodoxy, a radical group of women activists who were prominent in the feminist movement of New York in the years 1910-1920. It was within this atmosphere Glaspell found encouragement for her interest in creating female characters who desired to free themselves from the stereotypical roles into which they had been cast (Ben-Zvi; 160-161). So, in addition to the influence of the female writers who came before her, Glaspell’s involvement in "the Provincetown Players" greatly influenced her by connecting her to new people and ideas, by maturing her as a writer, and by providing her an avenue for expression.

II. The Main Symbols in *Trifles*:

Among more than forty short stories, fourteen plays, and nine novels, Susan Glaspell's best known is *Trifles*. *Trifles* is a one-act play that takes place in a farmhouse in rural Iowa. It is based on a real murder case happened in 1900. Susan Glaspell covered this case when she was working as a young reporter in a newspaper and later she used the story as the basis for her play *Trifles* and for her novel, *A Jury of Her Peers* (Wolf and Bryan; 1of2). The play tackled one of the important issues of that period which is the feminist perspective. The play takes place in a kitchen, the domestic sphere, and everything around reveal the lives of women.

The play involves a murder investigation, John Wright has been found strangled in his bed, and his wife, Minnie, has been suspected of committing the murder. These two main characters never appear in the play; instead, the play focuses on the county attorney, George Henderson,
who has been called in to investigate the murder; Henry Peters, the local sheriff; Lewis Hale, a neighboring farmer; and Mrs. Peters and Mrs. Hale, wives to the two local men. While these three men were busy come and go around the farmhouse searching for clues, the two women discover bits of evidence in the “trifles” the suspect wife left in her kitchen: baking, cleaning and sewing. Because the men ignore the women’s world, they remain blind to the truth, which is in front of their eyes.

The title of the play *Trifles*, is a symbol reflecting how men view women. A "trifle" is something that is small, of little value or importance or of no consequence. Throughout the play, Glaspell uses dialogue which allows us to see the demeaning view the men have for the women. Mr. Hale declares that “Women are used to worrying over trifles” (*Trifles*; 401). Men are trivializing the many tasks and details that women are responsible for. The irony of the play is that while the men are running around looking for "clues,” the women have discovered the key to the mystery among what the men consider silly women's work. In his ignorance of how crucial women's duties are, he implies their unimportance. In the former reference to his and to the sheriff’s wives, Mr. Hale presents the argumentative conflict that will prove prevalent throughout the course of the play.

In the description of the opening scene of the play, Glaspell mentions that the abandoned kitchen of John Wright is gloomy and “left without having been put in order…. Unwashed pans under the sink, a loaf of bread outside the breadbox, a dish towel on the table--other signs of incompletely completed work” (*Trifles*; 399). Noe points out that these tasks are “signs of an incompetent housekeeper to the officers of the court; to the women and to the audience these props help to establish the presence of a disturbed
Consciousness” (Noe; 39). Actually, as I think the incomplete tasks in Minnie's kitchen symbolize, also, that she acted very soon after provocation, I mean after John's strangling of the bird.

Isolationism is an important clue in the murder case. Mrs. Wright's farmhouse is located in a hollow, down in the woods, which puts her in a secluded place. Mr. Hale came to talk to Mr. Wright about a "party telephone", but he said, "He put me off, saying folks talked too much anyway . . ." (Trifles; 400). This is an example of how Mr. Wright did not want himself and his wife to have contact with anyone in town. The image of the “Party Telephone” is a very significant symbol because of its relation to the question of justice. This matter unfolds at the end of the play where Mrs. Hale learns that the “greater crime…is to cut oneself off from understanding and communicating with others, and in this context John Wright is the greater criminal and his wife the helpless executioner” (Alkalay-Gut; 7).

With the entrance of the five characters of the play, the women stand apart from the men who were clustered at the stove. The men were talking with each other in familiarity, working together and knowing one another. The women seem less acquainted and never call each other by their first names. But when the men made their first disparaging remarks about Minnie's housekeeping and women’s “worrying over trifles” (Trifles; 401), “the two women move a little closer together” (Trifles; 401). This movement is a symbol of the women’s bond, which will be indicated with the word “knot” later at the end of the play.

