

# Silent Justice in a Different Key: Glaspell's "Trifles"

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SUSAN GLASPELL'S "TRIFLES" is a deceptive play: deceptive because, like its title, it *seems* simple, almost inconsequential. Yet the play represents a profound conflict between two models of perception and behavior. An exploration of the play reveals a fundamental difference between the women's actions and the men's, a difference grounded in varying understandings of the home space. That difference culminates, finally, in the establishing of two competing ethical paradigms. One might summarize the plot of the brief, early twentieth-century play as follows: a country woman is suspected of killing her husband in their isolated farmhouse. The county attorney, the sheriff, and a neighbor return to the scene of the crime, attempting to collect evidence. Two of the men's wives accompany them to gather belongings for the jailed woman. In the course of the action, the women accidentally turn up the evidence which the men seek in vain, and the women decide to keep quiet about their discovery.

But to summarize the plot in this fashion is somewhat misleading because it is in fact no accident that the women discover the evidence. Their *method* from the very beginning of the play leads not only to the discovery that eludes the men, but also to their ultimate moral choice, a choice which radically separates them from the men. That is, their *way* of knowing leads them not simply to knowledge; it also leads to the decision about how to act on that knowledge.

From the very outset, the men and women of the play perceive the setting, the lonely farmhouse, from diverging perspectives. The men come to the scene of a crime and

attempt to look through the eyes of legal investigators. They stride into the room, and, with the exception of three words, we hear only male voices for the first quarter of the play. The county attorney conducts his investigation by the book. He interviews the key witness, asking for only facts (interpretations, he indicates, will receive attention later). The strict linear process also applies to spaces: the men go methodically from room to room, following the preset plan of the search. The sheriff and attorney are certain that they have left nothing out, "nothing of importance" ("Trifles," 8). Yet at the end of the play, they know no more than at the beginning. The motive for the crime remains obscure.

By contrast, the women arrive at a *home*. Although neither they nor the men realize it, they too are conducting an investigation. Their process seems formless as they move through the kitchen, talking and reflecting. The men patronize them and gently ridicule their concerns while the women themselves, at least at the outset, characterize their activity in the house as relatively unimportant. But as Mrs. Hale and Mrs. Peters gather household goods for Minnie Wright, the two characters begin to reconstruct the accused woman's life. They do so through several means: memories of her, memories of their own lives (similar to hers in many ways), and speculation about her feelings and responses to the conditions of her life. Instead of following a predetermined schedule of inquiry, they begin, almost instinctively, to put themselves into Minnie Wright's place. In her sewing box, they discover Minnie's dead pet bird, and this discovery would be the missing piece to the men's "puzzle." As they recognize that the bird has been violently strangled and then lovingly set inside a piece of rich material, the stage directions reveal their incipient knowledge: "[the women's] eyes meet. A look of growing comprehension of horror" ("Trifles," 24). They then reflect her husband would not have liked a thing that sang and would have silenced it as he silenced the singing Minnie. As they share and ponder, the mundane details of Minnie's life lead Mrs. Hale and Mrs. Peters to comprehend what their

husbands do not: the motive for the murder. Far more importantly, the details that allow them this insight—details overlooked as unimportant by the men—lead the women to understand the almost tangible oppression of Minnie Wright's everyday life. In one of the play's many ironies, Mrs. Hale says, resentfully, "I don't know as there's anything so strange, our takin' up our time with little things while we're waiting for them to get the evidence" ("Trifles," 17). Evidence, of course, is generally comprised of "little things," as we have witnessed graphically in our twentieth-century crime labs. None of the play's characters ever recognizes the irony, for the women accept the designation of their concerns as mere "trifles." But in another ironic turn, Mrs. Hale and Mrs. Peters ultimately find power in being devalued, for their low status allows them to keep quiet at the play's end. Much like servants and other discounted groups, the women are permitted access to knowledge because it is assumed they will not be able to make intelligent use of it.

To understand the women's discovery and their decision to hide it, one must trace carefully through the brief play. For this is more than a story of women learning something that the confident, powerful men remain ignorant about: the path these country women follow leads them directly to their choice of silence. Though this silence sounds no different to the men than the women's initial speechlessness, we as an audience hear a completely new tone in the quiet. In the beginning, the women are silent from the powerlessness Belenky has described (23-24); their final refusal to speak rings with the power of intention and choice. Glaspell continued to develop such powerful refusals in her later plays. For example, Madeline Fejevary, the heroine of *The Inheritors*, refuses to use her powerful connections and apologize to the judge for her actions. Instead, she faces a probable incarceration. Although her civil disobedience and conscious heroism set her apart from the farm women of "Trifles," her ultimate choice of powerful silence links her to the earlier characters.

