A Jury of Her Peers Study Guide

A Jury of Her Peers by Susan Glaspell

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Introduction

Susan Glaspell's "A Jury of Her Peers," first published in 1917, is a short story adaptation of her one-act play *Trifles.* Since their first publication, both the story and the play have appeared In many anthologies of women writers and playwrights. Although *Trifles* was written first and performed in 1916 by Glaspell' s theater troupe, the Provincetown Players, the play was not published until three years after the short story appeared in the March 5, 1917 edition of *Everyweek* magazine. Inspired by events witnessed during her years as a court reporter in Iowa, Glaspell crafted a story in which a group of rural women deduce the details of a murder in which a woman has killed her husband. Understanding the clues left amidst the "trifles" of the woman's kitchen, the women are able to outsmart their husbands, who are at the farmhouse to collect evidence, and thus prevent the wife from being convicted of the crime. The play was received warmly, and Glaspell made only minor changes in adapting the play into a short story.

Glaspell claimed that" A Jury of Her Peers" was based on an actual court case she covered as a reporter for the *Des Moines Daily.* On December 2, 1900, sixty-year-old farmer John Hossack was murdered in Indianola, Iowa. His skull was crushed by an ax while he and his wife were asleep in bed. His wife, Margaret, was tried for the crime and eventually released due to inconclusive evidence. Like Minnie Wright, the main character of Glaspell' s story, Mrs. Hossack claimed not to have seen the murderer. The trial was attended many of the town's women. Among them was the sheriff's wife, who showed much sympathy to Mrs. Hossack throughout the trial despite having initially testified against her. Critics believe that Glaspell based the character of Mrs. Peters on this woman. Because women were not allowed to be jurors at the trial, Glaspell created a Jury of those female peers in her short story.

Author Biography

Playwright, novelist, and short story writer Susan Glaspell was born July 1, 1876, in Davenport, Iowa, though some sources cite her birth year as 1882. She received a rural, middle-class public school education. Eventually she attended Drake University in Des Moines, Iowa, and graduated in 1899 with a degree in Journalism. In college Glaspell acquired several awards and made a name for herself as a competitive student. Following her graduation, she began work as a reporter for the *Des Moines Dally,* writing on local Crime and politics, an unusual occupation for a woman of her time.

In 1913 Glaspell married playwright George Cram Cook The couple never had children together, but she became stepmother to his two children from a previous marriage. They spent summers at their East Coast property and in 1915 founded the Provincetown Players, an organization of playwrights and actors, in Provincetown, Massachusetts Recognized as a dramatist in her own right, Glaspell often acted in her own productions and provided artistic support for other young writers and performers, most notably Eugene O'Neill. Glaspell was widowed in 1924 and married playwright Norman Matson. They divorced in 1932.

In her lifetime, Glaspell wrote thirteen plays, fourteen novels, and more than fifty essays, articles, and short stories. In 1931 she became only the second woman playwright to win the Pulitzer Prize. *Trifles,* the play upon which "A Jury of Her Peers" is based, is Glaspell's most anthologized work and accounts for much of her popularity as a twentieth century American playwright. She died in Provincetown of pleural embolism in 1948. Glaspell had lived and worked during a time when ambition and independence characterized many women, whose newfound political power was a driving force behind the suffrage and the temperance movements. This strong sense of female identity challenged the perceptions of many who viewed the public realm as a "man's world" only.

Plot Summary

The story begins with Mrs. Martha Hale being hurried along by her husband, Lewis Hale. She leaves her kitchen in the middle of making bread, hating the fact that she is leaving things half done.

She accompanies George Henderson, the county attorney, Sheriff Henry Peters, and his wife, Mrs. Peters, to the scene of a crime at the home of the Wrights, a couple they all knew. Mrs. Hale has been asked along to keep Mrs. Peters company, even though the two women have met only once before. The crime they are investigating is the murder of Mr. John Wright. His wife, Mrs. Minnie Wright, whom the women refer to by her maiden name, Minnie Foster, is being held at the jail as a suspect. The Hales, the Peters, and Attorney Henderson all meet at the scene to determine what might have happened the day before.

Mr. Hale and his son, who are the Wrights' closest neighbors, were the first to see Minnie and her dead husband. Mr. Hale tells how they arrived at the Wright home to find Minnie in her rocking chair looking "queer" and pleating her apron. When Mr. Hale asked to see John, she calmly told him he was upstairs and had been strangled to death; she claimed that someone had slipped a rope under her husband's neck and killed him while they were sleeping. Mr. Hale explained that he was there to inquire if John wanted a telephone installed; a request that caused Minnie to laugh. Shortly afterward, the coroner arrived with the sheriff to begin investigating the scene and Minnie was taken away to jail as a suspect.

The men are slightly appalled at Minnie's messy kitchen and criticize her housekeeping. Convinced that there is "nothing here but kitchen things," the men search for clues upstairs where the body was found and outside in the bam, while the women stay in the kitchen and gather some items to take to Minnie. Among the unfinished and badly sewn quilting, the jars of preserves that have burst due to the cold, and the dirty pots and cooking area, they begin to uncover their own clues about why Minnie might have wanted to kill her husband. They uncover evidence that the men overlook, such as the crooked stitch of the quilt, Minnie's old and drab clothing, the rundown kitchen in which she had to cook, and her beloved canary that had been strangled and saved in a box. Mrs. Hale has known Minnie since they were young girls. She discusses with Mrs. Peters how Minnie had been more cheerful and sociable before she was married. She notices that she had changed into a more serious, lonely, and introverted person after she became Mrs. Wright Mrs. Hale recalls what a strict and cold person Mr. Wright was. She remarks that he was too selfish and somber a person to match Minnie's lively and generous spirit. Over and over Mrs. Hale remarks that she should have visited Minnie more often-it was a crime not to have seen her in over a year. Mrs. Peters tries to comfort her by stating that "somehow, we just don't see how it is with other folks till-something comes up."_

Both Mrs. Hale and Mrs. Peters imagine what it must have felt like to live in such a horrible environment. Mrs. Peters sadly remembers the solitude of her farmhouse after

her only child died. Mrs. Hale recalls the hurry in which she left her kitchen earlier that day, with her cooking and cleaning half done. The women discuss how only a distracted woman could leave her housework unfinished, her kitchen untidy, and her stitching crooked.

Together, they determine that such a lonely household could only make Minnie "lose heart."

Seeing the broken hinge on the birdcage, they speculate that the canary may have been killed by her husband, much the way they believe he killed Minnie's spirit with his overbearing manner. They blame Mr. Wright for Minnie not having nice clothes to wear in public and for having to live and cook in a rundown home without even a telephone to keep her connected in the outside world. Both women put themselves in Minnie's place to try and feel what she may have been feeling. All the while they exchange knowing, uncomfortable glances.

The women repair her poor quilting and concoct a story of a runaway cat to explain the disappearance of the canary. In doing so, they conceal clues that might reveal Minnie's motive for murder. Neither one is able to say for certain who they believe is guilty of the murder, but they suggest that all of this information about Minnie, her marriage, and the dead canary holds the answer to who committed the crime. The women do not tell the men about the canary or about their assumptions about Minnie's unhappy marriage. The story ends with Mrs. Hale and Mrs. Peters nervously removing the canary and the unfinished quilting from the premises.

Detailed Summary & Analysis

Summary

As Martha Hale leaves her house to join her husband on that cold winter's day, she casts a hasty glance around her kitchen. She is uneasy about leaving her house in such a state; she had been in the middle of making bread when she and her husband were called upon by the town sheriff to assist in a murder case, the likes of which had never been seen before in Dickson County. Martha's husband calls her as she hovers in the doorway, reluctant to leave with the kitchen in such a state, and she hurriedly closes the door and gets into the big two-seater buggy that has come to collect them to take them to the crime scene.

The woman sitting next to her on the back seat of the buggy is Mrs. Peters, the sheriff's wife, whom Martha has met once and decidedly dislikes. Mrs. Peters is not in any way as a sheriff's wife should be, in Mrs. Hale's opinion; she is small, thin and softly spoken, unlike the previous sheriff's wife in every way. Sheriff Peters, however, makes up for his wife's deficiencies by being exactly the type of man one would expect to be elected sheriff.

Mrs. Peters tries to make small talk, but Mrs. Hale is in no mood for talking as the buggy reaches the crest of the hill, and the Wright property comes into view. It had always been lonesome looking, but now that it was the scene of such a crime, it seemed to Mrs. Hale to appear more forlorn than ever.

When they enter the house, both women are so affected by the sadness in the room that they do not warm themselves by the fire, but simply stand by the door, not even looking around.

The investigation begins with the Sheriff Peters requesting that Mr. Hale recount to himself and Mr. Henderson, the county attorney, exactly what he had seen the previous morning when he dropped by. The county attorney interrupts, asking if anything had been moved since that time, and reprimands the sheriff lightly for not having left someone to guard the scene. He then encourages Mr. Hale to begin his story.

Mrs. Hale watches her husband, noticing that he looks queer, almost as if the memory of the previous day's events were making him ill. Mr. Hale recounts that he and his oldest son had started out for town with a load of potatoes. He had decided to stop off at the Wright's house to ask John Wright once again if he wanted a telephone installed, clarifying to the men that unless two houses request telephones in the area the phone company will not install the line.

Mr. Hale recalls the stillness of the morning on the Wright's porch, and the silence that followed his knock on the door. He knocked harder, and remembers that he thought he heard someone say, "Come in," although he was not sure. Opening the door, he

recounts, he saw Mrs. Wright sitting in the rocker. Mrs. Hale thinks fleetingly as her husband tells the story that the dingy red rocker in the middle of the floor did not look like the type of chair the Minnie Foster of twenty years before would have sat in.

The county attorney presses Hale for details on how Mrs. Wright looked. Queer was the only word Hale could think of to describe her appearance, and when the county attorney asks him to clarify, taking out a notebook and pencil to take notes, he begins to speak more guardedly. She looked, Hale said, "as if she didn't know what she was going to do next. And kind of – done up." He describes how she did not seem to care that he had entered the house, how she did not pay much attention when he tried making small talk with her about the weather, so he had asked finally to see Mr. Wright. He recalls that at that request she had laughed. When he pursued the matter, asking if he was home, she told him that he was. When he asked why he could not see John Wright if he was home, she said, "Cause he's dead." By this time, Mr. Hale did not know what to say, and Mrs. Wright just continued rocking back and forth in her rocking chair. Mr. Hale asked where he was, and Mrs. Wright indicated that he was upstairs with a point of her finger. Before Mr. Hale started up the stairs, he asked of what he died. "He died of a rope around his neck," said Mrs. Wright, and Hale recalls that as she said it she went on pleating her apron and rocking back and forth.

Mr. Hale recalls that he called his son Harry in from the truck where he had been waiting, in case he needed help. However, when they got upstairs it was clear enough that Mr. Wright was dead, his wind cut off permanently by the rope still wound tight around his neck. They went back downstairs, and began to question Mrs. Wright. Mrs. Wright claimed that nobody had been notified and she had no idea who the murderer was. In addition, she claimed that she was asleep during the strangling.

Mr. Hale then recalls that Harry went to find a phone to notify the police station, and as he waited with Mrs. Wright, he tried once again to make small talk, telling her that they had stopped by in the first place to see if the Wrights had wanted a telephone installed. Mrs. Wright laughed suddenly at that, then stopped and looked a little scared.

When Hale saw that the county attorney was taking note of the word scared, he stopped, clarifying that maybe it was not scared exactly, but perhaps something else. Then he recalls that soon after their brief exchange Harry came back with Dr. Lloyd and Mr. Peters, and thus ended his tale.

Hale is visibly relieved to have finished his story, and the county attorney decides that they will continue the investigation upstairs. Before going upstairs, he asks the sheriff if he is sure that there was not anything in the kitchen of any importance to the motive of the murder. The sheriff confirms that there is nothing.

The county attorney is drawn to a certain cupboard in the kitchen, and peers into it. He quickly withdraws his hand, which is sticky with something that had obviously spilled in the cupboard. Mrs. Peters exclaims sympathetically that when she had spoken to Mrs. Wright the previous night she had been worried that her jam jars would break because of the sudden change in weather. This is extremely amusing to the men, who remark at

the absurdity of being held for murder and being worried about preserves. "Oh, well," Mr. Hale remarks condescendingly, "women are used to worrying over trifles."