The image of the Jar of Cherries (Trifles; 402) has many meanings. As Minnie’s jars were in need for heat, they may symbolize to her life, which lacks heat also. Another meaning is concerned with the jar being out on
shelf; Minnie herself was put on the shelf. She was alone and isolated until the coldness of her marriage and her life in general, broke her apart. According to the opinion of Smith “Her secrets kept under pressure burst from their fragile containers. The single intact jar symbolizes the one remaining secret, the motive to complete the prosecutor's case” (Smith; 175).

Another important symbol is associated with the image of the “footsteps” (Trifles;403) of the three men which “have been heard coming down the stairs” (Ibid). The men enter and leave the room, “physically crisscross the stage as they verbally crisscross the details of the crime, both actions leading nowhere, staged to show ineffectuality and incompetence” (Ben-Zvi; 155). In this way, Glaspell undercuts their authority and questions their power.

The names of the characters are very important in Trifles because these names represent symbols through which Glaspell reveals the important points associated with the theme of feminist perspective; John and Minnie Wright are the two characters that are not seen. Yet their presence is felt through the conversation between Mrs. Peters and Mrs. Hale. John and Minnie Wright, actually, provide the inciting incident for the play. The name “Wright” refers to social stereotype of women seeking right; Glaspell intends a “Pun on the surname marking her (Mrs.Wright's) lack of “rights”, and implying her “right” to free herself against the societally sanctioned “right” of her husband to control the family…” (Ibid; 153-54). So, the two names represent the roles of men and women in the larger society. Minnie's name has a double significance, “Minnie” being “mini” or “minimized,” which was descriptive of her relationship with John and in
general of women's relationship with men. Then the name of “Minnie Wright” refers to the minimal right the woman has in her society.

The image of Minnie before she got married is that “she used to wear pretty clothes and be lively when she was Minnie Foster…” this is how Mrs. Hale describes Minnie to Mrs. Peters (Trifles; 402). She talks about Minnie again saying: “I wish you'd seen Minnie Foster when she wore a white dress with blue ribbons and stood up there in the choir and sang” (Ibid; 405). The image of Minnie Foster is used to show, by contrast, what John Wright had done to her. “How—she—did—change,” says Mrs. Hale (Ibid; 404). John Wright abused Minnie by denying her personality and individuality, and eventually Minnie kills John to escape that abuse. Bryan D. Bourn points out that:

By extension of the analogy between the Wrights and men and women in general, the idea is that it is only a matter of time before women who are forced to subjugate themselves to a male dominated society get fed up and seek revenge on their oppressors.(Bourn; 2of3).

Taking the name of the husband is also important in Trifles. Mrs. Hale and Mrs. Peters are not given first names. The role that society has cast them in is one that is defined by their husbands. Mrs. Peters, who is married to the sheriff, is viewed in those terms, not as an individual. The county attorney even says “for that matter a sheriff's wife is married to the law” (Trifles; 405). Mrs. Peters herself tries to fulfill that role, saying, “Mrs. Hale, the law is the law” (Ibid; 403). She tries to reinforce that identity until she is faced with the brutality of what John Wright did to Minnie. She says, “I know what stillness is. The law has got to punish
crime, Mrs. Hale” (Ibid; 405). The difference is that she is talking about the crime committed against Minnie, not the murder.

To understand Trifles, it is necessary to understand its two major metaphors, as being significant symbols in the play. The first of these is the bird and birdcage metaphor. Mrs. Hale describes Minnie before her marriage to John as “kind of like a bird herself—real sweet and pretty, but kind of timid and—fluttery” (Ibid; 404). Mrs. Hale and Mrs. Peters find Minnie's birdcage in the cupboard, but they do not realize the importance of it until they find the dead bird with its neck twisted to one side. The comparison here is between Minnie and the bird. “Through the traditional literary metaphor of the bird's song as the voice of the soul, the women acknowledge that John Wright not only killed Minnie's canary, but her very spirit” (Makowsky; 62). The bird is caged just as Minnie is trapped in the abusive relationship with John. John Wright figuratively strangles the life out of Minnie like he literally strangles the bird.

Minnie understood her husband's action as a symbolic strangling of herself, ... It is not just because he killed the bird, but because Minnie herself was a caged bird...and he strangled her by preventing her from communicating with others (Alkalay-Gut; 6).