Like Madeline, Mrs. Hale and Mrs. Peters use their imaginations to picture troubling situations and identify with those involved. They therefore wander through vastly different territory than the men present on the scene. The women's conversation probes past an easy, abstract characterization of the dead man into memories of personal, almost visceral responses to him. When Mrs. Peters remarks, "*They say* he was a good man" (my emphasis), Mrs. Hale agrees, but with significant qualifiers. "Yes—good: he didn't drink, and kept his word as well as most, I guess, and paid his debts. But he was a hard man. . . . Just to pass the time of day with him—(shivers) Like a raw wind that gets to the bone" ("Trifles," 21-22). They contemplate what life would be like with such a man, and they also recall pertinent information about his wife. The women remember stories of the young, singing Minnie Foster and contemplate the lonely quiet of her childless farmhouse. Similarly, Madeline Fejevary marks off an imaginary jail cell and pictures the confinement of the imprisoned conscientious objector. Mrs. Hale and Mrs. Peters also remember Minnie's fear of cats—another trifle. But the county attorney's ignorance of that trifle later draws him to overlook the potential clue the empty bird cage presents. When he asks, off-handedly, if the bird has flown, Mrs. Hale lies: "We think—the cat got it." Or perhaps Mrs. Hale's remark is an oblique reference to the women's silence, as in the old question "has the cat got your tongue?" In any event, the attorney is oblivious to the remark, as he replies "(pre-occupied) Is there a cat?" ("Trifles," 24). The attorney seeks only information about the visible evidence of the murder itself. The idiosyncratic, often intangible dynamics of the Wright household remain outside his purview. They do not fit his procedural, separate knowledge (Belenky, 103-4). As a result, neither the missing bird nor the fictitious cat arouse his curiosity or his suspicions.

But the women do not simply remember and sympathize with Minnie. They identify with her, quite literally. In her first lines, Mrs. Hale defends the accused women's house-

keeping from the county attorney's attack. Mrs. Hale also mourns the loss of Mrs. Wright's preserved fruit, remembering her own hard work during canning season. Again, to the men, this empathy is trivial and harmless, but it is the emotional entree for the play's outcome. Later, Mrs. Peters empathizes in more significant ways: she evokes precise moments in her own life that parallel Minnie Wright's pain. After discovering the canary with its neck wrung, Mrs. Peters recalls the boy who murdered her kitten long ago, and whispers, "If they hadn't held me back I would have—hurt him" ("Trifles," 25). She also contemplates the stillness of her old homestead after her first baby died and compares it to Minnie's solitude. This evocation of memories compels the women to see Minnie Wright not as an abstract murderer but as a fully developed, complex victim who at last retaliated against the source of her pain. Indeed, the women's very discovery of the bird stems from their kindness, their desire to bring Minnie's quilting material to her jail cell. Because they identify with her and because they see her as an individual and not simply a participant in a criminal action, they uncover the key evidence in the case. Their perspective impels them imaginatively to *relive* her entire married life rather than simply to *research* one violent moment.

Clearly, as several feminist commentators have noted, the women are able to empathize with Minnie Wright because they share her experience. Annette Kolodny points out that the men cannot "read" the messages Minnie Wright sends silently through the details of her house since the men don't "share her context" (Kolodny, 462). But the men's *method* of reading, I would argue, is fundamentally different from the women's. The plot of the play is not simply the women reading Minnie's experience while the men read John's, not simply a rural version of "he said, she said." The county attorney, Mr. Peters, and Mr. Hale never attempt to identify with John Wright or even consider him as a distinct individual with specific behaviors. Instead, they view him as they do his wife, an abstraction. He is the victim of a crime, she the criminal.

(Today, she would be a “perpetrator,” in our even more abstract language of criminology.) The men, ignoring the context or “web” as Carol Gilligan might describe it, can make no sense of a seemingly aberrant moment (62).

The women’s approach and their recognition of the web of experience also propel Mrs. Hale to another stage unthinkable to the men. She takes direct responsibility for the desperation that led to the murder. Early in the play, she regrets not visiting “Minnie Foster” (significantly using the woman’s maiden name). After the women have found the dead bird, she responds emphatically to Mrs. Peters as they discuss Minnie’s guilt and their pending decision:

Mrs. Peters: The law has got to punish crime, Mrs. Hale.

Mrs. Hale: . . . I wish you’d seen Minnie Foster when she wore a white dress with blue ribbons and stood up in the choir and sang. [A look around the room.] Oh, I *wish* I’d come over here once in a while! That was a crime! That was a crime! Who’s going to punish that? (27)

From Mrs. Hale’s perspective, people are linked together through fragile, sometimes imperceptible strands. The tiny trifles of life—a neighbor’s visit, a bird’s song, the sewing of a quilt—have profound reverberations. Further, Mrs. Hale observes, “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” (“Trifles,” 27).