The county attorney washes the jam off his hands, but is unable to find a clean place to wipe his hands dry, as the roller towel is dirty. He remarks snidely that Mrs. Wright is not much of a housekeeper, noting the dirty pans under the sink as well.

When the county attorney asks if Mrs. Hale and Mrs. Wright had been friends, Martha Hale shakes her head, recalling that she has not been to the Wright house in over a year. When asked the reason, Mrs. Hale claims that she had been very busy, but that it also had to do with the house not being a very cheerful place to visit. Mr. Henderson agrees, commenting that Mrs. Wright did not seem to have much of a home-making instinct. Mrs. Hale mutters under her breath that Mr. Wright had as little or less than his wife did. Henderson asks her for clarification, and Mrs. Hale replies that a place would not be "any the cheerfuller for John Wright's bein' in it."

As the men make their way upstairs, the sheriff asks if there is anything his wife should not touch while she prepares the items she has promised to take to Mrs. Wright in the prison. Mr. Henderson says that Mrs. Peters is one of them, and urges the women condescendingly to look for clues. Mr. Hale chimes in that the women would not know a clue if they came upon it.

As soon as they leave, Mrs. Hale busies herself tidying the kitchen, grumbling that she would hate to have men coming in and criticizing her kitchen when she was not around. She notices a bucket of sugar uncovered on a shelf, with a paper bag next to it half full. Suddenly, she begins to recreate a scene in her head. "She was putting this in there," she says to herself slowly. She remembers the bread she was making when she was interrupted, and wonders what had interrupted Minnie Foster as she was scooping her sugar.

Lost in thought, Mrs. Hale is shaken from her reverie by the thin voice of Mrs. Peters, asking if Mrs. Hale would help her put together Mrs. Wright's belongings from the front-room closet. As they sort through the articles of clothing Mrs. Peters will take to Mrs. Wright, Martha Hale can't help noticing how worn out and patched all of her clothes were, exclaiming over Mr. Wright's excessive frugality, and pointed to them as the probable cause of Mrs. Wright not being seen out in society much.

While Mrs. Peters is looking for her shawl and apron to complete her package for Mrs. Wright, Mrs. Hale asks her suddenly if she believes that Mrs. Wright was guilty of the crime for which she is being accused. Mrs. Peters looks frightened, and says in a tremulous voice that she does not know. Mrs. Hale says confidently that she believes Mrs. Wright is innocent. Mrs. Peters replies softly that her husband says it does not look good for her. They both confirm that their husbands find the weapon of choice odd. Mr. Hale knew there was a gun in the house, and could not understand why the murder would not have simply shot Mr. Wright if they had wanted him dead. Mrs. Peters confides that Mr. Henderson had said that what they needed for the case was a motive. "Something to show anger-or sudden feeling."

As Mrs. Hale begins to comment that there are no signs of anger in the house, her eyes brush past the sugar, half-transferred into the sugar bowl, and then notices the table, half-wiped. She notices that the fire in the stove is not very bright, and wonders, "What it would mean, year after year, to have that stove to wrestle with." She remembers her own crime of never going to see Minnie Foster, leaving her to struggle with her stove alone, year after year. She is shaken from her reverie by Mrs. Peters. "A person gets discouraged-and loses heart," she says, and suddenly she too has a look of understanding in her eyes.

Mrs. Peters finds a large quilting basket in the living room, and as the two women are exclaiming over how lovely the quilt would be when finished, the door opened and the men walk in, interrupting Mrs. Hale as she is wondering aloud whether Mrs. Wright was going to quilt or knot the pieces. The men laugh condescendingly at this triviality, and at the ways of women. They leave to inspect the barn, and Mrs. Hale is resentful at their comments, but Mrs. Peters has just discovered something. She shows Mrs. Hale one of the blocks of the quilt, commenting on how different the sewing is on this particular block, crooked and uneven, compared to the others, which were all very neat and even. Their eyes meet for an instant, and something passes between them, as Mrs. Hale takes the block, and calmly begins to undo the uneven stitches. Mrs. Peters questions her, alarmed. Mrs. Hale replies calmly that she is just redoing a couple of stitches that looked uneven.

Mrs. Peters watches her nervously as she replaces the bad sewing for good. Then she calls out to Mrs. Hale. "What do you suppose she was so-nervous about?" Mrs. Hale replies dismissively, "Oh, I don't know. I don't know as she was-nervous. I sew awful queer sometimes when I'm just tired." She is examining her handiwork, and comparing it to the erratic sewing of the rest of the block, when she is suddenly startled by the piercing voice of Mrs. Peters, who has discovered an empty birdcage, and questions Mrs. Hale if Mrs. Wright kept a bird. Mrs. Hale replies that she did not know, and recalls that Mrs. Wright herself had had a beautiful singing voice. They wonder aloud what had happened to Mrs. Wright's bird, and Mrs. Peters notices that one of the hinges on the door of the birdcage had been roughly pulled apart. Once again, their eyes meet, and they fall silent.

Mrs. Hale breaks the silence abruptly, chastising herself for not having been a better neighbor and friend. Mrs. Peters tries to console her, but Mrs. Hale understands her own reasons for not coming, and cannot absolve herself of the fact that she had avoided the Wright household because it was not cheerful, and now understands that it is the very reason why she should have made the effort to come.

She thinks aloud how quiet the house would have been without children, and with only Mr. Wright to keep Minnie Foster company each day. Martha Hale asks Mrs. Peters if she had known Mr. Wright. She admits that she did not, but had heard he was a good man. Mrs. Hale concedes grimly that he was good in the moral sense, but that he was a hard man as well, "Like a raw wind that gets to the bone…I should think she would've wanted a bird!" Their eyes move back to the broken cage door, and Mrs. Hale wonders aloud again, what could have happened to the bird.

She then steers the subject to more cheerful topics, suggesting that Mrs. Peters take the quilt to Mrs. Wright so that she would have something to keep her occupied. They agree upon this course of action, and begin to look for thread and patches in the sewing basket. As they rummage through the basket, Mrs. Hale comes upon a pretty box. Thinking it might be where the scissors were kept, she opens it. In it is not scissors, but a small dead bird, its small neck wrung brutally. Again, the eyes of the two women meet, this time with a look of mutual understanding and growing horror. Suddenly there is a sound outside the door, and Mrs. Hale makes a rapid decision, closing the box and hiding it at the bottom of the sewing basket. The men stay only a moment, and then are back upstairs reviewing the details, frustrated that they have not yet found a single clue.

It is Mrs. Hale that breaks the silence, musing that she obviously liked the bird, and had plans to bury it in the box. Mrs. Peters remembers that she herself had had a kitten when she was younger, and that one day a neighborhood boy had killed it with a hatchet before her eyes. She recalls that if the adults had not have held her back, she would have, her voice faltering for a moment, hurt him. Mrs. Hale ponders the idea once again of not having children around, thinking how quiet it would have been. No, she concluded finally, Wright would not have liked a bird, or anything that was cheerful or sang. "She used to sing. He killed that too," she said in a voice that tightened with each word.

Mrs. Peters says, hesitatingly, that they have no way of knowing who really killed the bird. "I knew John Wright," Mrs. Hale replies grimly. The sheriff's wife says pleadingly, in defense of the dead man, "It was an awful thing was done in this house that night, Mrs. Hale…Killing a man while he slept-slipping a thing round his neck that choked the life out of him." As if bewitched by the sight of the broken birdcage, Mrs. Hale murmurs, "If there had been years and years of-nothing, then a bird to sing to you, it would be awful-still-after the bird was still."

Mrs. Peters suddenly breaks, recounting the story of when she and her husband lived in Dakota, and her firstborn child had died, at the age of two. "I know what stillness is," she says, her voice queerly monotonous. Martha Hale though, is lost in the memory of the beautiful girl Minnie Foster had been twenty years ago. She once again chastises herself harshly for not having come to visit more often, crying out, "That was a crime! Who's going to punish that?

The men re-enter the room where the two women sit, lost in thought. As they enter, the county attorney is explaining to the sheriff that the guilt of Mrs. Wright is inevitable; the only thing missing is a motive that would hold up in front of a jury. "You know juries when it comes to women," he says. "If there was some definite thing-something to show. Something to make a story about. A thing that would connect up with this clumsy way of doing it."

Sheriff Peters comes up to the table where they are sitting, and asks the county attorney if he would like to see the items Mrs. Peters had picked out for Mrs. Wright. He chuckles condescendingly, his hand on the sewing basket, which held the box with the bird, remarking that the women would not have picked out anything dangerous. They

leave once again to check one last area of the house. As soon as they are through the door, Martha Hale springs up, and the women's eyes lock once more, finally. Martha Hale's penetrating gaze tells Mrs. Peters what she must do, but for a moment, Mrs. Peters is frozen. Then she rushes forward suddenly, and, rummaging through the sewing basket, finds the box. She tries to fit it in her handbag, but the box is too big. She opens the box as if to take the bird out, but is unable to touch it and simply stares at it helplessly. The knob to the inner door turns, and ahead of the men by less than an instant, Martha Hale grabs the box from the Mrs. Peters, shoving it into the pocket of her coat just as the men enter the kitchen. Sarcastically, Mr. Henderson comments that although they had not found a motive to their crime, they had at least discovered that Mrs. Wright was going to knot her quilt, rather than quilt it.

Analysis

A Jury of her Peers begins with a scene of foreshadowing. Martha Hale hesitates to leave her kitchen in a mess. Perhaps this is force of personal habit, but in the context of the story, when she is leaving her own messy kitchen to see another woman chastised almost as much for her messy kitchen as for the alleged murder of her husband; it becomes a significant clue to the way in which the story will unfold in the following pages.

As they leave the warmth of the buggy to enter the lonely house, Martha Hale is struck for a moment with the feeling that she is unable to enter it. The feeling that is preventing her from crossing the threshold is guilt. Martha Hale feels guilty that in all the years that they had been neighbors, and of all the times that it had crossed her mind to pay a visit to Minnie Foster, she had never actually done it. Guilt is a recurring sentiment that Martha Hale will feel as she learns the details of what passed the night that Minnie Foster decided that she had simply had enough.

It is of further significance to note that despite the twenty years that had passed since Minnie Foster married and became Mrs. Wright, Martha Hale continues to remember and refer to her as Minnie Foster. If taking a husband's name is the ultimate symbol of unity in marriage, then being considered by her neighbors still as Minnie Foster instead of Mrs. Wright is significant in that those around her and perhaps even she herself never considered her really married to Mr. Wright. The reason and significance behind this are part of the mystery of why Minnie Foster would allegedly kill her husband in the middle of the night with a rope around his neck.

As Mrs. Hale watches her husband begin to recount the events of the previous morning when he discovered Mr. Wright's body, she has "that sinking feeling of the mother whose child is about to speak a piece. Lewis often wandered along and got things mixed up in a story. She hoped he would tell this straight and plain, and not say unnecessary things that would just make things harder for Minnie Foster." With this sentiment, we realize that Mrs. Hale has already cast her judgment on Minnie Foster, and if perhaps she has not found her innocent of the crime, she has definitively taken the woman's side. The main theme of this short story is a feministic one, and the women

herein cast away all cattiness, pettiness, jealousy and even alliances to their husbands, instinctively protecting Minnie as one of their own regardless of her respective innocence or guilt of the crime that she is accused of.

Mr. Hale begins to describe the scenario, and we get our first clue as to what type of man Mr. Wright was. Mr. Hale repeats what Wright had told him the last time he had asked about installing a phone line, that "folks talked too much anyway, and all he asked was peace and quiet." Mr. Hale remembers that his thought had been to catch Wright while his wife was there, and convince her that "all the women-folks liked the telephones," although he adds as an afterthought that he "didn't know as what his wife wanted made much difference to John."

When Mr. Hale finishes his story, the county attorney takes one long look around the kitchen before moving upstairs, and questions the sheriff as to whether or not there is anything of importance in the kitchen, or anything that would point to a motive. "'Nothing here but kitchen things,' he said, with a little laugh for the insignificance of kitchen things." This phrase is significant because it foreshadows the fact that there are indeed important clues in Mrs. Wright's kitchen; the motive may be hiding not in any one thing in particular, but in the combination of clues found in the kitchen. Perhaps there will be clues found not by the sheriff and the county attorney, but by the women, who have been left to do their womanly work in the kitchen.