On the other hand, Makowsky points out that the bird symbolizes a “child-substitute for the solitary Minnie; the canary's voice was to displace the silence of a coldly authoritarian husband and replace the sounds of the unborn children” (Makowsky;62). When John kills the bird, he kills the last bit of Minnie, and he makes a mistake in doing so.

The broken birdcage that was found is one of the most profound symbols in the play because it represents Minnie’s liberation from John.
Just like the bird, Minnie has now freed herself from John by killing him. The broken birdcage represents Minnie's freedom from the restrictive role of “Mrs. Wright.” Once she is free she takes her revenge for all of the years of abuse and oppression. She strangles the life out of John like he strangled her spirit and her bird. The birdcage metaphor also represents the role of women in society; the bird being woman and the cage is the male dominated society.

The second major metaphor is the quilt. The quilt is a symbol of Minnie's life. She has taken the scraps and put them into a nice, neat quilt. The block she was working on, however, was “all over the place!… It looks as if she didn't know what she was about!” Mrs. Hale says (Trifles; 403). The messy sewing is a sign of nervousness, When John killed the bird; he destroyed the last bit of personality that Minnie had held for herself. She was angry and confused, and probably literally “didn't know what she was about” (Ibid; 403). To comprehend the play one may follow the technique of the housewives, who in making their comprehensive patchwork quilt, sort and sift through trivia and discarded material, match small scraps together, and then sew piece after piece into ever enlarging squares. The 'log cabin' patchwork the women discover . . . is made exactly in this fashion: Rectangular scraps are sewn around the original square or rectangle, followed by a series of longer scraps which are measured to the increasing size of the quilt. . . The general pattern is one that emerges with the quilt. (Alkalay-Gut; 2).

The question that is asked about the quilt is whether Minnie was going to “quilt it or just knot it” (Trifles; 403). This is the decision that Minnie had to make. She either would quilt it, meaning that she would go on enduring the isolation and abuse or she would knot it meaning
that she would decide rejecting her life as it exists because that life was “not it” and she would do something to change it. Mrs. Hale and Mrs. Peters begin to understand and agree with Minnie a they see how John treated her, and how the law is treating her. Mrs. Hale sums up the women's feeling when she replies to the county attorney's question about the quilt, saying “we call it —knot it, Mr. Henderson” (Ibid; 406).

Alkalay-Gut points out that this image “conveys the sense of knotting the rope around the husband's neck: they have discovered the murderess. And they will "knot" tell” (Alkalay-Gut; 8). While Smith, in his comment about the "knot", suggests that “the bond among women is the essential knot” (Smith; 179).

Susan Glaspell used the formal elements in the play as a part of technique of symbolism to help convey the feminist theme. That is to say; the title, the images, the character names, and the metaphors all work together to paint not only a picture of Minnie's life with John, but by extension the lives of all women who live oppressed under male domination. In *Trifles*, the male characters are regarded as intellectually superior to their wives, who are patronized as rather childish for their concern in domestic detail. But, as a matter of fact, Glaspell makes a feminist leap as she portrays her female characters with such an ample cunning to secretly and humbly triumph over male prejudice.

### III. The Feminist Perspective in *Trifles*:

Long before the modern women's movement of the sixties, writers were writing about the lives and concerns of women living in a male dominated society (Snowdon; 16-25). *Trifles* (1916) and *A Jury of Her Peers* (1917), both written by Susan Glaspell, are works of literature that deal with
socially gender roles during the early twentieth century. The two works are almost exactly alike in that the actor's lines in *Trifles* become the dialogue in *A Jury of Her Peers*. In the both works Mr. and Mrs. Wright embody the view of gender roles. Mrs. Wright was a typical woman who suffered the mental abuse from her husband and was caged from life.

Most of the play revolves around the women and the kitchen. While the men scramble throughout the house looking for evidence or hints of a motive for murder, the women discovered the entire mystery while remaining at the kitchen. The kitchen too seems like a remote place and much resembles the marriage between Mr. and Mrs. Wright. The kitchen is the spot where Mrs. Wright (and most women of the time) spent most of their time in. Mr. and Mrs. Wright actually never appear in the play, instead the action of the play is executed by a mere five characters, three men and two women; a fact which in itself demonstrates the establishment of women as a minority. At the time Glaspell published *Trifles* (1916) and *A Jury of Her Peers* (1917),

Women could not serve on juries, nor did they have the right to vote. [The novel's] title, therefore, indicates Glaspell’s interest in the gap between theory and practice in the U. S. justice system. She challenged those who believed that the United States offered freedom and equality by demonstrating that women were not treated equally since they were excluded from participating in the justice system except as defendants (Droisen; 3of 4).