In the end, Mrs. Peters comes to participate in this vision of solidarity. The men, however, remain oblivious to it: indeed, they feel no more common bond with Mr. Wright than they do with his wife. Their vision, their way of knowing, narrows their focus, and in this case leads to a type of blindness as to what has occurred at the farmhouse. Of course, if they *had* discovered the evidence, they would have had no doubts about how to use it: their strict, legal path leaves no room for ambiguous margins. It is the women’s alternative path, the *way* they discover the evidence, that leads them to withhold it because they recognize that they are bound up in the texture of events just as Minnie Wright is. As they read

her story, they understand it as their story also. But their decision, I emphasize, does not simply derive from sharing Minnie Wright's gender. It springs from their map of the territory, one fundamentally different from the men's overview of the spaces before them.

Much popular and theoretical exploration has been made of the differences between genders. Some have tried to untangle the biological and environmental strands of the puzzle but we are far from being able to isolate essentially "feminine" or essentially "masculine" behavior as distinct from cultural conditioned performance. Certainly, during the early part of the twentieth century, the duties and structures of women's lives would have predisposed them to approach a problem from a different angle than that of the men. As many commentators have noted, even today, despite the significant changes in women's lives and opportunities since mid-century, women's responsibilities and concerns *tend* to remain somewhat distinct from men's.

Whether these differences between men and women are primarily based in biology (sex) or culture (gender), they remain evident in current culture. We recognize Glaspell's women constructing an alternative paradigm of justice and care, for they posit it on different grounds than the tradition of rights and rules, the standards used in the dominant culture. The ethic of care, the notion of responsibility *within* relationships especially, takes precedence in such a construction over strict formulations of justice based on precise reciprocity (Gilligan, 73). Therefore, unlike some moral development schemas whose highest stage strives for principles which are universal in application (e.g., Piaget and Kohlberg, cited in Gilligan), the women in this play develop a highly differentiated and reflective moral schema. The paradigm is probably not exclusively the domain of women but it *is* the domain of those who have been shaped since birth by conventions that support an ethic based on a "psychological logic of relationships" rather than a "formal logic of fairness" (Gilligan, 73). Although an individual might appropriate the logic

most closely associated with the other gender, to do so requires overcoming intense cultural conditioning. Indeed, it is likely that individual women have attempted to adopt the “fairness” ideology Gilligan describes so as to succeed in the dominant masculine culture. The pattern is familiar: just as members of minority cultures often must study “mainstream” culture and embrace new ideologies to succeed, so some women have worked to place themselves within the predominantly masculine logic. For even though Glaspell’s play was written more than eighty years ago, social critics still document the devaluing of women’s alternative patterns. In *The Difference*, Judith Mann observed the divergence between the two ethics visible in men and women making decisions and in the responses to those decisions. The men, Mann argues, operated from an ethos of self-reliance and competition and therefore strove to be first with a quick, firm answer. Women on the other hand valued cooperation and worked to interconnect, taking time to make up their minds. Such behavior was “dismissed as indecisive” instead of being understood as a separate model that promoted integrated thinking (Mann, 382). The distinction Mann observed echoes what we hear in Glaspell’s play.

Early in the two women’s discussion, Mrs. Hale expresses discomfort at the men’s violation (from her perspective) of Mrs. Wright’s house. Mrs. Peters counters matter-of-factly, “But Mrs. Hale, the law is the law” (“Trifles,” 16). Yet as Mrs. Peters begins to follow Mrs. Hale’s lead, her perspective also begins to shift. By the end of the play, both women operate in a contextual rather than an abstract mode: in Gilligan’s terms, they are concerned more with relationships than with rules. The neat, rigid order of criminal law, an order defined and upheld by their husbands and the county attorney, has given way to the messier pattern of day-to-day life and shared responsibilities and experience. Significantly, Mrs. Peter’s final action of the play goes far beyond mere silent complicity with Mrs. Hale’s concealment of evidence. It is the sheriff’s wife herself, the woman the county attorney

deems to be "married to the law" ("Trifles," 29), who frantically tries to hide the bird. Of course, the women's choice to adopt an alternative model of perception can succeed only in silence, but it is no longer a silence of powerlessness. In the play's final line, a line replete with several puns, Mrs. Hale and Mrs. Peters intentionally "knot" their knowledge and do "not" share it. Their silence has become a mark of their solidarity, a refusal to endanger a sister. For the men in the play, their secret remains an undiscovered trifle.

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