

# JURY OF HER PEERS: THE IMPORTANCE OF TRIFLES

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The continuing popularity of Susan Glaspell's story, "Jury of Her Peers," and the play "Trifles" from which it emerged, can not really be explained by an examination of the plot. Two housewives, Mrs. Hale and Mrs. Peters, accompanying their husbands who are investigating the murder of a man by his wife, discover in the kitchen the clues which indicate the motive of the murderess, and silently agree to withhold this evidence from their husbands. Despite the increasing contemporary interest in women in literature, it is difficult to perceive from the simple progress of events a complexity of thought warranting the current fascination with this work.

Critics tend to agree on the basic theme indicated by the sequence of events: Loyalty to and sympathy for the murderess, Minnie Foster (Mrs. Wright), determine the women's decision to conceal the truth from their husbands and the law. The following statement of Karen Stein in her commendable article on "Trifles" is typical of the general approach: "The women here realize, through their involvement in the murder investigation, that only by joining together can they, isolated and insignificant in their society, obtain for themselves and extend to others the support and sympathy that will help them endure the loneliness and unceasing labor required of them."<sup>1</sup> Underlying this attitude is the assumption that the women's lives are individually trivial, and their only strength and/or success can come from banding together. Triviality is not a value, but it can be overcome by large numbers, by the community of women.

The limitation of the present critical approach lies precisely in this assumption of the negative value of trivia, since it is through the trivial that the greatness of the story can be revealed. The most productive approach to this story is one that acknowledges and imitates the pattern of these women's lives, since it is specifically the connective, the accumulative details of experience, that provide the structural key for the comprehension of the story. More than this, it portrays an entire approach to experience, while the lives of their men together with their conceptions of reality and factuality, provide precisely the inappropriate approach based on abstractions that may mislead the devoted reader of this story.

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1. "The Women's World of Glaspell's Trifles" *Women in American Theatre* (New York: Crown, 1981), pp. 251-4.

To comprehend the story 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 in Minnie Foster's sewing basket 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 colors are coordinated and contrasted for balance and relationship, but the general pattern is one that emerges with the quilt.

In the same way one may attempt to comprehend the story by beginning, not with the general presumption of valid motive later to be substantiated through factual evidence, but with the scraps of specific places, relationships, and methods of operation. The organization of these details into patterns of oppositions and interrelations reveals larger concepts of criminality and justice that place the murder and the significance of the story in a different context. By beginning with the detailed polarization of specific relationships, places, and methods of operation, concepts of criminality and justice that form the basis for the story can more clearly be determined.

Like the patches in Mrs. Wright's basket, these details are cut to fit a pattern, and the pattern is one of ironic revelation. As Mrs. Hale and Mrs. Peters approach an understanding of the murder and Minnie Foster's motivation for the murder, they become further alienated from the men who are unified with the society and its definitions. There are three basic polarizations which work together: 1) The opposition between the world outside, where important events occur and murder and truths are revealed, and the kitchen, where menial and mechanical work is accomplished. 2) The opposition between the mentality and humanity of men and women, associated with the spacial polarizations. 3) The distinctions between the law, which comes to be defined as the imposition of abstractions on individual circumstances, and justice, which is characterized by the extrapolation of judgment from individual circumstances.

We may begin, as does Mrs. Hale, in the kitchen, a world immediately associated with the ordinary and contrasted to the "farther from ordinary . . . thing that had ever happened in Dickson country."<sup>2</sup> It is a world of simple imperatives: cleanliness, order, productivity, fruitfulness. The interruption of the order of these imperatives causes a disturbance in Mrs. Hale that immediately suggests a warped sense of values. She keeps the investigators of the murder waiting out in the sled while she considers completing the task of sifting flour. She is shocked at herself for considering this at such a time. But almost half way through the story she recalls

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2. "Jury of Her Peers," *The Best Short Stories of 1917*, ed. E. J. O'Brien (Boston: Small Maynard & Co., 1918), pp. 256-62. All quotations from the stories refer to this text.

this impulse, and the thought of her unfinished sifting helps her to comprehend the significance of her hierarchy of values as she associates Minnie's interruption with her own.