By focusing on the cruelties of Minnie's existence, her isolation, her lack of options, and the complete disregard of her plight by the courts and by society, Ben-Zvi feels that Glaspell "concretizes" the position of women in her society, moving the discussion beyond abstract problems of perception (Ben-Zvi; 157). The playwright's tactics force recognition of
"the central issues of female powerlessness . . . and the need for laws to address such issues" (Ibid). The women's arrogation of authority serves as "an empowerment," as Ben-Zvi notes: "Not waiting to be given the vote or the right to serve on juries, Glaspell's women have taken the right for themselves" (Ibid; 158). Thus, the female enactment of judicial power subverts traditional concepts of law and justice.

In the opening scene of *Trifles*, we learn a great deal of information about the people of the play and of their opinions. The various symbols of oppression used in the play, illustrate Mrs. Minnie Wright’s motives to kill her husband and to escape from imprisonment. In the play, the setting takes place in an “abandoned” and “gloomy” farmhouse out in the country (*Trifles*; 399). Almost immediately the reader gets the impression that it is a very secluded and cold place. The coldness of the setting in many ways resembles the aloofness of Mr. Wright who is described as “hard man” and “a raw wind that gets to the bone” (*Trifles*; 404). Because of the coldness of the weather outside the characters enter the warm farmhouse. The two women stand together away from the men, which immediately puts the men against the women. Mrs. Hale’s and Mrs. Peters’ treatment from the men in the play is reflective of the beliefs of that time. These women, aware of the powerless slot that has been made for them, manage to use their power which enables them to succeed in protecting Minnie, the accused wife.

Most critical readings of *Trifles* focus on female bonding as a means of gaining power; "Underlying this attitude is the assumption that . . . women's lives are individually trivial, and their only strength and/or success can come from banding together" (Alkalay-Gut; 1). Such a premise defines women through masculine precepts and confirms the male value
system, authenticating the power of the public sphere by the perceived need to replicate it. But, as evidenced in the ironically-named *Trifles*, where male disparagement proved male undoing as the women used their assigned invisibility to subvert the law and effect justice, women have a different kind of power. Women's power, subtle and indirect, is one of the original elements in *Trifles*. Bonding is both a manifestation of women's strength and its source; perhaps Glaspell wished to show the women of her time that they had more power than they realized.

A male and female perception of judgment is then, the central to the play. Alkalay-Gut believes that the unfolding evidence not only unites the women, but highlights the division between "woman's concept of justice," which entails "social" and "individual influences, together with the details that shaped the specific act," and "[t]he prevailing law [which] is general, and therefore . . . inapplicable to the specific case" (Alkalay-Gut; 8-9). As the "distance between the laws of the kitchen and the outside world increases," the women realize that the breach "negates the possibility of a "fair trial" for Minnie Foster" (Ibid). Satisfied that Minnie's husband behaved so heinously that the "murder was totally understandable," they dispense justice by circumventing the law (Ibid; 6). According to Alkalay-Gut, the women are "clearly secure" about the correctness of their actions; their "secretive manner is one of superiority" (Ibid; 9).

In *Trifles*, Glaspell shows two main viewpoints. That is how the men have the role of being the head of everything and how the women are only house maids to the men. Glaspell characterizes the men as not giving the women the credit they deserve for their hard labors everyday. The three men in the play help to prove how in that time period men were completely superior to women. By showing these two points it makes us feel more
sympathetic for the women because of how they are treated. The women always have to go along with what the men tell them, even if they disagree. Since the men are distinguished from the women, the women form their own alliance because they feel empathy for each other. The men and women have seemed to take sides against each other. By always trivializing what the women do, the men are actually working against themselves because the women decide not to give them the information needed to solve the case. The first view that Glaspell gives in *Trifles* is that the men are far superior or higher than the women. The men in *Trifles* show the expected character as we would hear about in the past before women had the rights which they have now. The attorney displays this past male figure the best. He is always looking down at the women and minimizing whatever they do.