When the county attorney remarks on the unkempt state of Mrs. Wright's kitchen, Mrs. Hale comes to her defense, perhaps remembering her own dirty kitchen, and remarks defensively "Men's hands aren't always as clean as they might be." Mr. Henderson laughs that she is being loyal to her sex, and supposes that the two women were friends as well, due to their proximity. Female loyalty is a major theme in this text, demonstrated by the fact that despite neither Mrs. Hale nor Mrs. Peters being a close friend of Mrs. Wright's, they are both quick to step to her defense, and even go so far as to cover up evidence for her. The reader has no way of knowing whether Mrs. Wright will be proven guilty or innocent in court, however it is the act of friendship and loyalty, not the outcome, that is significant.

Irony is a major theme in this work. The irony of the story is that, though the men constantly mock and condescend them, the women unravel the true story of what happened. The women are in the kitchen, systematically finding clues and destroying them, understanding more and more of why the murder was committed, understanding the certain justice of it, and working subtly to ensure that the victimization of poor Minnie Foster ends with the death of her frigid husband.

Characters

Minnie Foster

See Minnie Wright

Lewis Hale

Lewis Hale is an Iowa farmer and a neighbor of the Wrights. He is called on the day after John Wright's murder to participate in the investigation as a witness. He tells the police how he found the body in the upstairs bedroom and of Minnie's peculiar behavior that day. Through his narrative the reader and the other characters learn about Minnie's state of mind after the murder. He tends to be long-winded when he speaks, and his wife is frequently worried that he will not get the story straight. Along with the other male characters, Mr. Hale searches for clues in all the obvious places, yet misses some of the most crucial evidence in the kitchen.

Martha Hale

Martha Hale is the only character visible for the entire story. The narrator follows her from her own kitchen to Wright's kitchen. While waiting for the detective to investigate the premises, she conducts her own examination of the scene. Rather than search Minnie Wright's home with the critical eye of the law, Mrs. Hale observes it with the sympathetic eye of a farm wife. As an acquaintance of Minnie's for over twenty years, she provides the reader with background on what Minnie was like before and after marriage. She represents loyalty and female solidarity by concealing evidence that would implicate Minnie in the death of her husband.

George Henderson

George Henderson is the young county lawyer who intends to prosecute Minnie Wright for the murder of her husband. As part of the investigating party, he asks questions and take notes His sarcasm about the women's attention to minor domestic details aggravates the women and shows him to be narrow-minded.

Henry Peters

As a man of the law, the sheriff's main goal is to convict John Wright's murderer. He is described as the perfect example of a sheriff-heavy and big voiced. He is driven by the belief that he and his assembly of men can solve the crime of their own accord without the help of the women. He dismisses the women's observations as a silly waste of time

Mrs. Peters

Mrs. Peters's first name is never revealed in the story. She is the sheriff's wife, and the county prosecutor reminds her that she is "married to the law." Her first tendency is to discourage Mrs. Hale from rushing to conclusions and tampering with the evidence they uncover in the kitchen. Later, Mrs. Peters's female sensibility causes her to pardon Minnie of her possible crime, and she assists Mrs. Hale in concealing evidence. For the greater part of the story, she is clearly undecided about whether to side with the men, who want to prosecute Minnie, or with Mrs. Hale, who is sympathetic to Minnie's predicament. Hers is the "swing vote" on whether or not to "convict" Minnie.

Sheriff Peters

See Henry Peters

John Wright

John Wright is Minnie's husband, and his murder sets in motion the action of the story. Like Minnie, he does not appear in the story and, thus, cannot defend himself. He is described by both the men and the women as a selfish, cold, unsociable man who did not care much for his wife's needs and opinions Mrs. Hale and Mrs. Peters assume that he strangled Minnie's canary, which they find tucked away in Minnie's sewing basket. Since Mr. Wright has been strangled himself, the women hypothesize that Minnie murdered him in retaliation for what he did to her pet bird.

Minnie Wright

Minnie Wright is the main suspect in her husband's murder, but she does not appear in the story. Thus, she is not allowed to speak for herself; and the reader comes to know her solely by what Mrs. Hale says about her and by the "clues" she left in the kitchen that reveal her lifestyle and her frame of lined at the time of the murder. Mrs. Hale's reminiscence of Minnie Foster, the girl she was before she married John Wright, tells readers that she was a lively and pretty young woman who always dressed well and sang in the church choir. Mr. Hale's account of the Mrs. Wright he found after the murder indicates a "queer" woman who rocks in her chair while her husband lies dead upstairs.

Themes

Gender Roles

Much of the tension in "A Jury of Her Peers" results from what the women understand and what the men are blind to. The kitchen, during the time the story takes place, was the sole domain of the wife. Wives themselves, Mrs. Hale and Mrs. Peters are able to determine Mrs. Wright's frame of mind from how she left her kitchen. The men are scornful of the messy kitchen, and ultimately dismissive of what it contains. The sheriff comments that there's "nothing here but kitchen things," and when Mrs. Peters laments that the jars of preserves have burst from the cold, Mr. Hale says that "women are used to worrying over trifles.' , Yet the women know that Mrs. Wright would not choose to have such a shabby or ill-kept kitchen. When the attorney notices the filthy dish towels and says, "Not much of a housekeeper, would you say, ladies?" Mrs. Hale replies that "Those towels get dirty awful quick. Men's hands aren't always as clean as they might be."

Because both women have been farmer's wives themselves, they understand the loneliness of living in Isolation on a farm, and they can understand how upset Mrs. Wright would be over the death of her canary. They also recognize that the erratic stitching on her quilting squares, which contradicts her earlier, neater stitching was the result of a Distracted mind. Eventually, the men leave the women in the kitchen to search for clues in "more important" areas of the house, but not before telling Mrs. Peters and Mrs. Hale to keep their eyes open. The attorney's comment-"you women might come upon a clue to the motive" indicates that he does not think they could deduct a motive, but only stumble on to evidence by mistake. Mr. Hale takes this line of reasoning even farther by asking "would the women know a clue if they Did come upon it?" Such an attitude towards women in the room of the house they know best highlights not only the Differences between men's and women's household roles, but also that the women's role is devalued by men. The stark divisions between men's and women's roles is noted by Mrs. Hale, who says "I'd hate to have men coming' Into my kitchen. . . snoopin' round and Criticizing'."

The story makes it clear that men have obligations in the home as well. The women note that Mrs. Wright's clothing was worn and shabby. "You don't enjoy things when you feel shabby," Mrs. Hale says by way of explaining why she probably had not seen much of Minnie Wright in public since she had gotten married twenty years ago. They also note the decrepit state of the stove When contemplating what they should do about the clues, Mrs. Hale says that "The law is the law-and a bad stove is a bad stove," and thinks about "what it would mean, year after year, to have that stove to wrestle with." Mr. Hale originally went to the Wrights' house to ask if John Wright would install a telephone, "all the women-folks like the telephones," he says, but by the way Minnie had laughed at his proposition, it is inferred that John Wright would have denied his wife even that bit of comfort in her own home.

Deception and Loyalty

As Mrs. Peters and Mrs. Hale piece together a probable scenario for Mr. Wright's murder, they become torn between deceiving the men, particularly Mrs. Peters' husband, who is the sheriff, and maintaining their loyalty to a woman with whom they identify. Because the men are so reluctant to consider the quilting, the preserves, and the state of the kitchen to be significant details of the crime, the women may feel that any attempts to convince them of how important these "trifles" really are will only be met with more dismissive sarcasm "The law is the law-and a bad stove is a bad stove," says Mrs. Hale, succinctly summarizing their quandary. Their deception is borne of their loyalty to another woman-even if it is someone neither of them knew well. Even after the men have searched the grounds and are returning to the kitchen, their Minds are not made up. At the end, the attorney tells Mrs Peters that "a sheriff's wife is named to the law." when asked If she sees It that way, and she replies "Not just that way."

Public vs. Private Life

The men investigating the crime are unsuccessful in determining a motive that would have prompted Minnie to kill her husband because they are in unfamiliar territory. The division of public and private life IN the early twentieth century was very clear. Women remained Isolated IN the private sphere as homemakers, and men were required to function in the public world as breadwinners. Women did not commonly have knowledge of the more male-dominated institutions of law or business, and men were generally unaware of what was involved in homemaking and raising children. Since the domestic realm of the kitchen is so foreign to the sheriff and his male companions, they do not view its contents with the same understanding that the women do. To them, a dirty towels and dishes can signify only one thing-sloppy housekeeping. But the women know that most homemakers are conscientious and that dirty towels and dishes may be symptoms of an unsettled or disrupted mind. Because they are unfamiliar with women's work, the men are quick to dismiss it.

Style

Omniscient Narrator

The third-person omniscient narrator in "A Jury of Her Peers" is capable of relating the thoughts of each character. It differs from a first-person narrator in that it does not tell the story from only one character's point of view but sees things from a central vantage point. Omniscient narration allows readers to witness the physical actions and often the mental and emotional states of more than one character. It provides readers with Information about things that the characters themselves do not say aloud, or that they are unaware of. In the story, Mrs. Hale's husband says that "women are used to worrying over trifles." The omniscient narrator relates that he says it in a tone of "good-natured superiority." It is not likely that Mr. Hale realized he was demeaning the women, but the narrator comments on it.

The narrator, however, does focus on the women in the kitchen. When the men leave to do the police work of searching the barn and the bedroom upstairs, the narrator does not report what they are doing. One reason could be that whatever they found or did not find could not be as significant to the story as what the women uncovered. The narrative perspective calls attention to what is most important for the reader to know. It reflects the decision of the author to foreground some details and events and to overlook others.

Symbolism

Symbolism is a literary technique in which something comes to represent something else, without losing its original meaning. It is an important device used by writers who want to impart an added dimension of meaning to a character or some element of the plot. The two main symbols in "A Jury of Her Peers" are the canary and the quilt pieces. The canary is a symbol for Minnie, who used to sing in the church choir. Mrs. Hale confronts the comparison directly: "come to think of It, she was kind of like a bird herself. Real sweet and pretty, but kind of timid and-fluttery." But the women find the bird dead; strangled, a symbol for Minnie' s squelched liveliness in a drab house. Just as Mr. Wright had clipped his wife's Wings and left her to toil alone in an insufficient kitchen, Mr. Wright killed the bird, "a bird that sang. She used to sing. He killed that too." Both the bird's song and Minnie's happiness have been eliminated.

The women's discovery of Minnie's haphazard quilting opens up another interesting symbolic interpretation. The squares can be said to be symbolic of John Wright. Though Minnie at first was dutiful towards her quilting, making sure the stitches were meticulous, her most recent squares exhibit angry, sloppy stitches that reveal inner torment. Mrs. Hale and Mrs. Peters question whether or not Minnie intended to knot or quilt the squares together. When they tell the men that they believe she intended to knot the quilt, that knot becomes symbolic for the other knot that Minnie made--in the noose

around her husband's neck. Mrs. Hale's final remark that Minnie did, in fact, intend to knot the quilt symbolizes her belief that Minnie is guilty.

Historical Context

The era between 1914 and 1939 is sometimes referred to the modernist period of literary history.

During this time, the social climate of many Western countries began to change dramatically. In 1917 the United States entered World War 1. This international event strew many accepted social traditions into chaos. While the men were off fighting in the war and dying in greater numbers than ever before, women remained on the home front and increased independence was necessary for their survival. In order to support themselves and their families, mothers, sisters, wives, and daughters began to move into the work force and take charge of their family's well-being. Modernism in literature was a movement characterized by a rejection of traditional literary methods and values. Gone was the adherence to bourgeois values, and in its place was an often pessimistic sense of foreboding and questioning.

The poet W. H. Auden characterized the national sentiment of this era and its response to women's increasing independence as the "Age of Anxiety." The rise of women's suffrage challenged the male world of politics and government and ended their absolute power over the public realm. In 1918 women in England were granted the legal right to vote and suffrage for American women followed in 1920. Political power and economics were now shared-at least somewhat-between the sexes, and the preexisting gender divide between public man and private woman no longer provided the security of male mastery. English writer D. H. Lawrence's essay "Matriarchy" exaggerated a picture of these times by theorizing that a matriarchy, or woman-centered society, was growing out of the modernist era and taking control, and destroying the "mastery" of the patriarchy, or male-centered society.