Mrs. Hale's association with Minnie Foster increases when the order of Minnie's kitchen is criticized by the men. "Dirty towels!" exclaims the county attorney, and extrapolates from this detail a serious character flaw: "Not much of a housekeeper, would you say, Ladies!" Later Mrs. Hale realizes that the towel is dirty because the deputy wiped his hands on it when he made the fire, but her defence of Minnie is initially based on the hard life she knows a farm woman must lead, and the impossibility of perfection when the laws of the kitchen are created and violated by men. Both Mrs. Hale and the attorney know here that if a woman is an indifferent housewife, as Minnie appears to be, she is suspect as a woman, and this anti-feminine behavior would indicate potential homicidal tendencies inconceivable in a good wife. The broken jars of preserves — also the fault of the men who neglected to keep her kitchen stove going when they imprisoned her — is another false indication of unfeminine character, or, when Mrs. Hale affirms Minnie's concern over her preserves, a trivial ridiculous one. These are double bind exhibits of evidence that will be used against the defendant no matter how they are interpreted by the jury because the men cannot fundamentally comprehend the lives of the women. In fact, the half wiped table, the half poured sugar, and the dirty pans, point to something quite different: the sudden change in the woman managing the kitchen indicates an important discovery that forced Minnie Foster out of the pattern of her chores.

As Mrs. Hale discovers more and more about Minnie Foster's kitchen, she begins to understand the situation of the woman working in it, and her comprehension of the distance between the laws of the kitchen and the outside world increases. "The law is the law," she admits, "and a bad stove is a bad stove." The fact that Mrs. Wright has been forced to maintain housewifely standards with equipment that could only be faulty due to the avarice of her husband indicates that the mutual responsibility of husband and wife has been violated. This consideration in turn modifies Mrs. Wright's responsibility to her husband. Although she can have no recourse to the law, her life has been made miserable by an individual who has complete control of her. The laws of the world can not apply here, and yet it is from these individual considerations, these trifles, that the entire situation arises. The laws of the kitchen are those of individual considerations which modify judgement and can comprehend these seeming details.

The men comprehend the distinction between kitchen and world, but their manner of distinguishing the two areas is to trivialize the laws of the kitchen. " 'Nothing here but kitchen things,' " the sheriff says, "with a little laugh for the insignificance of kitchen things." Then the county attorney mocks Minnie's concern for her preserves: "I guess before we're through with her she may have something more serious than preserves to worry

about." And Mr. Hale, who has previously exhibited comprehension of Mrs. Wright's dilemma, joins in with the men against the feminine concerns: "Oh well," says Mrs. Hale's husband with good natured superiority, 'Women are used to worrying over trifles.'" He is defined here as Mrs. Hale's husband and not Mr. Hale because he has, for the first time, betrayed his wife's sex. Influenced by the attitudes of his peers, he identifies himself as a man by aligning himself against the women. Certainly the nature of the crime demands this alignment. The murder of a husband by a wife casts doubt on the justice of the accepted code of women's submission to a responsible, chivalrous man and forces Mr. Hale to identify himself with the husbands.

While the standard polarization of human beings in a crime story is normally determined by dividing law abiding citizens from the criminal,<sup>3</sup> the characters here are soon divided on the basis of sex differences. The Hales, a close couple, separate as the story develops because of the social pressures which enforce a division between men and women. The women are in the kitchen and the kitchen work is trivial, while the men study the "layout" of the house and the barn, gathering what they consider to be significant information. The mentality of the men and women are gradually seen as appropriate to these two different realms. One may characterize the distinctions as follows:

#### MAN'S WORLD

World

Significant

Community of men:

achievement of goals (solving murder, putting in telephone)