The evolution of the women's relationships illustrates the female ethos. Mael feels that the play's "moral dilemma" highlights the innate differences between male adherence to theoretical principles of morality and female empathic ethical sense which considers "moral problems as problems of responsibility in relationship" (Mael; 282-83). Although Mrs. Hale and Mrs. Peters draw closer as the men, using "abstract rules and rights," make comments that "trivialize the domestic sphere," ethical solidarity comes only after Mrs. Peters moves from "acquiescence to patriarchal law" to empathy, thus effecting a change "from a typically male to a more typically female mode of judgment" (Ibid; 283-84). This switch allows them to formulate a "redefinition of . . . crime" which finds more culpability in their earlier failure to help Minnie than in their "moral choice" to suppress evidence (Ibid; 284).
The absent woman, who is represented by the character of Minnie, makes a mockery of male authority; Noe points out the need to trace the chain of cause-and-effect behind Minnie's action before assigning guilt: "Alienated from her husband, powerless and silenced by . . . her marriage . . Minnie is an unseen woman long before she murders John Wright" (Noe; 46). Unseen both "literally" and "metaphorically," Minnie becomes a surrogate for all the invisible women in Glaspell's society (Ibid).

The purpose of this play then, was to illustrate the common bond between women, even in the face of the law. The play proves that in the hard times people of a common bond usually stick together. The symbolism used in this play is directed at the need for equal rights for women, and the role many men played in squashing that dream. And though Glaspell is an acclaimed feminist in *Trifles*, but her play does not contain the traditional feminist views of equal rights for both sexes.

### IV. CONCLUSION:

By using the characters, descriptive language, and symbolism Glaspell illustrates that one person's home and one person's way of living can also be an introduction to one person's private hell. Throughout the play discoveries are made to tell the audience that maybe things are not what they seem and that sometimes people must take a deeper look into what is around them. Mr. Hale, Mrs. Hale, Mrs. Peters, the county attorney, and the sheriff are the five characters of the play that introduce the audience to the crime that has just been committed. These five characters, while showing the audience, the house, and the background of the murder, they reveal how society was acting at that time and what was expected from the women.
Because Mrs. Wright follows the role mapped by her husband and is directed by society, her identity is lost somewhere along the way. However, Mrs. Hale and Mrs. Peters quietly insist on preserving their own identities by protecting Mrs. Wright from the men who seek to convict her of the murder. In this play, the apparent theme is the empathy the women in the plot find for each other. Looking at the play from this perspective we see a distinct set of characters and a plot. The three main characters, Mrs. Peters, Mrs. Hale and Mrs. Wright are all products of an oppressive society which denies them their right to think and speak freely, as in the case of Mrs. Peters and Mrs. Hale, and denies them their right to a happy, free life as in Mrs. Wright’s case (Ben-Zvi; 152-56). I also feel the same sympathy for Mrs. Wright who had to endure her husband's abnormal personality. All she wanted was a companion and when her husband took it away from her, she killed him. I don't agree with her decision to kill him, but she was probably pushed to the point where she couldn't control her actions.

Throughout history, a woman's role is to be an obedient and respectful wife. Her main obligation is to support, serve, and live for her husband and children. So, the men in *Trifles* feel that the women cannot think, cannot act, and cannot do any harm to their investigative work. However, the women find lots of evidence. They do think, act, and sabotage the investigation. They find the very evidence that the men are looking for. In most stories of this nature the men are the center of attention, but Glaspell opens our eyes to something new. Not only that the men do not solve the case, but they also aren’t the center of attention. Even though the men were not using lots of demeaning dialogue and they are not patronizing the women, it is clear that they are using the traditional manly ways to put the women down. Men say that they are superior to women and that they can
do everything by themselves, but why is it that the County Attorney’s biggest dilemma is that he cannot figure this case out by himself yet the women can? The men’s failure to solve the case and the men’s insignificance in the play speak for themselves. This is a reversal of the characterizations of the women of that time period. Glaspell was successful in showing us this by letting the audience see everything from a woman’s point of view.

Glaspell's *Trifles* was written in 1916, Nevertheless, it reveals through Glaspell's use of symbolism, the role that women are expected to play in society. Actually, *Trifles* was years ahead of its time though the subject matter is timeless. The aspect of this play that most caught my interest was the contrast between the men and women characters. This is a play written in the early twentieth century but transcends time periods and cultures.

**References**