In rural parts of the country, however, change was slow in coming. Away from the cities, farmers continued to toil the land like they always had. The coming of the automobile, motorized farm equipment, and the telephone began to break down some of the forces of isolation on the farm, but many farmers were not wealthy enough to take advantage of these new technologies. The spirit of the pioneers, for those who had lost touch with their rural roots, became a popular topic for literature. Laura Ingalls Wilder's *Little House on the Prairie* books romanticized the simplicity of rural and small town life, and Willa Cather's *0 Pioneers!* and *My Antonia* celebrated the resolve of the Midwest's first pioneers. In stark contrast to this trend was Glaspell's "A Jury of Her Peers," an unromantic look at the loneliness, isolation, and desperation that can result from the harsh life of the prairie.

Critical Overview

Little criticism of" A Jury of Her Peers" dates from the time of its initial publication or from 1927 when it was collected with Glaspell's other stories in the collection *A Jury of Her Peers.* Only after the story gained acclaim during the 1970s did critical interest in it grow. However, theater reviews of *Trifles.* performed in 1916, one year before the publication of "A Jury of Her Peers," relate that critics found the performance to be the Province town Players' finest to date.

In*Susan Glaspell: A Research and Production Sourcebook,* Mary Papke lists six reviews of the play, only one of which did not enthusiastically recommend it. Early critiques from the *New York Dramatic Mirror* gave it high praise as a drama of mystery and suspense and *Theatre Magazine* found the female actors in their interpretation of women's intuition ingenious. On the other hand, the *New York Times* critic found both its acting and dialogue unsatisfactory. Later reviews of European productions agreed that the play's appeal was for an exclusively American audience because it addressed a historical milieu specific to early twentieth century America No reviewers noted the story's strong feminist statement; that reading was formulated by feminists involved in the women's movement of the 1970s.

Over fifty years after the first performance of *Trifles,* feminist critics appropriated the short story version as a critique of male-dominated society. It is now considered a feminist classic. In her essay "Small Things Reconsidered. Susan Glaspell's 'A Jury of Her Peers' ," Elaine Hedges notes that Mary Anne Ferguson's 1973 anthology entitled *Images of*

Women in Literature reintroduced *Trifles* to readers as the forgotten text of an extraordinary writer. The recognition of women's artistic ability and intellect challenged the stereotype of women as concerned with the "trifles" of life. Thereafter, a number or critics, including Annette Kolodony, began to consider "A Jury of Her Peers" and include it in their work in hopes that the story would become popular in classrooms and anthologies of women's literature.

In her 1986 essay "Reading About Reading," Judith Fetterly's criticism of "A Jury of Her Peers" exposes what she feels is a contradiction in reading it as a feminist short story. She states, "Minnie is denied her story and hence her reality. . . and the men are allowed to continue to assume that they are the only ones with stories. So haven't the men finally won?" Fetterley finds that because the women in the story allow the men to continue to believe their version of the truth, and they never assert their side of the story, that Minnie is not really let off the hook. Although she may never be convicted of the crime, it is not a Victory since she cannot have her say and defend her actions. Fetterly's suspicion is that this sense of feminism comes at the expense of allowing men to continue to devalue a woman's story. Her point is that choosing to remain silent is not a feminist act if it encourages male superiority.

A different perspective of "A Jury of Her Peers" comes from the 1995 introduction to Linda Ben-Zvi's edited collection of critical essays on Glaspell titled *Susan Glaspell: Essays on Her Theater and Fiction.* In it, Ben-ZvI states that "Susan Glaspell's writing is marked by strong women, personae whose consciousness of themselves and their world shapes her plays and fiction." Not only did Glaspell's female persona shape her fiction, Ben-Zvi theorizes, but her strong female characters also shaped the situations in which they were introduced. Today, readers can appreciate Glaspell's work for its historical place in the long tradition of literature written by women in the United States.

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2
- Critical Essay #3

Critical Essay #1

Ortiz has a master's degree in English Literature and teaches at Wayne State University in Detroit, Michigan. In the following essay, she addresses the significance of women's subjective experience in Glaspell's portrayal of legal justice in "A Jury of Her Peers. "

When Mrs. Hale says to Mrs. Peters, "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?" she was talking about a shared female subjectivity.

A good way to understand subjectivity is to imagine that all people are subjects. As subjects of their particular environments, their identities are constructed by the times, geography, gender, age, and any number of things that make them who they are. People's actions, thoughts. and feelings are informed by all these circumstances. This individual perspective is the person's subjectivity. This subjectivity is the root of an individual's epistemology, or the way they know what they know.

Objectivity would be the opposite of this. An objective perspective or way of thinking relies on a person's ability to put aside his or her own subjective experience and view a situation from a standard or formulaic point of view. This point of view is removed from what the person thinks for him or herself and is based on a general set of assumptions.

People share a certain subjective viewpoint if they have enough common experiences. Mrs. Hale, Mrs. Peters, and Minnie Wright all share a certain female subjectivity as wives of farmers. They live in the same town and have very similar lives, therefore knowing themselves is similar to knowing one another. It is this shared understanding of their lives that allows Mrs. Hale and Mrs. Peters to reconstruct a picture of what Minnie's life might have been like.

It is a lack of this subjective approach that keeps their husbands unaware of the circumstances of the crime. The men's objective approach to the crime is informed not by their own ideas of what might have happened, but by a set of assumptions of what most people agree constitutes a crime.

While looking for a certain set of clues like forced entry, a murder weapon, and signs of intruders around the barn, they are not open to other interpretations of the crime, interpretations that perhaps only a woman who shared Minnie's experiences might see. When the men disregard the women's attention to the kitchen, they are favoring an objective approach. Upon briefly surveying the kitchen, the sheriff decides to move the investigation upstairs. His cynical assessment of the scene is, "Nothing here but kitchen things."-"Nothing," as the county attorney suggests "that would point to any motive." In fact, the men openly doubt the women's ability to read a crime with their subjective experience. The assumption that the women are prone to do so places them under suspicion of being blinded by this subjectivity and thus unable to come up with any useful information. Mr. Hale sums up this theory by asking, "But would the women know a clue if they did come upon it?"

Female subjectivity is cmcial in comprehending the story because It is the only way in which readers come to have a sense of who Minnie is. It is through the shared experiences of Mrs. Hale and Mrs. Peters that the reader comes to understand what MinnIe's life might have been like. Only when the women synthesize their observations at the crime scene with what they know about their own lIves as mral housewives do they achieve a shared concept of married mral womanhood. This shared sense of IdentIty is the basis for their shared subjectivity.

Minnie does not have to tell them that she was lonely or unhappy. They use memOries of their own experiences to sympathize with her isolation and to defend her against the accusations of the law. To Sheriff Peters's attempt to sway Mrs. Hale's loyalty to her sex, "Not much of a housekeeper, would you say, ladies?" Mrs. Hale reminds him that it takes two to dirty a house and only one is expected to clean it: "Men's hands aren't always as clean as they might be." The dual meaning of the phrase "clean hands" implies that husbands are not always as free from guilt as they could be. As housewives, Mrs. Hale and Mrs. Peters know this to be true. Perhaps their own homes have been dirtied by similarly careless hands. Mrs. Hale also under stands the anxiety of housework interrupted, "Things begun-and not finished." The question of what might have interrupted MinnIe's work comes to Mrs. Hale's mind after placing herself in Minnie's shoes. A housewife would not leave her work undone if not for some disturbance. This insight points Mrs. Hale in the direction of a motive.

Critic Linda Ben-Zvi notes that the author conveys the constricting sense of a woman's isolation with the symbolism of the exploded preserves jars. A summer's worth of canning suddenly destroyed represents a form of outburst; It is a suggestion that something may have erupted. Ben-Zvi reads the cracked Jars as a symbol for a break in Minnie's composure. That "preserves explode from lack of heat" is an indicator that any violent expression on Minnie's part may be caused by the lack of warmth she received from her own husband, "a punning reminder of the causal relationship between isolation and violence." The women's compassion for Minnie's lost preserves is a form of sympathy or understanding for her isolated, fractured marriage. Perhaps without realizing it, they are reading her kitchen as a text for her life.

Critic Judith Fetterley describes the kitchen as a text, one the men cannot or will not read because they fail to see it as a text. Fetterley believes the women remove the evidence from the scene because they understand that the men could learn to read the text of women's experience. It is not impossible for men to see it, but their unwillingness makes it unlikely. One reason why the men refuse to read or see the text could be that they also have ulterior mol1ves. The evidence might reveal that John was a brutal man who, in addition to being miserly and curt, was also capable of murdering an animal out of spite. As Fetterley claims, they may not want to uncover any evidence that, although it proves Minnie's guilt, also implies that John Wright, fellow husband, may have been the kind of man whose wile would want to murder him. Perhaps admitting that John was partly to blame for his own murder would be accepting responsibility for the injustices they may have perpetrated against their own wives. It might justify their own possible murders.

Fetterley's interpretation of the kitchen investigation implies that the definition of a good man or a good husband is as much at stake as the definition of a good woman or a good wife In the beginning, all attention is on what a poor housekeeper Minnie is, a criticism that draws attention away from the possibility that John was a poor companion. In maintaining a focus on what a woman should be, there is a lack of focus on what a man should be. ThIs fact clearly works in favor of the male characters.

Literary scholar Karen Stem also agrees that the women come away from the farm with a conclu sion-which the men do not-because the women apply a more subjective approach to the crime rather than the standard detective formula that the men do. "[T]hey become personally involved, and throughout their successful investigations they gain human sympathy and valuable insights into their own lives. This growth, rather than the sleuth process, is the play's focal point." These valuable insights are not available to a person when they maintain objectivity.

Stein points out that the mark of shared insight and similar experience can also be a common goal. She says, "For these women, solving the murder is not a disinterested act, but a cooperative endeavor which leads them to a knowledge essential for their Survival as females in a hostile or indifferent world."

To allow a fellow housewife to be convicted of murdering her neglectful and abusive husband might also be a crime against themselves. They not only share common experience, but also a common responsibility to ensure that they and other women like them do not have to suffer the consequences of defending themselves. To let Minnie go to Jail would be to condone the crimes against her, other housewives, and themselves.

Mrs. Peters Identifies with Minnie' s violent tendencies. She recalls for Mrs. Hale a childhood incident of violence in which a boy killed her kitten with an ax. She bitterly reflects, "If they hadn't held me back I would have. . . hurt him." Her bitter understanding of the urge for revenge and "female violence" is gained through an experience she then applies to the situation at hand. Ben-Zvi notes that "an understanding of female violence in the face of male brutality" is key to Mrs. Peter's realization of the connection she shares with Minnie. From this point on, Mrs. Peters appears to be more forgiving of any crime against a man as brutal as they imagine John Wright might have been.

Mrs. Peters continues to identify with Minnie by recalling yet another traumatizing experience. She solemnly admits, "I know what stillness is . . . [w]hen we homesteaded in Dakota, and my first baby

The women's subjective mterpretation of the murder also points to the fact that the men do not see the domestic sphere as a source of mformation about the murder of a man. Recognizing that there are several definitions of justice operating in the story opens up the possibility that there is more than one crone in the story. Ben-Zvi views the strangling of the John Wright as "a punishment to fit his came." In her reading, justice prevails because the women envision that Minnie has taken revenge upon her husband. This "eye for an eye" defimtion of Justice is more apparent than another form proposed by Mrs. Hale. When she cries, "Oh, I wish l' d come over here once in a while! . . . That

was a came! That was a crime! Who's going to punish that," she suggests that she may have contributed to Mmme's abandonment. That she sees herself as culpable of a crime reflects yet another level of subjectivity.

A woman's subjectivity becomes the bmding force which causes the women to render their own brand of justice. As a kmd of "jury," although unrecognized and ridiculed by the law men, the women try Mmnie. Although they find her guilty of the crime of murder, they justify the crone through a'

female solidarity built on the knowledge that women suffer from carnes of lonelmess, abuse, and neglect not recognized by the American legal system Their knowledge that the system, represented by their husbands and Mr. Henderson, does not view these predicaments as crimes, or even as legitimate concerns, causes them to assume responsibility for factoring these concerns into their analysis. They are charged with the responsibility for reading their "verdict" like no one else is able to do. As Fetterley points out, "Women can read women's texts because they live women's lives; men cannot read women's texts because they don't lead women's lives."