Knowledge of facts which lead to general truths and legal definitions

#### WOMAN'S WORLD

Kitchen

Trivial

Community of women:

community, rather than goal oriented (quilting, protection)

Knowledge of people which make facts useful for understanding people & situations

The distinctions develop as the story progresses and can most clearly be seen in Mr. Hale's alteration in the story. At first sympathetic to Minnie, condemning her husband's tyranny and her probable reaction, he becomes less and less concerned. During the interrogation, Hale exhibits a desire to explain Minnie's motivation and her unique and painful circumstances, but is cut off by the condescending attorney. His next and final speech reveals that he has consciously taken on the role suggested to him by the others:

Mr. Hale rubbed his face after the fashion of a show-man getting ready for pleasantries. "But would the women know a clue if they did

3. Stein, p. 251.

come upon it?" he said, and having delivered himself of this, he followed the others through the stair door.

After this final bit of wisdom, Mr. Hale falls silent for the rest of the story, the other men speaking for him, reflecting his attitudes and values in their search for the relevant truth.

Mrs. Hale, on the other hand, joins a community of women. Gradually, with no motivation other than understanding, she begins to associate herself with two other women who appear to be opposites, the accused woman and the sheriff/accuser's wife. Her guilt at her alienation from Minnie Foster, which makes her initial entry into the Wright house difficult, is transformed by her identification with her old friend, and her pejorative evaluation of Mrs. Peters who "didn't look like a sheriff's wife," becomes an identification with her as well, precisely because she is not like a sheriff's wife.

Arthur Waterman correctly evaluates Mrs. Hale's initial position when he notes: "She had heard of Wright's abuse of his wife and pitied her, but she had never the courage to befriend her."<sup>4</sup> However, the guilt that this attitude engenders in Mrs. Hale alters as events reveal their association. Clearly it is guilt that initially motivates Mrs. Hale's reiterated wish that nothing be revealed to worsen Mrs. Wright's position. Her memory of Minnie is of a "real sweet and pretty, but kind of timid and fluttery (girl)." and her desire to protect this innocent creature from the condemning eyes of strangers.

But the similarity in the lives and habits of the three women, made salient by the supercilious sneers of the men, leads to an empathy that transcends the pity. Aware of the amount of work involved in canning fruit, Mrs. Hale reacts differently from the County Attorney who upon discovering the exploded jars exclaims, "Here is a nice mess." Her association with the fruit is of the process: "I remember the afternoon I put up my cherries last summer." Yet despite this growing identification, she cannot bring herself to sit in Minnie's rocking chair, cannot put herself in her friend's place. The shabbiness of Minnie's clothes and the logical explanation of Wright's stinginess diminishes the alienation, and the threat of mockery from the men brings her even closer. However, it is the sudden comprehension of the significance of the unfinished work in the kitchen that brings Mrs. Hale to Minnie's side. Minnie left her work because something sudden and important happened, just as Mrs. Hale was forced to leave her own work half finished.

The most significant detail, of course, is the strangled bird, not only because it provides the motive for the murder and the method of murder, but also because it provides a clue to the entire relationship of Mr. and Mrs.

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4. Arthur Waterman, *Susan Glaspell* (New Haven: College and University Press, 1966), p. 29.

Wright. The fact that Minnie strangled her husband because he strangled the bird indicates to Mrs. Hale that Minnie understood her husband's action as a symbolic strangling of herself, his wife. It is not just because he killed the bird, but because Minnie herself was a caged bird (like the girl of the popular song of the time) and he strangled her by preventing her from communicating with others. This comprehension makes the murder totally understandable.

Minnie's existence and her behavior are determined by her man who makes the rules she lives by. In this respect all three women are the same. Their behaviour varies only because different men motivate different behaviour. Mrs. Hale, blessed with a generally understanding husband, could have committed the same crime as Minnie had she been married to Mr. Wright. Mrs. Peters knows this well: "Married to the law," she is granted a measure of trust and responsibility otherwise forbidden to women. Married to Wright, she would be the target for Mr. Peters' investigation. Mrs. Hale's understanding of Peters' selective behaviour to different people "... particularly genial with the law-abiding, as if to make it plain that he knew the difference between criminals and non-criminals . . .," reveals that his distinction is an artificial one when it comes to women, since it is their partner that determines their behaviour.

