



Feminist Analysis of Susan Glaspell's *Trifles*: Unveiling Gender Power Dynamics and Female Resistance

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Abstract

Susan Glaspell's lifetime (1876–1948), coincides closely with the rise of modernism in Europe and its arrival and development in the United States. Her representative drama Trifles has obvious modernist characteristics. Many scholars analyze and evaluate her works from the perspective of modernism. However, Some drama critics and historians believe that her works are the classics of feminist drama in the history of American literature and deserve further discussion. This study attempts to analyze Susan Glaspell's Trifles from the perspective of feminism. This analysis reveals the oppressive forces within a patriarchal society and the subsequent resistance displayed by female characters. The paper delves into the limited agency and discourse power of women, emphasizing the spatial confinement and silencing they endure, capturing the complexities of women's struggles in a society dominated by patriarchal values.

Keywords: *Feminism; Patriarchal Value; Activity Space and Discourse Power; Gender Politics; Female Resistance*

1. Susan Glaspell and *Trifles*

Susan Glaspell (1876-1948), known as "the mother of modern American drama", is a representative of the American Small Theater Movement in the early 20th century. Her dramas tend to be anti-traditional and have obvious modernist characteristics. She is also one of the founders of Provincetown Theater, the first modern drama company in the United States. She is an American playwright, novelist, actor, and reporter, and a winner of the Pulitzer Prize (Bigby 3). Susan Glaspell is not only a modernist writer but also an outstanding feminist writer. It was not until the 1970s that some drama critics and historians re-examined her plays, evaluated her artistic achievements, and considered her works as a classic of feminist drama in the history of American literature (Jean 48). She has created many works in her life, including 14 plays, nine novels, and more than 50 short stories.

Trifles (1916) is her most famous one-act play, which is based on the murder of Margaret Hossack, an Indianola, Iowa peasant woman, who killed her husband. Glaspell reported the case and the following trial when she was a journalist and decided to create a play based on this true incident. From December 3, 1900, to April 10, 1901, as a news reporter, Glaspell wrote 26 articles in response to Margaret Hossack's case (Ozieblo 28). Following the prevailing trend against female offenders, Glaspell criticized Mrs. Hossack for killing her husband with an axe when he was sleeping. Under the

influence of Glaspell's articles, the public believed Mrs. Hossack was a cold-hearted insane killer. However, after speaking with friends and relatives at the Hossack farm, Glaspell changed her perspective toward Mrs. Hossack and took a new look at her with sympathy. Many years later, Glasper may feel guilty of Mrs. Hossack and decided to write a play to criticize the social system that deprives women of the same rights as men but requires more responsibility. A year later, the one-act play *Trifles* was followed by a short story "the jury of her peers", in which Glaspell tried to further analyze some elements she thought were not clear enough in *Trifles*. These two works are undoubtedly her attempt to "discredit Mrs. Hossack and make up for her late understanding and her inability to help at that time" (Ozieblo 29). With regard to this sense of guilt, it must be emphasized that Glaspell retained the role of Mrs. Hale for herself in the first performance of *Trifles* by Provincetown players on August 8, 1916. This role was always to defend Minnie Wright and felt guilty for not providing Minnie with her due friendship. After its premiere, the play won unanimous praise from the audience and critics. It has become one of the few far-reaching one-act plays in the history of American drama (Ben-Zvi 8).

The play is mainly about a murder in a small town. As a one-act play, the whole murder scene is not presented directly, but as the background of the story. The victim Farmer John Wright was strangled in bed late at night, while his wife Minnie Wright was accused of being the biggest suspect and



was detained by the police. County attorney Henderson, sheriff Peters and neighbor Hale went to Wright's house to search for clues to the case and explore the motive for the murder, while Mrs. Peters and Mrs. Hale helped Mrs. Wright pack some things at home. In the play, three men looked around for clues in the Wright couple's house, but they got nothing in the end. They turned a blind eye to women's actions and words, even with a trace of disdain and ridicule, and thought that women do not have the ability to search clues. However, it was the two women they despised that found the key clue in kitchen to Mrs. Wright's crime.