Source: Lisa Ortiz, for *Short Stones for Students,* Gale, 1998.

Critical Essay #2

An American educator, Fetterley is the author of The Resisting Reader: A Feminist Approach to American Fiction (1978). *In the following essay, she discusses how "A Jury of Her Peers" can be interpreted as a story about reading and that the women in the story are more adept at "reading" Minnie Wright's situation than are the men.*

As a student of American literature, I have long been struck by the degree to which American texts are self-reflexive. Our "classics" are filled with scenes of readers and readings. In *The Scarlet Letter,* for example, a climactic moment occurs when Chillingworth rips open Dimmesdale's shirt and finally reads the text he has for so long been trying to locate. What he sees we never learn, but for him his "reading" is complete and satisfying. Or, to take another example, in "Daisy Miller," Winterbourne's misreading of Daisy provides the central drama of the text Indeed, for James, reading is the dominant metaphor for life, and his art is designed to teach us how to read well so that we may live somewhere other than Geneva. Yet even a writer as different from James as Mark Twain must learn to read hi river if he wants to become a master pilot. And, of course, in *Moby Dick,* Melville gives us a brilliant instance of reader-response theory in action in the doubloon scene.

When I first read Susan Glaspell's "A Jury of Her Peers" in Mary Anne Ferguson's *Images of Women in Literature* I found it very American, for it, too, is a story about reading. The story interested me particularly, however, because the theory of reading proposed in it is explicitly linked to the issue of gender. "A Jury of Her Peers" tells of a woman who has killed her husband; the men on the case can not solve the mystery of the murder; the women who accompany them can. The reason for this striking display of masculine incompetence in an arena where men are assumed to be competent derives from the fact that the men in question can not imagine the story behind the case. They enter the situation bound by a set of powerful assumptions. Prime among these is the equation of sexuality with masculine subject and masculine point of view. Thus, It is not simply that the men cannot read the text that is placed before them. Rather, they literally can not recognize it as a text because they can not imagine that women have stories. This preconception is so powerful that, even though, in effect, they know Minnie Wnght has kIlled her husband, they spend their time trying to discover their own story, the story they are familiar with, can recoginze as a text, and know how to read. They go out to the barn; they check for evidence of violent entry from the outside; they think about guns. In their story, men, not women, are violent, and men use guns: "There was a gun in the house. He says that's what he can't understand." Though Mrs. Hale thinks the men are "kInd of *sneaking.* . . coming out here to get her own house to turn against her," in fact she needn't worry, for these men wouldn't know a clue if they came upon it. Minnie Foster Wnght's kitchen is not a text to them, and so they can not read it.

It is no doubt in part to escape the charge of "sneakIng" that the men have brought the women with them in the first place, the presence of women legitimating male entry and clearing it of any hint of violence or violation. But Mrs. Hale recognizes the element of

violence in the situation from the outset. In Sheriff Peters, she sees the law made flesh. "A heavy man with a big voice" who delights in distinguishing between criminals and noncrimmals, his casual misogyny-"not much of a housekeeper" -indicates his predisposition to find women guilty. Mrs. Hale rejects the sheriff's inv1tation to Join him in h1S definition and mterpretation of Minnie Wright, to become in effect a male reader, and asserts instead her intention to read as a woman. Fortunately, perhaps, for Minnie, the idea of the woman reader as anything other than an adjunct validator of male texts and male interpretations ("a shenff's w1fe 1S married to the law") is as incomprehensible to these men as is the idea of a woman's story. With a parting shot at the mcompetence of women as readers-"But would the women know a clue if they did come upon it?"-the men leave the women alone with their "trifles."

Martha Hale has no trouble recoginzing that she is faced W1th a text wntten by the woman whose presence she feels, despite her physical absence. She has no trouble recognizing Minme Wnght as an author whose work she is competent to read. Siginficantly enough, identification determines her competence. Capable of imag1mng herself as a writer who can produce a slgnificant text, she is also capable of interpreting what she finds in Minnie Wnght's kitchen. As she leaves her own house, Martha Hale makes "a scandal1zed sweep of her kItchen," and "what her eye took in was that her kitchen was in no shape for leaving." When she arrives at Mmme Wright's house and finds her kitchen in a similar state, she is prepared to look for something out of the ordmary to explam it-that 1S, she is in a pos1tion to discover the motIve and the clue which the men miss. Identification also prov1des the key element in determimng how Mrs. Peters reads. From the start, Martha Hale has been sizing up Mrs. Peters. Working from her perception that Mrs. Peters "dtdn't seem like a sheriff's w1fe," Martita subtly encourages her to read as a woman. But Mrs. Peters, more timid than Mrs. Hale and indeed married to the law, wavers in her allegiance: "'But Mrs. Hale,' said the sheriff's wife, 'the law is the law' ." In a comment that ought to be as deeply embedded in our national folklore as are its masculinist counterparts-for example, "a woman is only a woman but a good c1gar is a smoke "Mrs. Hale draws on Mrs. Peters's potential for identification with Minnie Wright: "The law is the law-and a bad stove 1S a bad stove. How'd you like to cook on this?" At the crucial moment, when both motive and clue for the murder have been discovered and the fate of Minnie Wright rests in her hands, Mrs. Peters remembers her own potential for violence, its cause and its justification: "'When I was a girl,' said Mrs. Peters, under her breath, 'my kitten-there was a boy took a hatchet, and before my eyes-before I could get there-' She covered her face an instant. 'If they hadn't held me back I would have'-she caught herself, looked upstarts where footsteps were heard, and finished weakly' hurt him'."

At the end of the story, Martha Hale articulates the theory of reading behind "A Jury of Her Peers" . "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 tlus minute?" Women can read women's texts because they live women's lives; men can not read women's texts because they don't lead women's hves. Yet, of course, the issues are more complicated than this formulation, however true it may be. A clue to our interpretation of Glaspell's text occurs in a passage dealing with Mrs. Peters's struggle to determine how she will read: "It was as if sometlung within her not herself had

spoken, and it found in Mrs. Peters something she dId not know as herself. 'I know what stillness is,' she said, in a queer, monotonous voice." Obviously, nothing less than Mrs. Peters's concept of self is at stake in her decision. The self she does not recognize as "herself" is the self who knows what she knows because of the hfe she has lived As she reads this life in the story of another woman, she contacts that self from whIch she has been systematically alienated by virtue of being married to the law and subsequently required to read as a man.

When I was in high school and first introduced to literature as a separate subject of study, I was told that one of the primary reasons people read, and, thus, one of the primary justifications for learning how to read, is to enlarge their frame of reference through encountenng experiences that are foreign to them which are not likely to happen in their own lives and, thus, to ennch and comphcate their perspective. Since as a young woman reader I was gIven to read primarily texts about young men, I had no reason to questIOn the valIdIty of this proposition. It was not until I got to college and graduate school and encountered an overwhehningly male faculty intent on teaching me how to recognize great literature that I began to wonder about the homogeneity of the texts that got defined as "classic." But of course it took feminism to enable me finally to see and understand the extraordinary gap between theory and practIce in the teaching of literature as I experienced it. If a white male middle-class literary establishment consistently chooses to IdentIfy as great and thus worth reading those texts that present as central the hves of whIte male middle-class characters, then obviously recognition and reiteration, not dIfference and expansion, provIde the motivation for reading. Regardless of the theory offered in justification, as it is currently practIced within the academy, reading functions primarily to reinforce the identity and perspective which the male teacher/reader brings to the text. Presumably this function is itself a function of the sense of power derived from the expenence of perceiving one's self as central, as subject, as hterally because hterarily the point of view from which the rest of the world is seen. Thus men, controlling the study of literature, define as great those texts that empower themselves and define reading as an activity that serves male interests, for regardless of how many actual readers may be women, within the academy the presumed reader is male. . . .

The reading of women's texts has the potential for giving women a knowledge of the self, for putting us in contact with our real selves, which the reading of male texts can not provIde. WhIch, of course, brings us back to Mrs. Peters and "A Jury of Her Peers" and to a final question that the story raises.

Just as the women in the story have the capacIty to read as men or as women, having leamed of necessity how to recogruze and mterpret male texts, so are the men in the story presumably educable. Though initially they nught not recognize a clue if they saw it, they could be taught its significance, they could be taught to recognize women's texts and to read as women. If this were not the case, the women in the story could leave the text as they find it; but they don't. Instead, they erase the text as they read it. Martha Hale undoes the threads of the quilt that, like the weaving of Philomel, tells the story of Mimrie Wright's violation and thus provides the clue to her revenge, Mrs. Peters instinctively creates an alternate story to explain the missing bird and then further

fabricates to explain the absent cat; and Mrs. Hale, with the approval of Mrs. Peters, finally hides the dead bird. Thus, we must revise somewhat our Imtial formulation of the story's pomt about reading: it is not simply the case that men can not recoginze or read women's texts; it is, rather, that they will not. At the end of the story, the county attorney summarIzes the situation "incisively"

"It's all perfectly clear, except the reason for doing it. But you know Junes when it comes to women. If there was some defimte thing-something to show. Something to make a story about A thing that would connect up with tlns clumsy way of doing it." But why, if it is all so perfectly clear to them, have the men made so little intelligent effort to find that "something" that would convince and convict? Why, in fact, has tlns same county attorney consistently deflected attention from those details that would provIde the necessary clues: "Let's talk about that a little later, Mr. Hale"; "I'd like to talk to you about that a lIttle later, Mrs. Hale." ThIs is the question that "A Jury of Her Peers" propounds to its readers, making us ask in turn why it is more Important for the men in this story to let one woman get away with murder than to learn to recognize and to read her story? . . .

When men ask women to read men's texts under the guise of enlarging their expenence and perspective, they are in fact asking women to undergo an expenence that is potentially inimical to them; and when men msist that men's texts are the only ones worth reading, they are in fact protecting themselves against just such an expenence. If we examine "A Jury of Her Peers" with this hypothesis in mind, we may find in the story an answer to the question that it propounds. For what is the content of the text that Minnie Wright has wntten and that the men are so unwilling to read? It is nothing less than the story of men's systematic, institutionalized, and culturally approved violence toward women, and of women's potential for retalIatory vIOlence against men. For the men to find the clue that would convict Minnie Foster Wright, they would have to confront the figure of John Wnght. And if they were to confront this figure, they would have to confront as well the limitations of their definition of a "good man," a phrase that encompasses a man's relation to drink, debt, and keeping his word with other men but leaves untouched hIs treatment of women. And if a man's treatment of women were to figure into the determination of his goodness, then most men would be found not good. Thus, for the men in the story to confront John Wright would mean confronting themselves. In addition, were they to read MInnie Wright's story, they would have to confront the fact that a woman married to a man is not necessarIly married to his law, might not in fact see things "just that way," might indeed see things quite differently and even act on those perceptions. They might have to confront the fact that the women of whom they are so casually contemptuous are capable of turning on them. For, of course, in refusing to recognize the story of Minnie Wright, the men also aVOId confrontation with the story of Mrs. Hale and Mrs. Petersthey never know what their wIves have done alone in that kitchen

Male violence agamst women and women's retaliatory violence against men constItute a story that a sexist culture is bent on repressing, for, of course, the refusal to tell tlns story is one of the major mechanisms for enabling the violence to continue. WitInn "A Jury of Her Peers," this story is once again suppressed. Mrs. Hale and Mrs. Peters save Minnie Foster Wright's life, but in the process they undo her story, ensuring that it will

never have a public hearing. The men succeed in their refusal to recognize the woman's story because the women are willing to let the principle stand in order to protect the particular woman. Thus, if the men are willing to let one woman get away with murder in order to protect their control oftextuality, the women are willing to let the men continue to control textuality in order to save the individual. The consequence of both decisIOns is the same: Minnie Wright is demed her story and hence her reality (What will her life be like if she does get off?), and the men are allowed to continue to assume that they are the only ones with stories. So haven't the men finally won?

