The Verge Study Guide

The Verge by Susan Glaspell

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Introduction

The Verge was one of Susan Glaspell's first fulllength plays and is considered by many to be the most complex of her career. The play grew out of Glaspell's recognition of the way in which Victorian society left some women feeling trapped in roles for which they were unsuited. Because of the play's non-realistic speech patterns and expressionistic elements, it was dismissed by most critics as being muddled and confusing. It has recently been "rediscovered" by feminist theorists, however, who see the work as an important contribution to theater history. At the time of the play's first production in 1921, women were still expected to stay at home and be dutiful wives and mothers. This mindset was meeting with increased resistance. Many women began to voice dissatisfaction with their lack of opportunities and tried to change the situation. Thus, the feminist movement began to take hold. Other women rebelled by retreating into despondency, depression and, sometimes, madness. *The Verge* also re.ects the fascination with Freudian theory that was sweeping the United States at the time. Freud had delivered his first U.S. lectures in 1909, and his theories of psychoanalysis and dream interpretation were widely discussed in many popular publications of the day.

The Verge is a somewhat dif.cult play to comprehend upon first reading. Characters sometimes speak in sentence fragments and have strange syntactical patterns that are closer to poetry than to everyday speech. The play also employs a heavy dose of symbolism to deliver its message. If one pays careful attention to the visual and poetic elements contained within the text, however, the work reveals a fascinating portrait of a woman trapped in a situation that slowly pushes her to madness.

Author Biography

Susan Glaspell was born on July 1, 1882, in Davenport, Iowa. She was the middle child and only daughter of Elmer and Alice Feeney Keating Glaspell. By the time of her graduation from high school, she had already formed an interest in writing. After high school, from 1894 to 1897, she worked for two local newspapers. In 1897, Glaspell enrolled in Drake University, graduating with a degree in philosophy in 1899. After graduation, she accepted a job as a political reporter for the Des Moines *Daily News* and eventually began writing her own column. She discovered that she was well suited to the writing life and, in 1901, returned to Davenport and continued writing short stories for women's magazines.

In 1907, Glaspell met George Cram Cook. At the time, Cook was awaiting divorce from his first wife so that he could marry his current .ancé. Glaspell and Cook became instant friends. Glaspell traveled to Europe and spent some time in Colorado, but she maintained her relationship with Cook. He eventually divorced his second wife and the two were finally married in 1913. The couple immediately moved to Greenwich Village, where Glaspell wrote her first play, *Suppressed Desires*. The couple presented it to the Washington Square Players for possible production. It was turned down, however, so during the summer of 1915, while vacationing in Provincetown, Cook and Glaspell decided to present it themselves. They gathered some of their friends and formed the Provincetown Players.

The Provincetown Players had good success with their first endeavor and decided to continue production the following year. They dedicated themselves to producing new works by American playwrights and are credited with bringing the works of Eugene O'Neil to the stage. In 1916, the Provincetown Players staged Glaspell's most well-known and critically acclaimed play, *Trifles*. Glaspell never quite gained the mainstream recognition of writers such as O'Neil, however. She continued to experiment in form and eventually penned *The Verge*, her most daring and unusual work. The original production of *The Verge* took place in New York in 1921, but the play was not published until 1922. It was greeted with primarily negative reviews, although a few critics recognized it as an exciting, new form of theater. Because it did not gain critical acclaim, the work's contribution to theater history was largely ignored. It did receive a production in London, however, in 1925.

In 1922, Cook and Glaspell decided to leave the United States and move to Greece. Unfortunately, Cook died unexpectedly there in 1924. Following his death, Glaspell returned to the United States and once again took up her playwriting career. Her play *Alison's House* won the Pulitzer Prize in drama for the 1930-1931 season. From the fall of 1936 through May 1938, Glaspell worked for the Federal Theatre Project as head of the Midwest Play Bureau. Glaspell wrote her last play, *Springs Eternal*, in 1945. She died on July 27, 1948.