2. Feminism in American Drama

Feminism originated in France, then spread to and gradually became popular in Britain and the United States. Feminism refers to a social theory and political movement mainly based on women's experience. It not only pursues gender equality but also requires civil and political rights and opposes aristocratic privileges. The most important goal is to strive for political rights, which is often called "feminist movement" (Wang 66).

American female drama has experienced several periods. Their theme has developed from a single struggle for women's rights to explore various social problems. At the same time, the performance of drama is also constantly innovating. American women make their own voice through drama to strive for their own rights, integrate themselves into society, and become equal members. They call for an ideal society and a spectacular social change.

The feminist movement was officially launched at the end of the 19th century, but feminism in American women's drama was reflected in early drama works. Women's drama with feminist consciousness developed after 1790 with the gradual abolition of the ban on drama in the United States, especially the rise of the abolitionist movement in the early 19th century. Women started to participate in various demonstrations, conferences, and speeches. At the end of the 19th century, the feminist movement flourished. Feminist actors in London, especially some American actresses, began to accept the social realism of Ibsen playwrights (Wang 67). Many American female playwrights are young people who immigrate from small towns to cities. Their script attempts to keep up with the increasingly complex social situation but has little success. In the beginning of the 20th century, adopting the new realistic style, "Hedda Gabler" performed in Manhattan theater in October 1903. This performance is known as the beginning of American drama in the 20th century, and women's drama has gradually attracted social attention. In expressing feminism, Rachel Crothers's plays "Myself-Bettina", "A Man's World" and "Young Wisdom" depict mature new women with beautiful appearance and decisive work. They not only fight for women's rights but also learn the ability to communicate friendly with other women. In the play, Rachel puts forward hot feminist topics such as double standards, new women, free love, experimental marriage, women's progress, and so on. Her works and Susan Glaspell's "Trifle" have become classics of feminism. Among

these female dramas in this period, there is a prominent play "Miss Lulu Bett" by Zona Gale, a black humorous comedy about the repressive scene in a small town, which became the first drama produced by women and won a Pulitzer Prize. Female playwrights in this period not only created their own plays but also actively participated in the editing, directing, and performance.

From the 1920s to 1930s, women in Western countries basically acquired equal political rights, but they were still unequal to men in social life and cultural concepts. Feminists began to realize that there was a problem of gender relations and gender power. The feminist movement became to analyze why men and women were unequal and the power structure of men and women. Feminism in this period is the combination of theory and practice (Shawatt 256). It is a belief and ideology of equality between men and women. It aims to oppose all inequalities, including gender discrimination. Feminism requires equality between men and women in terms of social status, employment opportunities, and remuneration.

From 1930 to 1960, there was a climax of feminism. Some female playwrights try to shift their theme from realism to women's issues. During this period, many excellent works appeared. Clare Boothe Luce's "The Women" is a humorous and pungent play that satirizes the current situation of women's dependence on men in society.

Since 1960, the American women movement has entered a post-feminist period. Post-feminism adopts some postmodernism ideas, emphasizes the diversity of perspectives and evaluation criteria, and advocates forming a political alliance with other progressive forces for women's rights. The social consciousness of women groups has gradually improved in political and cultural life. In order to develop and expand themselves, women groups cooperate with other progressive social groups and participate in various social activities. Whether they are feminists or not, their creations are affected by this social trend. As a result, the theme of women's plays has diversified, emphasizing that women should try their best to integrate into all aspects of society, so as to achieve equal status with men. Beth Henley's "Crimes of the Heart", Wendy Wasserstein's "Uncommon Women and Others", the Pulitzer Prize winner "The Heidi Chronicles", and Marsha Norman's "Night, Mother" have become successful works on Broadway (Susan S). These plays present a generally acceptable image of women to the mainstream audience, that is, women who can speak and think independently. Feminist writers explore women's multiple identities and horizons in aesthetics, and explore gender discrimination, racial discrimination, and homosexuality without considering the normal logic of realism. Some female playwrights also use absurd surreal images, angry language, and physical changes to attract the audiences, so as to affect the audience's political tendency.

In conclusion, the development of female drama has enriched American literature and art, promoted the development of society, and become a beautiful scenery in the history of American drama.