Despite her attempts to maintain her husband's values when she affirms "The law is the law," Mrs. Peters responds to Mrs. Hale's criticism of the broken stove and the financial neglect of the kitchen with "A person gets discouraged — and loses heart." As she emerges as an individual, distinct from her role of sheriff's wife, her identification with Minnie is rapid and becomes complete. She relates two events from her own life which enable her to comprehend the motivation and the justification of the murder — her reaction to the murder of her kitten, and her feeling of emptiness when her child died. These are uniquely female experiences, and they link Mrs. Peters to the murderess as they separate her from the men.

They link Mrs. Peters to Mrs. Hale as well, and the women come to be so close that they talk in suggestions rather than statements, aware that the implications of their oblique and symbolic sentences will be understood. Their final decision to cooperate in concealing the evidence they have uncovered comes after a long debate that seems a series of non sequiturs. "I know what stillness is," says Mrs. Peters, and then adds, "The law has got to punish crime." "I wish you'd seen Minnie Foster," Mrs. Hale replies, and then proceeds to blame herself for not visiting Minnie. "If I was you I wouldn't tell her her fruit is gone! Tell her it ain't." Underlying these apparently isolated statements is the question of their responsibility to their newly discovered values and to their innocent peer.

Suddenly faced with proof of the murder, as well as the deep significance of Minnie's act, Mrs. Peters retreats once more to the role of insignificant woman. In so doing, she both uses and underlines the men's incapacity to comprehend the motivation: " 'My!' she began, in a high, false voice, 'It's

a good thing the men can't hear us! Getting all stirred up over a little thing like a — dead canary.' She hurried over that. "As if that could have anything to do with — with — My, wouldn't they LAUGH!"

The two worlds are complete, the masculine world that would mock the apparent trivia of woman, and the secret trifle-language of women in which lie momentous truths of their existence, like the strangled bird in the childish box. Moreover, this polarization becomes associated with the third division that has emerged in the course of the plot — the opposition of law and justice. "The law is the law — and a bad stove is a bad stove," says Mrs. Hale early in her discoveries. And when she has discovered the necessity of communication and the pain of alienation, she cries out:

"I might 'a' known she needed help! I tell you, it's queer, Mrs. Peters. We live close together, and we live far apart. We all go through the same things — it's all just a different kind of the same thing. If it weren't — why do you and I UNDERSTAND? Why do we KNOW — what we know this minute?"

Associating the understanding to which the women have come about the murder with the obligation she had ignored, suffered, and now acknowledges, she shifts the very nature of criminality to an enforced alienation from society.

It is not that Minnie should be absolved of her crime because "of her sex,"<sup>5</sup> as Waterman notes, but because sex and the understanding of the communal nature of identity and interrelationship of the individual alter their very conception of crime. "Oh, I wish I'd come over here once in a while!" Mrs. Hale exclaims, "That was a crime! That was a crime! Who's going to punish that!" The greater crime, as Mrs. Hale has learned, 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. The other men, including Mr. Hale, are to a lesser extent guilty as well, as their constant callous banter underlines. Unlike the women, they have not learned the lesson of Minnie Foster, and are therefore excluded from full knowledge at the end. Mrs. Hale's protection of Minnie shrives her from her previous crime of unneighborly behavior, and Mrs. Peters is absolved of her obsequiousness and denial of her own sensitivity. But the men have not been able to recognize their failings and are therefore in no position to judge the nature of the crime.