Glaspell, of course, chooses dIfferently from her characters, for" A Jury of Her Peers" does not suppress, but, rather, tells the woman's story. Thus, Glaspell's fiction is didactic in the sense that it is designed to educate the male reader in the recognition and interpretation of women's texts, while at the same time it provides the woman reader with the gratification of discovering, recovering, and validating her own experience. For "A Jury of Her Peers," I would argue, from my own experience in teaching the text and from my dIscussIOn with others who have taught it, is neither umntelligible to male readers nor susceptible to a masculinist interpretation. If you can get men to read it, they will recognize its point, for Glaspell chooses to make an issue of precisely the principle that her characters are willing to forgo. But, of course, it is not that easy to get men to read this story. It is surely no accident that "A Jury of Her Peers" did not make its way into the college classroom until the advent of academic femmism.

Source: Judith Fetterley, "Reading about Reading. 'A Jury of Her Peers, "The Murders in the Rue Morgue,' and 'The Yellow Wallpaper'," in *Gender and Reading. Essays on Readers, Texts, and Contexts,* edited by Ehzabeth A. Flynn and Patroclmo P. Schwelckart, The Johns Hopkms Universlty Press, 1986, pp. 147-64.

Critical Essay #3

AnAmerican critic and educator, Hedges is *the author of* Land and Imagination: The Rural Dream in America *(1980; with William L. Hedges) and* In Her Own Image: Women Working in the Arts *(1980; with Ingrid Wendt). In the following excerpt from a longer essay, she discusses the reality of women's lives in the nineteenth century, thereby explaining the significance of the events and "trifles" that figure in the plot ofGlaspell's "A Jury of Her Peers.* "

Susan Glaspell's "A Jury of her Peers" is by now a small feminist classic. Published in 1917, rediscovered in the early 1970s and increasingly reprinted since then in anthologies and textbooks, it has become for both readers and criucs a familiar and frequently revisited landmark on our "map of rereading." For Lee Edwards and Arlyn Diamond in 1973 it introduced us to the work of one of the important but forgotten women writers who were then being rechscovered; and its characters, "prairie matrons, bound by poverty and limited experience [who] fight heroic battles on tiny battlefields," provided examples of those ordinary or anonymous women whose voices were also being sought and reclaimed. For Mary Anne Ferguson, also in 1973, Glaspell's story was significant for its challenge to prevailing Images or stereotypes of womenwomen as "fuzzy minded" and concerned only with "trifles," for example-and for Its celebration of female sorority, of the power of sisterhood. More recently, in 1980, Annette Kolochry has read the story as exemplary of a female realm of meaning and symbolic signification, a realm ignored by mainstream critics and one, as she urges, that feminist critics must interpret and make available. Rechscovenng lost women writers, reclaiming the experience of anonymous women, reexamimng the image of women in lIterature, and rereachng texts in order to discern and appreciate female symbol systems-many of the major approaches that have characterized feminist literacy criticism in the past decade have thus found generous validation in the text of "A Jury of her Peers." The story has become a paradiginatic one for feminist criticism. . . .

In Glaspell's story, Mrs. Hale and Mrs. Peters comprise an Ideal (if small) commumty of readers precisely because they are able to bring to the "trivia" of Minnie Wright's life just such a "unique and infonning context." That context is their own experience as midwestern rural women. As a result they can read Minnie's kitchen trifles with full "recognition and acceptance of . . . their significance." For contemporary readers, however, who are historically removed from the way of lIfe on whIch Glaspell's story depends, such a reading is not so readily available. Superficially we can of course comprehend the story's details, since women's work of cooking, cleaning, and sewing is scarcely strange, or unfamiliar, either to female or to male readers. But to appreciate the full resonance of those details requires by now an act of historical reconstruction. Glaspell's details work so effectively as a symbol system because they are carefully chosen reflectors of crucial realities in the lives of 19th and early 20th century midwestern and western women. The themes, the broader meanings of "A Jury of her Peers," which are what encourage us to rediscover and reread it today, of course extend beyond its regional and histoncal origins. Women's role or "place" in society, their confinement and isolation, the psychic violence wrought against them, their power

or powerlessness vis-a-vis men, are not concerns restricted to Glaspell' s Ume and place. But these concerns achieve their Imaginative force and convIction in her story by being finnly rooted in, and orgamcally emerging from, the carefully observed, small details of a localized way of llfe. . . .

"A Jury of her Peers" is set in the prairie and plains region of the United States. The story itself contains a reference to the county attorney's having just returned from Omaha, which would literally locate the acUon in Nebraska. And a further reference to "Dickson County," as the place where the characters live, might suggest Dixon County, an actual county in the northeastern comer of Nebraska where it borders on Iowa. In the narrowest sense, then, given Glaspell's own Iowa ongins, the story can be saId to refer to the prairie and plains country that stretches across Iowa into Nebraska-a country of open, level or rolling land, and few trees, winch generations of pioneers encountered dunng successive waves of settlement throughout the nineteenth century. More broadly, the story reflects the lives of women across the entIre span of praine and plains country, and some of the circumstances of Minnie Wright's life were shared by women further west as well. While emphasizing Iowa and Nebraska, therefore, this paper will draw for evidence on the autobIOgraphical writings by women from various western states. . . .

When a male pioneer registered his sense of the land's emptiness, It was often to recognize that the emptmess bore more heavily upon women. Seth K. Humphrey wrote of his father's and his own experiences, in Miffilesota territory in the 1850s and in the lniddle northwest in the 1870s, and he remembered that "the prairie has a solitude way beyond the mere absence of human beings." With no trees, no obJects to engage or interrupt the glance, the eyes "stare, stare--and sometimes the prairie gets to staring back." Women, he observed, especially suffered. They "fled in terror," or "stayed until the prairie broke them." Women themselves reported that it was not unusual to spend five months in a log cabin without seeing another woman, as dld a Marshall County, Iowa woman in 1842; or to spend one and a half years after arriving before being able to take a trip to town, as did Luna Kellie in Nebraska in the l870s. The absence both of human contact and of any ameliorating features in the landscape exacerbated the loneliness felt by women who had often only reluctantly uprooted themselves from eastern homes and fatnilies in order to follow their husbands westward.

Mlffille Wright is not of course living in circumstances of such extreme geographical isolation. By the time of Glaspell's story, estabhshed vlllages and towns have replaced the first scattered settlements, and networks of transportation and communication link people previously isolated from one another. But John Wnght's farm, as we learn, is an isolated, outlying farm, separated from the town of which it is, fonnally, a part. Furthennore, he refuses to have a telephone; and, as we also learn, he has denied hls wife access to even the mmimal contacts that town life lnight afford women at that tlme, such as the church choir in which Mmme had sung before her marriage. Minnie Wright's emotional and spiritualloneliness, the result of her isolation, is, in the final analysis, the reason for her murder of her husband. Through her bnef opening description of the landscape Glaspell establishes the physlcal context for the loneliness and isolation, an isolation Mmnie inhented from and shared with generations of pIOneer and farm women before her.

The full import of Minnie's isolation emerges only incrementally in Glaspell's story. Meanwhile, after the characters arrive at the Wright farm, the story confines ltselfto the narrow space of Minnie' s kitchen-the lilnited and lirnitlng space of her female sphere. Wlthln that small space are revealed all the dimensions of the loneliness that is her mute message. And that message is of course conveyed through those "kitchen things," as the sheriff dislnissingly calls them, to whlch Mrs. Hale and Mrs. Peters respond with increasing comprehension and sympathy.

One of the first "kitchen things" or "trifles" to winch Glaspell mtroduces us is the roller towel, on which the attorney condescendingly comments. Not considering, as the women do, that his own assistant, called in earlier that morning to make up a fire in Minme's absence, had probably dlrtied the towel, he decides that the soiled towel shows that Minnie lacked "the homemaking instinct." The recent researches of historians into the lives of 19th century women allow us today to appreciate the full ironic force of Mrs. Hale's qUletly understated reply: "There's a great deal of work to be done on a farm." One of the most important contributions of the new social history is its documentation of the amount of work that pioneer and farm women did. The work as, as one historian has saId, "almost endless," and over the course of a lifetime usually conslsted of tasks "more arduous and demanding than those perfonned by men." Indoors and out, the division oflabour "favored men" and "exploited women." Sarall Brewer-Bonebright, recalling her hfe in Newcastle, Iowa in 1848, descnbed the "routine" work of the "women-folk" as mcludlng "water carrying, cooking, churning, sausage making, berry plcking, vegetable drying, sugar and soap boiling, holniny hulling, medicine brewing, washing, nursing, weaving, sewing, straw platting, wool picking, spiffiling, quilting, k11itting, gardening and various other tasks. . . ." Workdays that began at 4.30 a.in., and didn't end until 11 30 p.in., were not unheard of. Jessamyn West's description of her Indiana grandlnother-"She died saying, 'Hurry,

hurry, hurry,' not to a nurse, not to anyone at her bedside, but to herself' -captures an essentIal reality of the lives of many 19th and early 20th century rural women.

The work involved for Minnie Wright in preparing the clean towel that the attoruey takes for granted is a case in point. Of all the tasks that 19th and early 20th century women commented on in their diaries, laundry was consistently described as the most onerous. . . .

In her recent study of housework, *Never Done,* Susan Strasser agrees that laundry was woman's "most hated task." Before the introduction of piped water it took staggering amounts of time and labor: "One wash, one boiling, and one rinse used about fifty gallons of water---or four hundred poundswhich had to be moved from pump or well or faucet to stove and tub, in buckets and wash boilers that might weigh as much as forty or fifty pounds." Then came rubbing, wringing, and lifting the wet clothing and linens, and carrying them in heavy tubs and baskets outside to hang. It is when Mrs. Peters looks from Minnie's inadequate stove, with its cracked lining, to the "pail of water carried in from outside" that she makes the crucial observation about "seeing into things. . . seeing through a thing to something else." What the women see, beyond the pail and the stove, are the hours of work it took Mllmie to produce that one clean towel. To call

Minnie's work "instinctual," as the attorney does (using a rationalization prevalent today as in the past) is to evade a whole world of domestic reality, a world of which Mrs. Hale and Mrs. Peters are acutely aware.

So too with the jars of preserves that the women find cracked and spoiled from the cold that has penetrated the house during the night. It is the preserves, about which Minme has been worrying in jail, that lead Mr. Hale to make the comment Glaspell used for the title of the dramatic version of her work. "Held for murder, and worrying over her preserves. . . worrying over trifles." But here again, as they express their sympathy with Minnie's concern, the women are seeing through a thing to something else: in this case, to "all [Minnie's] work in the hot weather," as Mrs. Peters exclaims. Mrs. Hale and Mrs. Peters understand the physical labor involved in bouing fruit in Iowa heat that one historian has described as "oppressive and inescapable." By the same token, they can appreciate the seriousness of the loss when that work is destroyed by the winter cold.. .

Hard as the work was, that it went unacknowledged was often harder for women to bear. The first annual report of the Department of Agnculture in 1862 included a study of the situation of farm women which concluded that they worked harder than men but were neither treated with respect as a result nor given full authority Withm their domestic sphere. And Norton Juster's study of farm women between 1865 and 1895 leads him to assert that women's work was seen merely as "the anonymous background for someone else's meaningful activity," never attaining "a recognition or dignity of its own." Indeed, he concludes, women's work was not only ignored; *it* was ridiculed, "often the object of derislOn." Mr. Hale's remark about the preserves, that "women are used to worrying over trifles," is a mild example of this ridicule, as is the attorney's comment, mtended to deflect that ridicule but itself patronizing-"yet what would we do without the ladies." It is this ridicule to which Mrs. Hale and Mrs. Peters especially react. When Mr. Hale behttles women's work we are told that "the two women moved a little closer together"; and when the attorney makes his seemingly concUiatory remark the women, we are further told, "did not speak, did not unbend." Mrs. Hale and Mrs. Peters, who at the beginning of the story are comparative strangers to each other, here begin to establish their common bonds with each other and with Minnie. Their slight physical movement to wards each other visually embodies that psychological and emotional separation from men that was encouraged by the nineteenth century doctrine of separate spheres, a separation underscored throughout the story by the women's confinement to the kitchen, whIle the men range freely, upstairs and outside, bedroom to barn, in search of the "real" clues to the crime. . . .

