

Trifles: The Path to Sisterhood



Drawing by Randy Jones for promotion of *A Jury of Her Peers*, Sally Heckel's film adaptation of Susan Glaspell's work.

In 1916 Susan Glaspell wrote "Trifles," a one-act play to complete the bill at the Wharf Theatre (the other play was *Bound East for Cardiff* by Eugene O'Neill). One commentator on Glaspell's work believes the play was originally intended as a short story, but, according to Glaspell, "the stage took it for its own."¹ In 1917, however, Glaspell rewrote the work as a short story, "Jury of Her Peers," which appeared in *Best Short Stories of 1917*. That work was adapted by Sally Heckel in 1981 for her Academy-Award nominated film.

The setting for all three works is the same: a gloomy farmhouse kitchen belonging to John Wright, recently strangled, and his wife Minnie, now being held in prison for the crime. Three men enter the set: one, the neighboring farmer who discovered the body; another the district attorney; and a third, the sheriff. Two women accompany them: Mrs. Hale, the farmer's wife and childhood friend of Minnie and Mrs. Peters, the sheriff's wife. While the men search the bedroom and barn for clues to a possible motive for the murder, the women move about the kitchen, reconstructing Minnie's dismal life. Through their attentiveness to the "trifles" in her life, the kitchen things considered insignificant by the men, the two women piece together, like patches in a quilt, the events which may have led to the murder. And because they empathize with the missing woman, having lived similar though different lives, they make a moral decision to hide potentially incriminating evidence.

It is unlikely that had either woman been alone, she would have had sufficient understanding or courage to make the vital decision, but as the trifles reveal the arduousness of Minnie's life (and by implication of their own), a web of sisterhood is woven which connects the lives of all three enabling Mrs. Hale and Peters to counter patriarchal law, a decision particularly weighty for Mrs. Peters, who, as she is reminded by the district attorney, is "married to the law."²

Having taught both play and short story in my "Images of Women in Literature" classes, I am continually amazed at the power of Glaspell's feminist understanding

of the difficult decision with which the two early twentieth century rural women struggle. The volatile discussions which accompany class readings of these works, the questioning of the legality and morality of the women's choice, attest to the relevance of the issues Glaspell raises.

Current feminist research in developmental psychology can help increase our admiration for Glaspell's challenging presentation of the moral dilemma and the way in which Minnie's trifles raise the consciousness of both women, especially Mrs. Peters, moving them from awareness to anger to action. This research can also help us better appreciate Sally Heckel's recent adaptation of these issues to the medium of film, more specifically her use of close-up and composition within the frame, to provide a cinematic equivalent of Glaspell's statements in drama and prose.

Freud would not have been surprised by the decision taken by Mrs. Hale and Peters for in 1925 he wrote that women's superego was never "so inexorable, so impersonal, so independent of its emotional origins as we require it to be in men . . . for women the level of what is ethically normal is different from what it is in men . . . women show less sense of justice than men . . . they are less ready to submit to the great exigencies of life . . . they are more often influenced in their judgment by feelings of affection or hostility."³ Freud's use of value-laden terms such as "less" emerges from a vision of moral development based upon a male model which tends "to regard male behavior as the 'norm' and female behavior as some kind of deviation from that norm."⁴

Freud's model of mature moral development as "inexorable . . . impersonal . . . independent of emotional origins" reappears in the 1960s as the sixth or post-conventional stage of Lawrence Kohlberg's six stages of moral development. Not surprisingly, when women are given Kohlberg's test, they rarely attain the sixth stage where decisions are based upon universal ethical principles but typically are stuck at the third and fourth (or conventional) levels where decisions are based upon contextual concerns (Gilligan, p. 18).

But Kohlberg's moral scale in turn relies upon a model of human development such as Erik Erikson's "expansion of Freud" (Gilligan, p. 11) where separation, not relationship, becomes the model and measure of growth.⁵ Freud, Erickson, and Kohlberg, although recognizing that women's development is different from men's, present their model, based upon male experience, as universal.