Plot Summary

Act 1

The Verge opens on a setting that is not easily recognizable. The place is dark except for a bright shaft of light that emanates from a trap door in the middle of the floor. The shaft illuminates a strange, twisting plant. A violent wind can be heard swirling outside. It is clear that this is a strange, and perhaps threatening, space. Suddenly, a buzzer sounds, and Anthony emerges from the trap door. He picks up a telephone and is instructed by Miss Claire to check the temperature in the room. He does so and reports back to her that the temperature is dropping and that the plants are in danger. She says something on the telephone that eases his concern, and he retires back down into the trap door. The curtain is briefly drawn upon this scene. A moment later, it opens to reveal the setting as a greenhouse. It is now a winter morning, filled with sunshine, but the snow is blowing and piling up outside. The frost has made abstract patterns upon the greenhouse glass giving the room a somewhat creative atmosphere. Inside, there are strange plants filling the shelves and lining the walls. Of particular interest is a plant that creeps along the low back wall of the greenhouse. Its leaves are described as "at once repellent and significant." It is clear that this room is not a typical greenhouse but is a botanical laboratory, used for experimentation in creating new plant forms. Anthony is at work preparing soil, but he stops briefly to check the thermometer. Pleased with the current temperature, he returns to his work. The buzzer sounds, but Anthony ignores it.

Harry Archer enters from outside the greenhouse, snow blowing in violently, and Anthony requests that he immediately close the door so as not to harm the plants. Harry inquires why Anthony did not answer the buzzer and discovers that Claire has told him not to so he will not be disturbed in his work. Harry inquires why the house is freezing cold, and Anthony explains that Claire has had all of the heat diverted to the greenhouse so that the plants will not be harmed. Anthony mentions that it is very important to have heat for the plants at present because the Breath of Life is about to flower. Harry opens the door once again and is propelled back out into the snow by Anthony, who promptly returns to his work.

Hattie, the maid, enters with breakfast food and informs Anthony that Mr. Archer has ordered breakfast to be served in the greenhouse because it has heat. Harry returns, and he and Hattie begin to set up breakfast. Claire enters and chastises Harry for inviting their houseguests, Tom and Dick, to eat breakfast in the greenhouse. Claire and Anthony then discuss the Edge Vine. They are both upset because the plant is not doing well. Anthony tries to cheer Claire up by reminding her that the Breath of Life will open soon. It is clear from the way Claire and Anthony talk about the Edge Vine and the Breath of Life that these mean much more to them than ordinary plants. Dick arrives, and a brief farcical exchange takes place about the lack of salt for the eggs. Dick then inquires about Claire's work with the plants. She tries to explain the importance of her experiments, but there are no words that can truly convey her feelings. Instead, she speaks in fits and starts, "I want to give fragrance to Breath of Life□the flower I've

created that is outside of what flowers have been. What has gone out should bring fragrance from what it has left. But no definite fragrance, no limiting enclosing thing." The men continue to question Claire about her motives, and she becomes increasingly agitated. In her frustration and desire to explain, she smashes one of the eggs. She finally retires to the inner room. Harry and Dick discuss Claire's strange behavior, and Harry concides that he is considering having a physician come out to visit Claire.

Tom arrives but is locked outside the greenhouse. Another farcical episode occurs as the men try to communicate to Tom that they do not have the key. Tom comically threatens to shoot himself with his revolver if they will not let him in. Claire finally returns and unlocks the door, but not before sending Tom on his way to fetch some salt. He mistakenly returns with pepper. The three men sit down for breakfast and continue to question Claire about her strange behavior. Claire continues to try and explain herself in stilted, inadequate language, as Harry becomes more frustrated and confused. Claire finally exits to help Anthony in the inner room.

The three men continue to discuss Claire's behavior. Harry confesses that he was hoping to get some help with the situation from Tom and Dick, but now he is concerned that they will just encourage her. Tom urges Harry to just let Claire be as she is. He says that if Claire can "do it with plants, perhaps she won't have to do it with herself." When Harry asks what he means, he explains, "Break up what exists. Open the door to destruction." Harry exits to go have a smoke. Tom then confesses to Dick that he loves Claire but, because he cannot have her as he wants, he must go away to India.

Elizabeth, Claire's daughter, arrives with Harry. Claire returns but is unable to embrace her daughter or show her any affection. Claire tries to exit, but Harry stops her. It is clear that Claire is very uncomfortable with her daughter's presence. Elizabeth tries very hard to win over her mother, but Claire will have none of it. Elizabeth wants to help her mother with the plants, but Claire vehemently tells her that it will not be. Claire once again launches into a diatribe about what she is attempting to do, and the words again fail her. She suddenly focuses on the Edge Vine, and her disappointment that "it isn't□over the edge" but is reverting to traditional forms. She decides it should be destroyed. Claire flies into a rage and rips up the Edge Vine. She then tries to strike Elizabeth with the vine, but Harry wrests it from her and quickly ushers Elizabeth out.