3. Analysis

The play is conducted by two lines: the bright line is that Mr. Wright died at home, and Mrs. Peters and Mrs. Hale found Mrs. Wright's murder motive and evidence but kept it a secret while accompanying their husband and attorney George Henderson to the scene for evidence searching. The dark line is Mrs. Wright's life experience. Therefore, the analysis also starts from two aspects: the conflict between Mr. and Mrs. Wright, and the contradiction between men and women in the bright line.

3.1. The lack of female power

3.1.1 The lack of activity space

The social space division was closely related to gender politics. Male's activities are set in public places, legal, economic, cultural, and other "public areas" with power and prestige, while female's activities are set in the "private areas" next to families, stoves, and children (Duan 55). This division of the public sphere and the private sphere based on gender confrontation will undoubtedly cause great suppression to the female gender class, and the dominant power relationship is always dominated by men. The Wright family has obviously become a space to discipline women. Male individuals or groups always plan and strengthen the gender spatial order to serve their absolute power and vital interests.

The house where Mr. and Mrs. Wright live in this play is located in the valley, a remote place; The heroine, Mrs. Wright, not only stays in such a remote valley all day, but also her range of activities can be said to be within a circle centered on the kitchen and no more than the distance from her house. "Most of the time, the kitchen not only represents the triviality of the family itself but also represents the submissive position in the family" (Wang 164).

Such an environment isolated her from the crowd, without interpersonal and social activities. Minnie was imprisoned at home because her husband banned her from the church choir, the local charity, and he refused to call at home. This isolation can be regarded as a form of solitary confinement (Massey), so that her nearest neighbor Mrs. Hale has not seen her for nearly a year. Luce Irigaray, a French scholar, believes that "men control women by isolating them from each other. Their community is deprived, they are also deprived of self-consciousness and become objects rather than subjects" (Elsley 55).

When three men, including Sheriff Peters, were looking for clues in the barn outside the house and the bedroom above the kitchen, the two wives stayed in the house without going out or going upstairs. They just stayed in the remote and cramped kitchen. In sharp contrast, the men occupied a spacious and core position, such as the upstairs bedroom and the downstairs living room. Besides, the male showed tyranny and arrogant and they can swagger and walk everywhere in the room.

3.1.2 Loss of Female Discourse Power

The women in the play are silent and besieged by the great tension of men's discourse. They have been in a state of forbearance and silence. They are cautious in their words and

behaviors. While men are arrogant, and give orders to the women with an oppressive masculinity, unless women can speak on behalf of their interests. After entering the house, the two women stood consciously against the door, even hesitated to bake the fire, and didn't say a word. They just stood foolishly aside to listen to the man's talk. They are trembling, even if they make a sound occasionally.

It is not difficult to see that female discourse has always been in a marginal position or repressed position relative to the mainstream discourse. Only when the men are absent can they relax and speak happily.

3.2. The oppression of patriarchal values

Before marriage, Minnie was a lively, passionate, elegant, and optimistic girl. In the past, singing and choir were the focus of her life. After marriage, Mr. Wright's stinginess made Mrs. Wright unable to pay dues and participate in women's activities; she was shabby without bright clothes and ashamed to participate in church choir. Mrs. Wright's spatial movement is greatly limited. She is enclosed in a limited family space by her husband, which deprives her female power and opportunities. The marriage for her is like keeping a bird in a cage without freedom. Mr. Wright limited Minnie's contact with the outside world. Mrs. Wright, who lacked communication with the outside world, thought she could tell her husband about her depression all day, but her husband Wright was a ruthless person as cold wind. He worked outside all day and would not accompany Minnie even if he came back home. So Minnie bought a bird to take care of and communicate with. The bird can be considered as the embodiment of Minnie. Although she can't sing, she is accompanied by the song of a bird. Although she has no children, a bird can communicate with her. Strangling the singing bird by her husband is the strangulation of Minnie's vitality. Mr. Wright deprived Minnie of the freedom and right to express herself. Women are limited to the private sphere and become men's private property. The husband's increasing neglect and strict control, which completely deprives Minnie of the basic power demands in the family space. Men not only control public space but also are undoubtedly the highest authority in family space. Family space is not so much the territory of women, but the place to be bound. Mr. Wright's cruelty of breaking the bird's neck deduces the oppression of patriarchal culture on women's space to the extreme. This deep-rooted gender politics exists in every corner of the space, laying the roots for women's resistance in the future.

