Social Issue Plays:
The Treatment Of Women and the Use of Symbols in Glaspell's Trifles
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Major Theme

Gender: In this play women are pitted against men--Minnie against her husband, the two women against their husbands and the other men. The men are logical, arrogant, stupid; the women are sympathetic and drawn to empathize with Minnie and forgive her her crime.

Politics of Gender

The play, Trifles, which was originally entitled "Jury of Her Peers," was a vehicle for the expression of Glaspell's views on the treatment of women in the 1900's.

Through "Trifles" Glaspell is able to bring attention to the poor conditions women faced, and the inequality they encountered.

The way that Glaspell accomplishes this is through the conversation of two women after a murder. The murder is that of John Wright. It is being investigated by the County Attorney and the Sheriff. Both are men and both believe that John Wright's wife killed him but they can't prove it, so they go to the house with Mr. Hale, who was first on the scene, looking for evidence. With them they bring two women, Mrs. Hale, Mr. Hale's wife and a neighbor to the Wright's, and Mrs. Peters, the sheriff's wife.

The men when they go into the house see a very different picture than what the women see. What the men see is a messy house that is poorly taken care of, but no reasons why Mrs. Wright would kill her husband.

Dirty towels

Broken jars of preserves

To the men such things are just "women's trifles" but the women know that Mrs. Peters must have worked hard to make the preserves. Mr. Hale just says, "Well, women are used to worrying over trifles." This is just another example of how the men saw women as inferior and the often hard work that they did as frivolous.

In the end the men are unable to find evidence but are going to convict Mrs. Wright anyway. However the women have found the evidence and know what happened. They conclude that Mrs. Wright was treated poorly by her husband, as many women of the time were, and she just couldn't take it any more. Mrs. Hale and Mrs. Peters feel bad because they never visited Mrs. Wright and they both knew from experience how lonely it can be for a woman who has no children. The men could never come to this conclusion because they can't see a man treating a woman poorly.

The first symbol is found in Minnie's quilting.

Mrs. Peters and Mrs. Hale stumble across some squares that Minnie had sewed, all of which were sewn in a neat and orderly fashion, except one which was sewn haphazardly and carelessly. This befuddles the women and they wonder why she had evidently not cared about this particular square. "Why, it looks as if she didn't know what she was about!" Mrs. Hale comments. The women discuss it for a few moments and impulsively, Mrs. Hale decides to rip a few stitches and resew the piece. Mrs. Peters, who "is married to the law," is upset over Mrs. Hale's abrupt decision, wishing instead that she would leave things alone.

The other symbol is found in a dead bird wrapped in silk

Mrs. Hale says that "[Minnie] was kind of like a bird herself..." She also says that "when she was Minnie Foster, one of the town girls singing in the
choir," she was full of life and probably a very happy and pretty girl. The women decide John would not have liked the bird because he was "close," "hard," and like a "raw wind that gets to the bone."

Mrs. Peters exclaims "Somebody-wrung-its-neck." Mrs. Hale says of Minnie, "She used to sing. [John] killed that, too." Although it is never implicitly stated, it is obvious that John killed the bird and because of the "stillness," isolation and loneliness Minnie felt, she killed John.

As previously stated, Glaspell uses symbols to further her theme. Had the men not degraded the women and their "trifles," they may have found the evidence they sought.

**Why trifles?**

The little things, the "trifles" that the men dismiss, are all that the women need to discern what happened to John Wright. The little bird with its neck wrung parallels John Wright's death. The same knots used in quilting are inferred to have strangled John, and the lack of attention he paid to his home, much less his wife, clearly shows that this man was like all the rest of the midwestern men--uncaring.

The uncaring concern and the lack of attention for detail are what Mr. Hale, the Sheriff, and the County Attorney do not have in their quest for evidence; therefore, everything else around them is petty and insignificant. This distinction includes the women as well.

"Trifles" emphasizes the actual dismissal of the women. If women were not merely relegated to running the farm, then perhaps they would not resort to killing their husbands in an effort to bring some peace into their lives.