Act 2

The scene opens upon Claire alone in a strange tower. She is seen through the downstage window. Adelaide and Harry enter. Adelaide reprimands Claire for not being a proper mother to Elizabeth. Claire argues with her and says she has no interest in being what Adelaide considers a proper woman. Harry then informs Claire that he has invited Dr. Emmons, the neurologist, to dinner in hopes that he can make her well. Claire quickly flings open the window of the tower and yells down to Tom that she is in trouble and needs help. Tom quickly runs up to the tower to see what is wrong. Claire intimates that she needs help to escape from Adelaide's absurd ideas. Harry suggests

that they all go down for dinner, but Claire refuses. She convinces Tom to stay and talk with her as Harry and Adelaide exit.

Claire confesses to Tom that she loves him, but he tells her it cannot be. He is afraid that if they became lovers they would no longer be able to communicate the way they do now. Tom asks Claire to tell him about the Breath of Life .ower. She says that she will know tomorrow if she has succeeded and asks him to stay until she finds out. Tom says he will try. Claire once again pleads for Tom to stay and help her find what she is seeking, but he again refuses. Claire continues to try and persuade Tom, becoming more poetic in her speech. Tom begins to be swept away by her words and almost gives in to her, but cannot. Claire realizes she has failed and breaks the moment by running down the stairs to scold Harry for playing the phonograph. She then returns to the tower, followed by Harry. She asks Harry to have everyone come up to the tower, including Dr. Emmons, so he does. Claire rails against Dr. Emmons and says that "It must be very interesting□helping people go insane." Dick arrives, and Claire immediately runs to him and asks him to take her away. Harry now realizes that Dick and Claire have been lovers. He tries to go after Dick, but Dr. Emmons stops him.

Act 3

The action is now back in the greenhouse. Anthony is working on the plants when Hattie, the maid, rushes in. She tells Anthony that Mr. Archer is talking to Dick heatedly and that she is worried for Dick's safety. In the next instant, Dick rushes in and tries to escape down the trap door. Harry chases him with the revolver. Anthony stops him by saying "You can't shoot him in here. It is not good for the plants." Claire enters and calmly removes the revolver from Harry's hand. Then Tom enters. He has come to say goodbye. Anthony reminds Claire that it is time to go see what has happened to the Breath of Life. Anthony goes to see and reports to Claire that they have succeeded. But, she is not happy. Harry is distressed and tells Claire he wishes she would be satisfied. The three men then leave. Tom returns and tells Claire that he has decided he does not want to go away without her and urges her to come away with him to India. This upsets Claire because she realizes that Tom is just like all of the others. He wants her on his own terms. Claire becomes so distraught that she feels she has no alternative but to kill him. Claire strangles Tom and then picks up the gun and "raises it high and fires above through the place in the glass left open for ventilation." The others, hearing the shot, run in to find Tom dead. Claire is now totally engulfed by madness, and the play closes as she quietly sings "Nearer My God, to Thee."

Act 1

Act 1 Summary

The Verge is a three-act play, originally produced in America in 1921, which addresses the plight of a creative, sensitive woman during the onset of the Women's Movement in the early 1900's. As Act I opens, the stage is set with an unusual-looking plant upon which a bright beam of light is directed. The beam is coming from the direction of a trap door in the floor. Everything else is dark and the sound of wind is heard, which creates an ominous atmosphere.

A buzzer sounds with a very definite pattern as if by code. Anthony, a middle-aged man, enters from the trap door and answers a telephone. By Anthony's answers, it is discernible that the weather is becoming more extreme, and that Anthony is to check the temperature in the room immediately, so the plants will not be placed in jeopardy. Anthony acknowledges the directions and descends again into the trap door. The curtain closes.

Soon after, the curtain opens and the scene is the interior of a greenhouse on a sunny, snowy morning. Snow is seen blowing and piling up outside the windows, which are covered with icy patterns. Plants abound in the room and are placed on every available shelf and nook, but they are all dwarfed by one plant in particular. This unusual plant is huge, clings to the back wall, and is the first indication that this is not an ordinary greenhouse, but possibly some type of experimental lab.

Anthony is seen preparing soil, checking thermometers, and going about his work until a buzzer sounds again. The buzzer does not emit the same pattern as before, so Anthony ignores the sound and continues to work.