In the discipline space dominated by male discourse, men use various strategies to force women to speak on behalf of their interests or keep women silent. Women have gradually lost their equal social status with men in the right to speak "Women are scarce, silent, and unknown gender" (Shavart 256). Throughout the play, attorney Henderson always tries to interrupt and influence the conversation, so as to establish his authority; In addition, the men in the play always accuse and despise women's behavior and language. When Mr. Hale heard that Peters laughed at Mrs. Wright's worry about the jam at home, he concluded that women are always worrying about trifles; Moreover, the real

names of Mrs. Peters and Mrs. Hale have never appeared in the whole play. Only when Mrs. Hale recalls the scene before Mrs. Wright's marriage will she mention that her name is Minnie. Men become the masters of social life, while women are their vassals. The kitchen is considered to be the main place for women's activities. This is a typical patriarchal society, where Minnie Foster is a member of this society and one of the victims of the patriarchal society. The real names of Mrs. Peters and Mrs. Hale have never appeared in the whole play, which reflects the loss of women's self-identity.

3.3. The resistance of female power

Minnie, who has been in a state of isolation for a long time, she has no place to tell and release the repression and resentment. When her husband killed the bird, Mrs. Wright had changed from depression to anger. Finally, she decided to kill her sleeping husband with a rope as he had killed the bird, which was her resistance to her dissatisfaction with life and the patriarchal society.

Mrs. Hale to some extent accepts the gender politics in the patriarchal culture, but she still holds a strong self-consciousness. Mrs. Peters made it clear at first that she wanted to uphold the patriarchal law to punish the crime. But Mrs. Hale's words touched the heart of Mrs. Peters. The communication of similar life experience opens the heart of them. They share the pain and sorrow, and their self-awareness are awakened. "Whenever a woman is ready to speak, a process of liberation begins, so it has powerful political meaning... When we tell others the story of our lives, our self-consciousness becomes clear"(Bell 13). Finally, Mrs. Hale and Mrs. Peters formed a female alliance. The two wives decided to take key evidence away from the crime scene and protect Mrs. Wright by covering up the truth. They resist authority and remain silent about the truth, which is precisely the performance of mastering the discourse power, so as to achieve the purpose of protecting Minnie. This kind of solidarity and help among women is a kind of self-protection. They are no longer objects to male, but independent individuals who have self-awareness. From this moment, they have recovered their own power to overturn the gender politics in male culture.

However, the way of women's resistance has its limitations. Mrs. Wright resists her husband by the means of violence, which leads to her greater uneasiness. And she is still bound by housework and doesn't create her own new life. Mrs. Peters and Mrs. Hale also violate the law to protect Mrs. Wright and fall into a "moral dilemma".

4. Conclusion

Susan Glaspell's play *Trifles* sheds light on the societal constraints and gender dynamics of the time. The analysis of *Trifles* from a feminist perspective unveils the multifaceted challenges faced by women, both in the domestic sphere and broader societal contexts. This paper highlights the lack of female power, manifested in restricted activity spaces and diminished discourse power. The limited activity space and silenced discourse of the female characters underscore the pervasive dominance of men in both public and private

spheres. The symbolism of the caged bird and its tragic fate becomes a powerful metaphor for the suppression of women's vitality and expression.

Furthermore, the resistance of female power, as demonstrated by Mrs. Hale and Mrs. Peters in their solidarity with Mrs. Wright, marks a pivotal moment in the narrative. Their decision to protect Mrs. Wright by withholding crucial information becomes an act of defiance against patriarchal authority. This collective action signifies the emergence of self-awareness and empowerment among women, breaking the shackles of subjugation. However, the play also suggests the limitations of women's resistance within the existing societal framework. Mrs. Wright's use of violence as a form of resistance and the moral dilemma faced by Mrs. Hale and Mrs. Peters underscore the complexities and challenges of challenging established norms.

In essence, *Trifles* stands as a timeless piece of feminist literature that not only critiques the gender inequalities of its time but also prompts reflection on the broader implications of societal expectations on individual autonomy. This paper serves as a testament to the enduring relevance of feminist discourse and its transformative potential in shaping a more equitable future.

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