The central image for this conclusion of communality is the quilt. Not only is quilting a simple communal task in which the trivial becomes integrated vitally into a larger framework, but there are hidden patterns and significances in the work. To quilt a blanket is to sew the joined patches to the lining all the way around the borders of the patch. It is to make a thin,

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5. Waterman, p. 30.

flat quilt, in which all the thicknesses are equal. To knot a quilt is to sew the fabric together, generally through a thicker lining, only at the corners of each patch. Quilting equalizes the thickness of the blanket, knotting emphasizes the distinctions. When the women inform the men at the conclusion of the story that Minnie was planning to knot the quilt, although they had not discussed this matter between them, they have determined to differentiate between the legal definition of the crime, in which all considerations external to the act itself are meaningless and equal, and their moral definition of the crime, in which nothing is even and flat. Distinctions must be made and they have made them.

Patchworking is conceived as a collective activity, for although it is the individual woman who determines the pattern, collects, cuts the scraps, and pieces them together, quilting work on an entire blanket is too arduous for one person. Minnie's patchwork would have been knotted and not quilted because knotting is easier and can be worked alone. Clearly this significance enters into the considerations of the guilty-hearted Mrs. Hale.

With her hand against the pocket of her coat where the bird is hidden, Mrs. Hale emphasizes the additional meanings of the term "knot it," meanings she is sure her investigators will not comprehend. "Knot it" conveys the sense of knotting the rope around the husband's neck: they have discovered the murderess. And they will "knot" tell. Mrs. Hale speaks a language that Mrs. Peters can now understand, but from which those who are merely concerned with universally interchangeable facts will be excluded.

The decision of the women is motivated, then, not by sexism, but by the realization that the gap between the sexes extends to a concept of law which negates the possibility of a "fair trial" for Minnie Foster. The title of the story almost certainly echoes Lucy Stone's plea for a fair trial for Lizzie Borden by a "jury of her peers."<sup>6</sup> Stone argued that Borden's motivations and actions could only be comprehended by women, and it is clear that this concept is relevant here. Minnie may be let off, as were Lizzie Borden and many husband and father murderers of the nineteenth century, because "you know juries when it comes to women,"<sup>7</sup> but she will not be understood, for woman's concept of justice involves not only social but individual influences, together with the details that shaped the specific act. The

6. "A Flaw in the Jury System," *The Women's Journal*, June 17, 1893, p. 188.

7. This is a general misconception discussed by Ann Jones in *Women Who Kill* (New York: Holt Rinehart and Winston, 1960). Jones quotes, for example, from the prosecutor's speech on the trial of Jane Swett for the murder of her husband: "The privilege of sex, though unknown to the law or to justice, has in this country and age been nearly as potent as that of clergy in medieval times, and has in fact shielded almost every woman tried in the land from capital conviction and execution, however manifest and aggravated in many cases their guilt has been." (Trial of Jane M. Swett, of Kennebunk, for Homicide. S. T. C. Jan. Term, 1867, Biddeford, Maine: Butler and Place, 1867), pp. 80-1. The women were let off however, when they were let off, not because they were believed innocent, but because of an inability to believe in the depravity of the gentle sex. Lizzie Borden was obviously guilty, and was believed guilty, but was acquitted. Her acquittal did not prove her innocence, but the chivalry of the judge.

prevailing law is general, and therefore finally inapplicable to the specific case. Minnie Foster can only be judged by a jury of her peers.

In the beginning of "Jury of her Peers" Mrs. Hale is brought along because Mrs. Peters needs the company of a woman. The women are indeed united only by fear. By the concluding lines a network of women is created on basis of mutual understanding and a secret knowledge of truth, not only of the murder but also of the significance of the small, accumulative details of existence. The women are not afraid and conspiratory, but clearly secure in their justice. The secretive manner is one of superiority, and a sense that their men need protection from the truly painful facts of life.

Susan Glaspell is often criticized as a mere local colorist, whose stories and plays, banal and insignificant, are now being rescued from oblivion because the paucity of good literature by women necessitates the reincarnation of second rate works. It is essential to any further research on this author to emphasize the philosophy that is revealed in her most popular work: Trifles are the essential material of life that create a world of women essentially different from the world of men.