Suddenly, Harry Archer, the man of the house, enters the greenhouse in a gust of wind and snow. Anthony is annoyed to have been interrupted so rudely and is concerned that the cold temperature will have adverse effects on the plants. Harry asks Anthony why he didn't answer the buzz a few moments ago, to which Anthony can only reply that Claire, Harry's wife, has instructed Anthony to answer no buzz but hers.

Annoyed at this special buzz code and lack of attention to his own needs, Harry continues to question Anthony about why there is no heat in the house but that the greenhouse is very warm. Anthony can only reply that Claire has ordered that the heat from the house be diverted to the greenhouse so that the health of the plants is not jeopardized during this extreme weather.

There is a special plant inside called "The Breath of Life," which is about to flower, and Anthony has been given strict instructions to keep it alive at all costs. Harry wonders incredulously about his own welfare in favor of that for the plants and leaves the

greenhouse in a swirl of snow blasting through the open door. Anthony does not look up and returns to the task at hand.

Soon after Harry leaves, Hattie, the maid, enters the greenhouse with the provisions to make breakfast at Harry's request. Anthony is surprised at yet another intrusion and cannot understand why the greenhouse plants have been placed at risk for these insistent mortals.

Harry returns to the greenhouse and assists Hattie in breakfast preparation for the house guests, Tom and Dick, who have been notified that the meal will be served in the greenhouse because the main house has no heat. Claire enters and is astonished that Harry has invited even more people to intrude upon the sacred space of the greenhouse.

Ignoring Hattie and Harry, Claire and Anthony launch into discussion of the plants, particularly the one called, "The Edge Vine." The plant is not thriving, and Anthony tries to divert Claire's gloom by reminding her that "The Breath of Life" will soon be opening. It is clear that these two plants are significant, but the reason is not yet clear.

Dick, he first house guest to arrive, engages in a convoluted discussion about salt for the eggs with Harry who realizes that the salt must have fallen into the snow on the journey from the main house. Uncomfortable with the state of the household in which he is a guest, Dick tries to maintain some sort of manners and asks Claire about her work with the plants. Claire tries to explain the significance that the plants have for her but is able to utter only stilted sentences which ends in her pushing one of the eggs off the table in her exasperation.

Claire retreats to an inner room while Harry and Dick discuss her odd behavior. Harry confides that he is considering asking a doctor friend of his to come to the house to observe Claire's behavior.

Tom arrives at the greenhouse door, which Claire has locked to eliminate any more intrusions and temperature fluctuations. Unfortunately, Harry and Dick have their backs to the door and cannot see Tom gesturing or hear his knocks to get into the room. Finally Harry and Dick do see Tom and try to gesture to him that they do not possess the key to unlock the door. Tom has a gun in his hand and makes comical gestures of shooting himself in an effort to get other men to sense his urgency to get the door unlocked.

Claire finally comes back into the main room and agrees to unlock the door but only after sending Tom back to the house to retrieve salt, so the door will not have to be opened any more times than necessary. Tom, unfortunately, returns with pepper but Harry, Dick, and Tom resign themselves to eggs without salt and continue on with their breakfast and more questions for Claire about her greenhouse activities.

Once more, Claire tries to explain herself and becomes increasingly exasperated when the men cannot grasp her meaning of the joy of just letting things grow whichever way

they want without restriction. Claire leaves the men to their breakfast and leaves to help Anthony in another room.

Harry confides that he had hoped to get some advice from Tom and Dick about what to do with Claire, but Tom and Dick do not seem concerned with Claire's behavior and Harry fears that any dialogue from them will just encourage his wife. At last Tom tells Harry to just let Claire go on as she is, that her activities are harmless enough. Harry is annoyed that the other two men cannot grasp his frustration and leaves to smoke.

Tom confides to Dick that he loves Claire but knows that any return of the affection is impossible and has decided to leave for India. Another buzz of the phone brings word that Elizabeth, Claire's 17-year-old daughter from a previous marriage, has arrived for a visit. Tom tries to get Claire to come to the phone but to no avail, and Harry ultimately brings Elizabeth to the greenhouse.

Claire emerges halfway out of the trap door and awkwardly embraces her daughter. The two women are not comfortable with each other, Claire being more ill at ease than Elizabeth. Elizabeth is obviously well mannered and cultured and attempts to please Claire, who resists any show of affection. Claire is especially adamant about Elizabeth's not getting involved in the work with the plants.

Claire's frustrations rise again as she attempts to explain the significance of the plants in her own life. To Claire, it is enough that the plants grow with abandon and that they are new varieties although not necessarily bred to be superior. This concept is foreign to Elizabeth, who thinks that anything new should at least be better.