Recent feminist research in developmental psychology challenges the sexual asymmetry of the patriarchal view in which male development is the norm and women's development is perceived (as with Freud) as "less." Of particular value for a discussion of Glaspell's and Heckel's works are Nancy Chodorow's writings on gender development and Carol Gilligan's on moral development.

According to Chodorow, the "process of becoming a male or female someone in the world begins in infancy with a sense of 'oneness,' a 'primary identification' . . . with the person responsible for early care. Emerging from this phase, every child faces the challenge of separation: distinguishing *self* from *other*. . . . Because women are the primary caretakers of children, that first 'other' is almost without exception female; consequently, boys and girls experience individuation and relationship differently.⁶ For boys, the typical development is more emphatic individuation and firmer ego boundaries, i.e., in order to become male, boys experience more strongly a sense of being "not female." For girls, because the primary parent (or other) is of the same sex, "a basis for 'empathy' [is] built into their primary definition of self." (quoted in Gilligan, p. 8) They "come to experience themselves as less differentiated than boys, as more continuous with and related to the external object-world. . . . The basic feminine sense of self is connected to the world, the basic masculine sense of self is separate" (Ms. p. 36).

This distinction in itself carries no value judgment and merely describes a difference. But because theories of psychological development (e.g., Freud's and Erikson's)"

focus on individuation . . . and maturity is equated with personal autonomy, concern with relationships appears as a weakness of women rather than as a human strength" (Gilligan p. 17).

If we turn from gender to moral development, a similar pattern emerges. Because women "define themselves in a context of human relationship" (Gilligan p. 17), their moral decisions differ from those of men. For women, typically, moral problems arise "from conflicting responsibilities rather than from competing rights," require for their "resolution a mode of thinking that is contextual rather than . . . abstract," are concerned more with relationships than rules (Gilligan, p. 19). Since Kohlberg perceives the expansion of moral understanding moving from the pre-conventional (or individual) through the conventional (or societal) to the post-conventional (or universal), women, who see the self and other as interdependent, whose moral judgments are more closely tied to feelings of empathy and compassion, who see moral problems as problems of responsibility in relationship, are more closely aligned with the conventional, a less mature stage of development (Gilligan, p. 73). Gilligan, however, insists the relational bias in women's thinking is not a developmental deficiency as traditionally seen by psychologists but a different social and moral understanding. What we have are "two modes of judging, two different constructions of the moral domain—one traditionally associated with masculinity and the public world of social power, the other with femininity and the privacy of domestic interchange" (Gilligan, p. 68).

With this theoretical basis, we can now turn to Glaspell's works and more fully appreciate her astute depiction of these two different modes of judging: the post-conventional revealed through the words and actions of all three men and by Mrs. Peters early in each work, the conventional mode voiced by Mrs. Hale and by Mrs. Peters at the end of each work as her consciousness has been raised through the demeaning remarks made by the men and, more significantly, through her exposure to the trifles of Minnie's life.

From the moment the men enter the kitchen, they begin to judge the absent Minnie according to abstract rules and rights. For example, dirty towels suggest to them that Minnie "was not much of a housekeeper."⁷ To Mrs. Hale, however, responding from within a specific context, dirty towels imply that either "there's a great deal of work to be done on a farm" or "towels get dirty awful quick. Men's hands aren't always as clean as they might be" (Ferguson, p. 453). As the men continue to criticize or trivialize the domestic sphere (e.g., laughing at the women's concern for broken jars of preserves or their curiosity as to whether Minnie was going to "knot or quilt" her sewing), the stage directions indicate: "the two women move a little closer together" (Ferguson, p. 453).

Their moral "moving closer together" does not occur, however, until Mrs. Peters empathically understands Minnie's situation. For initially, Mrs. Peters parrots the male judgmental mode, demonstrating Glaspell's keen understanding of women's acquiescence to patriarchal law. When Mrs. Hale reproaches the men for disparaging remarks about Minnie's housekeeping, Mrs. Peters timidly responds: "It's no more than their duty" (Ferguson, p. 454). As Mrs. Hale restitches Minnie's erratic sewing on a piece of quilting, Mrs. Peters nervously suggests: "I don't think we ought to touch things" (Ferguson, p. 457). And when Mrs. Hale objects to the men searching and "trying to get Minnie's own house to turn against her," (Ferguson, p. 456) Mrs. Peters replies: "But, Mrs. Hale, the law is the law" (Ferguson, p. 456). Her concern with "duty" and what one "ought to do" support a post-conventional view, corroborating the district attorney's trust in Mrs. Peters as "one of us" (Ferguson, p. 376).