In "A Jury of her Peers" JohnWnght'smurder is discovered because Mr. Hale and hIs son stop at the Wright farm while travelling to town with their potato crop. Once in town, men had places to congregate-the market, the country store, the blacksmith shop, the saloon. That "women really did little more than pass through the masculme haunts of the vIllage," as Faragher concludes, was a reality to which at least one 19th centJ.1ry male wnter was sensitive. "The saloon-keepers, the politiCIans, and the grocers make it pleasant for the man," Hamlin Garland has a character comment in his story of midwestern rural life, "A Day's Pleasure"; "But the wife is left without a word." Garland wrote "A Day's Pleasure" to dramatize the plight of the farm wife, isolated at home, and

desperate for diversIOn. Mrs Markham has been SIX months WIthOut leaving the family farm. But when, over her husband's objections and by dmt of sacrificed sleep and extra work to provide for her children while she is gone, she manages to get into town, she finds scant welcome, and little to do. After overstaying her leave at the country store, she walks the streets for hours, in the "forlorn, aimless, pathetic wandering" that, Garland has the town grocer observe, is "a dally occurrence for the farm women he sees and one which had never possessed any special meaning to him."

John Wright's insensitivity to his wife's needs parallels that of the men or Garland's story Lacking decent clothes, Minnie doesn't travel into town. What she turns to in her isolation is a bird, a canary bought from a travelling peddler. It is after her husband strangles that surrogate vOIce that, in one of those "mtermittent flare-ups of bizarre behavior," as one hIstorian has descnbed them, which afflicted rural women, she strangles him.

Here again Glaspell's story reflects a larger truth about the lives of rural women Their isolation mduced madness in many. The rate of insanity in rural areas, especially for women, was a muchdiscussed subject in the second half of the 19 th centJ.1ry. As early as 1868 Sarah Josepha Hale, editor of the influential *Godey's Lady's Book,* expressed her concern that the farm population supplied the largest proportion of mmates for the nation's insane asylums. By the 1880s and l890s this concern was wIdespread. An article in 1882 noted that farmer's wives comprised the largest percentage of those in lunatic asylums. . . .

That the loss of her music, in the shape of a bIrd, should have tnggered murderous behavior in Minme Wnght is therefore neither gratuitous nor melodramatic, as is sometimes charged against Glaspell' s story. In the monotonous expanses of the prairie and the plains, the presence of one small spot of color, or a bIt of music, might spell the dJiference between sanity and madness.. .

There is no spot of beauty in Glaspell's description of Minnie's kitchen, which is presented as a drab and dreary space, dominated by the broken stove, and a rocking chair of "a dingy red, with wooden rungs up the back, and the middle rung was gone, and the chaIT sagged to one side." When the women collect some of Minnie's clothes to take to her in prison, the sight of "a shabby black skirt" painfully re1ll1nds Mrs. Hale by contrast of the "pretty clothes" that Minnie wore as a young girl before her marriage.

Unable to sing in the church choIT, depnved of her surrogate voice in the bird, denied access to other people, and with no visible beauty in her surroundings, Minnie, almost mevitably one can say, turned in her lonelmess to that final resource available to 19th and early 20th centJ.1ry women quilting. Minme's quilt blocks are the penultimate trifle in Glaspell's story. The discovery later of the strangled bIrd and broken bird cage explain the immediate provocation for Minnie's crime. But It is with the discovery of the quilt blocks, to which the women react more strongly than they have to any of the previously mtroduced "kitchen things," that a pivotal pomt in the story is reached.

The meaning of quilts in the lives of American women is complex, and Glaspell's story is a valuable contribution to the full account that remains to be written. Quilts were utilitanan in origin, threelayered bed coverings mtended to protect against the cold weather. But they became in the course of the 19th century probably the major creative outlet for women-one patnarchically tolerated, and even "approved," for their use, but which women were able to transform to their own ends. Through quilting-through their stitches as well as through pattern and color-and through the institutions, such as the "bee," that grew up around it, women who were otherwise without expressive outlet were able to communicate their thoughts and feelings.

In "Trifles" Glaspell included a reference she omitted from" A Jury of her Peers," but which is worth retrieving. In the play Mrs. Hale laments that, gIven her husband's parsimony, Minnie could never join the Ladies Aid. The Ladies Aid would have been a female society associated with the local church, where women would have spent their time sewing, braiding carpets, and quilting, in order to raise money for foreign missIOnaries, for new flooring or carpets, chairs or curtains for the church or parish house, or to add to the minister's salary. Such societies, as Glenda RIley has observed, provided women with "a relief from the routine and monotony" of farm life. They also provided women with a pubhc role, orplace. And through the female friendships they fostered they helped women, as Julie Jeffrey has noted, to develop "feelings of control over their environment," mitigating that sense of powerlessness which domestIc Isolation could induce.

Denied such associations, Minnie Wright worked on her qUIlt blocks alone, and it is the effect of that solitude which the women read in her blocks and which so profoundly moves them. It is, specifically, the stitches in Minnie's blocks that speak to them, and particularly the "queer" stitches in one block, so unIIke the "fine, even sewing," "dainty [and] accurate," that they observe in the others. Nineteenth century women learned in chIldIlOod to take stitches so small that in the words of one woman, it "required a microscope to detect them." Mothers were advised to teach their daughters to make small, exact stitches, not only for durability but as a way of instIlling habits of patience, neatness, and diligence. But such stitches also became a badge of one's needlework skIl, a source of self-esteem, and of statns, through the recogintion and admiration of other women. Minnie's "crazy" or crooked stitches are a clear signal to the two women that something, for her, was very seriously wrong.

Mrs. Hale's reaction is immediate. Tampering with what is in fact evidence-for the badly stitched block is just such a clue as the men are seeking: "Something to show anger-or sudden feeling" she replaces Minnie's crooked stitches with her own straight ones. The almost automatic act, so protective of Minnie, is both concealing and healing. To "replace bad sewing with good" is Mrs. Hale's symbolic gesture of affiliation with the damaged woman. It is also the story's first intimation of the more raillcal tampering with the evidence that the two women wIll later undertake.

In so quickly grasping the significance of Minnie's quilt stitches, Mrs. Hale is performing yet another of those acts of perception-of seeing through a detail or trifle to its larger meaning-on which Glaspell's dramatic effects depend throughout her story. As she

holds the badly stItched block in her hand, Mrs. Hale, we are told, "feels queer, as if the distracted thoughts of the woman who had perhaps turned to it to try and quiet herself were communicating themselves to her." Resorting to needlework in order to "quiet oneself," to relieve distress, or alleviate loneliness, was openly recognized and even encouraged throughout the 19th century, especially in the advIce books that proliferated for women. . . .

Minnie's stitches speak with equal directness to Mrs. Peters. It is she who first discovers the badly stitched block, and as she holds it out to Mrs. Hale we are told that "the women's eyes met-something flashed to life, passed between them." In contrast to the often outspoken Mrs. Hale, Mrs. Peters has been timid, self-effacing, and "indecisIve," tom between sympathy for Minnie and resIgned subll11ssion to the authority of the law, which her husband, the sheriff, represents. She has evaded Mrs. Hale's efforts to get her more openly to choose sides. The flash of recognition between the two women, a moment of communication the more intense for being wordless, is, as one critic has said, "the metarnorphizing spark of the story." It presages Mrs. Peter's eventual revolt agamst male authority. That revolt occurs when she snatches the box containing the dead bird-the evidence that could condenm Minnie-in order to conceal It from the men. Her defiant act is of course the result of the effect on her of the accumulated weight of meaning of all of the "trifles" she has perceived and mterpreted throughout the story. But it is here, when she reads Minnie's stitches, that she is first released from her hesitancy into what will later become full conspiratorial complicity with Mrs. Hale.

In examining MinnIe's quilt blocks Mrs. Hale observes that she was making them in the "log cabin pattern." The log cabm pattern was one of the most popular in the second half of the 19th century, frequently chosen for its capacity to utilize in its construction small scraps of left-over fabric. For Mmnie in her poverty it would have been a practical pattern choice. But there accrued to the pattern a rich symbolism, which would not have escaped a farm woman lIke Mrs. Hale and which adds yet another rich layer of meaning to Glaspell's exploration of women's place. The log cabin quilt is constructed of repetitions of a basic block, which is bUIlt up of narrow overlapping strips of fabnc, all emanating from a central square. That square, traditionally done in red cloth, came to represent the hearth fire within the cabin, with the strips surrounding It becoming the "logs" of which the cabm was built. As a replication of that most emotionally evocative of American dwelling types, the log cabin quilt came to symbolIze both the hardships and the heroisms of pioneer lIfe. More specifically it became a celebratIOn of women's clvllIzing role in the pIOneering process: in the words of one researcher, "women's dogged detennination to build a home, to replace a wilderness With a commumty." .. .

That Minme is rnaking a log cabin quilt-and the women find a roll of red cloth in her sewing basket-is, both in this historical context and in the context of her own life, both pOignant and bitterly Ironic. The center of her kitchen is not a hearth with an inviting open fire but that stove with its broken lining, the sight of which, earlier in the story, had "swept [Mrs. Hale] into her own thoughts, thinking of what it would mean, year after year, to have that stove to wrestle with." In Glaspell's story the cult of domesticity has become a trap, Minnie's home has become her prison. Minnie has asked Mrs. Peters to bring her an apron to wear injaI, a request the sheriff's wife at first finds "strange." But

when Mrs. Peters decides that wearing the apron will perhaps make Minnie feel "more natural," we can only agree, since in moving from house to jaIl she has but exchanged one form of imprisonment for another....

Throughout much of the 19th century married women were defined under the law as "civilly dead," their legal existence subsumed within their husbands, their rights to their own property, wages, and children either nonexistent or severely clrcumscnbed. Nor dJd they participate in the making and administering of the law. In 1873 Susan B. Anthony had challenged that legal situation, in a defense that was widely reprinted and that would have been available to Glaspell at the time of the final agitatIOn for the vote. Arrested for having herself tried to vote, and Judged guilty of having thereby committed a cnme, Anthony had argued that the all-male jury which judged her did not comprise, as the Constitution guaranteed to each citizen, a "Jury of her peers." So long, she argued, as women lacked the vote and other legal nghts, men were not their peers but their supenors. So, in Glaspell's story, Mrs. Hale and Mrs. Peters decide that they, and not the men, are Minnie's true peers. They take the law mto their own hands, appoint themselves prosecuting and defense attorneys, judge and jury, and pass their merciful sentence. . . .

As the characters prepare to leave the Wnght farm, the county attorney facetiously asks the women whether Minnie was going to "quilt" or "knot" her blocks. In having Mrs. Hale suggest that she was probably going to knot them (that is, Jom the quilt layers via short lengths of yam drawn through from the back and hed or knotted at wide intervals across the top surface, rather than shtch through the layers at closer intervals with needle and thread) Glaspell is using a techmcal term from the world of women's work in a way that provides a final triumphant vindicahon of her method throughout the story. If, lIke Mrs. Hale and Mrs. Peters, the reader can by now engage in those acts of percephon whereby one sees "into things, [and] through a thing to something else," the hmnble task of knothng a quilt becomes resonant With meaning. Minnie has knotted a rope around her husband's neck, and Mrs. Hale and Mrs. Peters have "hed the men in knots." All three women have thus said "not," or "no" to male authority, and in so doing they have knotted or bonded themselves together. Knots can entangle and they can unite, and at the end of Glaspell's story both men and women are knotted, in separate and different ways, with the women having discovered through their mterpretahon of the trifles that comprise Mmnie's world their hes to one another. One 19th century woman described quilts as women's "hieroglyphics"-textile documents on which, with needle, thread, and bits of colored cloth, women inscribed a record of their lives. All of the trifles in Glaspell's story together create such a set of hieroglyphics, but it is a language we should by now begin to be able to read.

Source: Elame Hedges, "Small Things Reconsidered Susan Glaspell's 'A Jury of Her Peers'," in *Women's Studies,* Vol. 12, 1986, pp 89-110.

Adaptations

"A Jury of Her Peers" was adapted into a thirty minute motion picture of the same title in 1981, directed by Sally Heckel and produced by Texture Films in New York.

Topics for Further Study

"A Jury of Her Peers" is based on Glaspell's own one-act play *Trifles.* Consider what reasons the author may have had for rewriting the play in short story form. What are the main differences between telling a story through marathon and telling It through drama? How might the story be different if it were adapted as another form, such as a poem or a film?

Read *Trifles* and write an essay comparing the differences between the short story and the play. Which gives you a better idea of who Minnie is? Are there any improvements that you find notable in the short story? Any distractions?

Think about the significance of the title" A Jury of Her Peers." What images might it evoke for a reader? What might it represent in relation to the story?

Glaspell's story demonstrates the domes roles women were expected to live by at the turn of the century. Research how most women lived back then. What things have changed and how? What has remained the same? Why might some things have changed while others have not?

In what ways does "A Jury of Her Peers" resemble a classic murder mystery? In what ways does it differ from one? What do these similarities and differences say about justice and the duty of law-abiding citizens?

Suppose the situation in "A Jury of Her Peers" were reversed: Suppose John Wright had been a pleasant man, full of the love of life until his marriage to Minnie Foster, at which point he found himself thoroughly dominated by someone who specialized in non-stop belittling remarks and verbal abuse. Suppose John were reduced to an emotional wreck after several years of this treatment, to the point that he killed Minnie; and suppose a handful of John's similarly dominated friends covered up the crime by removing small pieces of circumstantial evidence from the crime scene. How would your view of John's crime and his friends' "male solidarity" Differ from your view of Minnie's crime and her friend's "female solidarity" in "A Jury of Her Peers"? Why?

Compare and Contrast

1910s: The average salary for farm workers is $830 a year.

1990s: The average farm laborer makes approximately $22,000 a year.

1917: The United States enters World War 1. Women are prohibited by law from fighting in the battlefield, but nearly 9,000 Red Cross nurses, including many women, serve with the Army and Navy Nurse Corps in Europe.

1991: During the Persian Gulf War, 13 American women soldiers are killed and two are taken prisoner.

1880s: Approximately 2.5 million U.S. women engage in paid work.

1990s: Over 3 million U.S. women work at least two jobs to make ends meet.

1917: The homicide rate is 6.9 per 100,000 people in the United States.

1992: The homicide rate is 9.3 per 100,000 people in the United States.

What Do I Read Next?

Trifles (1916), the one-act play by Susan Glaspell, upon which "A Jury of Her Peers" is based, was written and performed for the Provincetown Players, a theater troupe founded in Cape Cod by Glaspell and her husband, fellow playwright George Cram Cook. It is considered to be her best play by many critics and is frequently included in anthologies of American literature.

"The Yellow Wallpaper" (1892), by Charlotte Perkins Gilman, is the first-person account of a young woman committed to bed rest and psychiatric care by her husband, who believes that her intellectual pursuits, such as reading and wnting, are ruinng her health.

Their Eyes Were Watching God (1937), a novel by Zora Neale Hurston, tells the story of Janie Crawford, an African-American woman in the South who struggles with her grandmother's lessons that a woman should not marry for love alone. After years of following this advice, Janie decides to marry Tea Cake, the only man she has ever loved. Their romance ends when Tea Cake dies and Janie is tried for ills murder.

The Awakening (1899) by Kate Chopin is a short story of Edna Pontellier, a young married woman struggling to discover her own individuality. After a series of events that try her own sense of sexuality, womanhood, motherhood, and freedom, she asserts herself by taking her own life.

"Lamb to the Slaughter," a short story by Ronald Dahl published in 1953, is a black comedy about a woman who murders her husband and successfully disposes of the evidence with the unwitting help of the police.

Further Study

Makowsky, Veronica "American Girl Becomes American Woman: A Fortunate Fall?," in *Susan Glaspell's Century of American Women; A Critical Interpretation of Her Work,* Oxford University Press, 1993.

An essay on the actual trial upon which "A Jury of Her Peers" and *Trifles* are based and the historical context and other circumstances which led to their being written.

Mustazza, Leonard. "Generic Translation and Thematic Shift in Susan Glaspell's 'Trifles' and 'A Jury of Her Peers' ," in *Studies* in *Short Fiction,* Vol 26, No 4, Fall, 1989, pp 489-96.

Argues that in adapting *Trifles* to the short story form in "A Jury of Her Peers," Glaspell changed the focus away from the elements of women's lives Judged as trivial by men toward women's lack of power in the American legal system.

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Introduction

Purpose of the Book

The purpose of Short Stories for Students (SSfS) is to provide readers with a guide to understanding, enjoying, and studying novels by giving them easy access to information about the work. Part of Gale's□For Students□ Literature line, SSfS is specifically designed to meet the curricular needs of high school and undergraduate college students and their teachers, as well as the interests of general readers and researchers considering specific novels. While each volume contains entries on □classic□ novels

frequently studied in classrooms, there are also entries containing hard-to-find information on contemporary novels, including works by multicultural, international, and women novelists.

The information covered in each entry includes an introduction to the novel and the novel's author; a plot summary, to help readers unravel and understand the events in a novel; descriptions of important characters, including explanation of a given character's role in the novel as well as discussion about that character's relationship to other characters in the novel; analysis of important themes in the novel; and an explanation of important literary techniques and movements as they are demonstrated in the novel.

In addition to this material, which helps the readers analyze the novel itself, students are also provided with important information on the literary and historical background informing each work. This includes a historical context essay, a box comparing the time or place the novel was written to modern Western culture, a critical overview essay, and excerpts from critical essays on the novel. A unique feature of SSfS is a specially commissioned critical essay on each novel, targeted toward the student reader.

To further aid the student in studying and enjoying each novel, information on media adaptations is provided, as well as reading suggestions for works of fiction and nonfiction on similar themes and topics. Classroom aids include ideas for research papers and lists of critical sources that provide additional material on the novel.

Selection Criteria

The titles for each volume of SSfS were selected by surveying numerous sources on teaching literature and analyzing course curricula for various school districts. Some of the sources surveyed included: literature anthologies; Reading Lists for College-Bound Students: The Books Most Recommended by America's Top Colleges; textbooks on teaching the novel; a College Board survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; a National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; the NCTE's Teaching Literature in High School: The Novel;and the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) list of best books for young adults of the past twenty-five years. Input was also solicited from our advisory board, as well as educators from various areas. From these discussions, it was determined that each volume should have a mix of □classic□ novels (those works commonly taught in literature classes) and contemporary novels for which information is often hard to find. Because of the interest in expanding the canon of literature, an emphasis was also placed on including works by international, multicultural, and women authors. Our advisory board members□educational professionals□ helped pare down the list for each volume. If a work was not selected for the present volume, it was often noted as a possibility for a future volume. As always, the editor welcomes suggestions for titles to be included in future volumes.

How Each Entry Is Organized

Each entry, or chapter, in SSfS focuses on one novel. Each entry heading lists the full name of the novel, the author's name, and the date of the novel's publication. The following elements are contained in each entry:

- Introduction: a brief overview of the novel which provides information about its first appearance, its literary standing, any controversies surrounding the work, and major conflicts or themes within the work.
- Author Biography: this section includes basic facts about the author's life, and focuses on events and times in the author's life that inspired the novel in question.
- Plot Summary: a factual description of the major events in the novel. Lengthy summaries are broken down with subheads.
- Characters: an alphabetical listing of major characters in the novel. Each character name is followed by a brief to an extensive description of the character's role in the novel, as well as discussion of the character's actions, relationships, and possible motivation. Characters are listed alphabetically by last name. If a character is unnamed□for instance, the narrator in Invisible Man-the character is listed as □The Narrator□ and alphabetized as □Narrator.□ If a character's first name is the only one given, the name will appear alphabetically by that name. □ Variant names are also included for each character. Thus, the full name □Jean Louise Finch□ would head the listing for the narrator of To Kill a Mockingbird, but listed in a separate cross-reference would be the nickname □Scout Finch.□
- Themes: a thorough overview of how the major topics, themes, and issues are addressed within the novel. Each theme discussed appears in a separate subhead, and is easily accessed through the boldface entries in the Subject/Theme Index.
- Style: this section addresses important style elements of the novel, such as setting, point of view, and narration; important literary devices used, such as imagery, foreshadowing, symbolism; and, if applicable, genres to which the work might have belonged, such as Gothicism or Romanticism. Literary terms are explained within the entry, but can also be found in the Glossary.
- Historical Context: This section outlines the social, political, and cultural climate in which the author lived and the novel was created. This section may include descriptions of related historical events, pertinent aspects of daily life in the culture, and the artistic and literary sensibilities of the time in which the work was written. If the novel is a historical work, information regarding the time in which the novel is set is also included. Each section is broken down with helpful subheads.
- Critical Overview: this section provides background on the critical reputation of the novel, including bannings or any other public controversies surrounding the work. For older works, this section includes a history of how the novel was first received and how perceptions of it may have changed over the years; for more recent novels, direct quotes from early reviews may also be included.
- Criticism: an essay commissioned by SSfS which specifically deals with the novel and is written specifically for the student audience, as well as excerpts from previously published criticism on the work (if available).

- Sources: an alphabetical list of critical material quoted in the entry, with full bibliographical information.
- Further Reading: an alphabetical list of other critical sources which may prove useful for the student. Includes full bibliographical information and a brief annotation.

In addition, each entry contains the following highlighted sections, set apart from the main text as sidebars:

- Media Adaptations: a list of important film and television adaptations of the novel, including source information. The list also includes stage adaptations, audio recordings, musical adaptations, etc.
- Topics for Further Study: a list of potential study questions or research topics dealing with the novel. This section includes questions related to other disciplines the student may be studying, such as American history, world history, science, math, government, business, geography, economics, psychology, etc.
- Compare and Contrast Box: an □at-a-glance□ comparison of the cultural and historical differences between the author's time and culture and late twentieth century/early twenty-first century Western culture. This box includes pertinent parallels between the major scientific, political, and cultural movements of the time or place the novel was written, the time or place the novel was set (if a historical work), and modern Western culture. Works written after 1990 may not have this box.
- What Do I Read Next?: a list of works that might complement the featured novel or serve as a contrast to it. This includes works by the same author and others, works of fiction and nonfiction, and works from various genres, cultures, and eras.

Other Features

SSfS includes □The Informed Dialogue: Interacting with Literature,□ a foreword by Anne Devereaux Jordan, Senior Editor for Teaching and Learning Literature (TALL), and a founder of the Children's Literature Association. This essay provides an enlightening look at how readers interact with literature and how Short Stories for Students can help teachers show students how to enrich their own reading experiences.

A Cumulative Author/Title Index lists the authors and titles covered in each volume of the SSfS series.

A Cumulative Nationality/Ethnicity Index breaks down the authors and titles covered in each volume of the SSfS series by nationality and ethnicity.

A Subject/Theme Index, specific to each volume, provides easy reference for users who may be studying a particular subject or theme rather than a single work. Significant subjects from events to broad themes are included, and the entries pointing to the specific theme discussions in each entry are indicated in boldface.

Each entry has several illustrations, including photos of the author, stills from film adaptations (if available), maps, and/or photos of key historical events.

Citing Short Stories for Students

When writing papers, students who quote directly from any volume of Short Stories for Students may use the following general forms. These examples are based on MLA style; teachers may request that students adhere to a different style, so the following examples may be adapted as needed. When citing text from SSfS that is not attributed to a particular author (i.e., the Themes, Style, Historical Context sections, etc.), the following format should be used in the bibliography section:

□Night.□ Short Stories for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 234-35.

When quoting the specially commissioned essay from SSfS (usually the first piece under the □Criticism□ subhead), the following format should be used:

Miller, Tyrus. Critical Essay on □Winesburg, Ohio.□ Short Stories for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 335-39.

When quoting a journal or newspaper essay that is reprinted in a volume of SSfS, the following form may be used:

Malak, Amin. □Margaret Atwood's □The Handmaid's Tale and the Dystopian Tradition,□ Canadian Literature No. 112 (Spring, 1987), 9-16; excerpted and reprinted in Short Stories for Students, Vol. 4, ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski (Detroit: Gale, 1998), pp. 133-36.

When quoting material reprinted from a book that appears in a volume of SSfS, the following form may be used:

Adams, Timothy Dow. □Richard Wright: □Wearing the Mask,□ in Telling Lies in Modern American Autobiography (University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 69-83; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 1, ed. Diane Telgen (Detroit: Gale, 1997), pp. 59-61.

We Welcome Your Suggestions

The editor of Short Stories for Students welcomes your comments and ideas. Readers who wish to suggest novels to appear in future volumes, or who have other suggestions, are cordially invited to contact the editor. You may contact the editor via email at: ForStudentsEditors@gale.com. Or write to the editor at:

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