Mrs. Hale, on the contrary, supports Minnie from the outset (although it's not clear that she could or would have taken the final action on her own). She responds to Mrs. Peter's comment that "the law is the law" with "and a bad stove is a bad stove" (Ferguson, p. 378)—implying the need to re-interpret abstract law within a particular context. When Mrs. Peters declares: "The law has got to punish crime, (Ferguson,

p. 383)" Mrs. Hale urges a redefinition of one's notion of crime. Reflecting on Minnie's drab and lonely life, she cries: "I wish I'd come over here once in a while! . . . That was a crime! Who's going to punish that?" (Ferguson, p. 384).

As Mrs. Peters listens to Mrs. Hale's recollections of Minnie's past and comes into physical contact with Minnie's present, "It was as if something within her, not herself had spoken, and it found in Mrs. Peters something she did not know as herself" (Ferguson, p. 383). Minnie's lonely life evokes memories of the stillness when Mrs. Peter's first baby died while she was homesteading in the Dakotas. Minnie's violent response to the killing of her pet canary recalls murderous feelings in Mrs. Peters when her pet kitten had been brutally slain. Sharing her memories with Mrs. Hale, Mrs. Peters recognizes her connection with other women and, consequently, is capable of moving from a typically male to a more typically female mode of judgment.

In filming the Glaspell works, Sally Heckel utilizes the visual and aural resources of cinema to highlight each trifle, create context, and reinforce relationships. Through close-up (e.g., a jar of preserves, a piece of quilting), the supposedly insignificant kitchen things assume larger-than-life proportions—emphasizing the significance of the domestic sphere. Through a combination of off-screen dialogue and closeup, Heckel creates the context necessary for the women's final decision. For example, when the district attorney is heard to state, "We need a motive," the camera provides a close-up of sugar spilt on a counter (evidence of interrupted work). Another man will state: "We need some definite thing to build a story around," and Heckel offers a close-up of Mrs. Hale's hand on the quilt piece, under which is hidden the dead canary. Thus, while the men speak abstractly off-screen, on-screen, Heckel depicts the particulars, the specific context from which the women will make their moral choice.

A third visual device, composition within the frame, creates relationships, and Heckel will use this to visually unite the women and/or objects. In one frame, she links the remaining jar of preserves, the broken bird cage, and the now-restitched piece of quilt—a visual equivalent of the connections that lead Mrs. Hale and Peters to their joint decision.

Heckel's powerful contemporary film of Glaspell's earlier works attest to the vitality of Glaspell's vision. Fifty years before the current women's movement, Susan Glaspell understood how consciousness raising could empower women to take actions together which they could not take as individuals, how as women share their experiences, they could act out of a new respect for the value of their lives as women, different from, but certainly equal to, the world of men.

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Notes

- ¹ Quoted in *Plays by American Women*, ed. Judith Barlow (New York: Avon Books, 1981) p. xxi.
- ² Susan Glaspell, "A Jury of Her Peers" in *Images of Women in Literature*, ed. Mary Anne Ferguson (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1973) p. 385.
- ³ Quoted in Carol Gilligan, *In a Different Voice* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1982) p.7.
- ⁴ David McClelland quoted in Gilligan, p. 14.
- ⁵ Carol Gilligan, "In a Different Voice: Women's Conceptions of Self and of Morality," *Harvard Educational Review*, 47 (1977) p. 509.
- ⁶ Judith Thurman, "The Basics: Chodorow's Theory of Gender," *Ms* Sept. 1982, pp. 35-6.
- ⁷ Susan Glaspell, "Trifles," in *Images of Women in Literature*, ed. Mary Anne Ferguson, 3rd edition (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1981) p. 453.