The fact that her own daughter cannot grasp her intent pushes Claire to the point of wanting "The Edge Vine" destroyed, and Claire continues to do just that, pulling the plant out of its pot, roots and all. Claire attempts to strike Elizabeth with the uprooted plant but Harry intervenes and escorts Elizabeth from the greenhouse. After they leave, Claire says that she feels light now and asks Tom to say something pleasant about God and cautions him to be careful because she knows that He is not far away.

Act 1 Analysis

From the play's beginning, it is clear that the contents of the greenhouse symbolize something that needs to be tended and nurtured. The cold elements are kept at bay while the plants, especially "The Edge Vine," are given special attention. Even the heat from the house is diverted from the human inhabitants to the plants in Claire's greenhouse. The random growth patterns of some of the more unusual plants suggest ideas and creativity, and the author takes special care to shine a beam of light onto the most unusual plant of all at the very beginning.

The interior of the greenhouse symbolizes the interior of Claire's heart and sensibilities which she struggles to protect from outside forces symbolized by the blizzard raging outside. There is some beauty attributed to the outside elements in the beautiful crystallized ice patterns on the windows and the whorls of snow seen outside the

windows and Claire has clearly had access to the beauty in the world but is now at a stage in her life where she rejects the cold materialism of her married life for that of a more satisfactory inner peace.

While Claire's objectives are notable, there is selfishness in this phase of self-discovery that must be achieved at the expense of others. Claire has diverted the heat from the house to the greenhouse at the expense of her houseguests and even greets her own daughter with detachment when Elizabeth cannot grasp Claire's actions. The only person who enjoys Claire's approval is Anthony because he is devoted to furthering Claire's mission and does not sway from his devotion to her.

The author has assigned resolute and intractable qualities to the male characters that add to Claire's annoyance with the status quo and and limitations on women of the period. It is interesting that the author has also given the characters the names Tom, Dick, and Harry, typically stated in the phrase "any Tom, Dick or Harry" to imply ordinary individuals. The author expresses a certain disdain for the obtuse male characters, which possibly stems from the author's intent to bring awareness to the importance of the emerging Women's Rights issues of the early 1900's.

Act 2

Act 2 Summary

As the second act begins, Claire is seen inside an unusual room inside a tower, which is not completely round. There are some rough edges and unfinished masonry to give the room a feeling of incompleteness. Claire is seated near a window browsing through a book of drawings when Claire hears Harry and Adelaide, Claire's sister, climbing the stairs up to the room. Adelaide, who has raised Elizabeth, Claire's daughter, has come to address some issues about Claire and then about Elizabeth.

In addition to not being a responsible wife to Harry, Adelaide chastises Claire for her lack of affection and attention for Elizabeth. Claire has no interest in what Adelaide thinks is respectable and cares very little for societal constraints and typical female roles. Claire's behavior borders on the insolent, and Harry informs Claire that Dr. Emmons, the psychiatrist, will be a guest at dinner tonight, and Harry hopes that Claire will speak to the doctor in an attempt to help her.

While Harry speaks, Claire spots Tom from her window seat and yells down to him that she is in trouble. Harry and Adelaide are outraged at another display of irresponsible behavior from Claire that she would let Tom run all the stairs to the tower thinking that Claire is in danger. When Tom arrives, out of breath, and realizes that Claire is perfectly fine, he is both relieved and a bit annoyed. Harry apologizes for his wife's behavior but Claire is undaunted and informs Tom that she needs to be rescued from Adelaide's attacks on Claire's character and way of thinking.

Harry is done with the nonsense and suggests everyone go downstairs to dinner but Claire refuses to budge and Tom stays in the tower room with her as Harry and Adelaide leave. Harry is aware that there is some attraction between Tom and his wife but does not have the energy to fight it tonight.

Sequestered with Tom, Claire admits to him that she loves him but Tom reminds Claire that the love cannot be acted upon and he is leaving for India tomorrow. Tom feels that once the line is crossed between friends and lovers, he and Claire's relationship will never be the same, and communication will dramatically decline.

Tom tries to divert Claire into talking about her other passions and mentions "The Breath of Life" flower, and Claire tells Tom that she will know tomorrow if the plant experiment has been successful or not. Tom agrees to stay if it is possible to see the results. Claire pleads with Tom to stay and be her partner, and they can search for meaning together, but once more Tom declines. Claire is not to be deterred and continues to bait Tom with passionate words and thoughts and even tries to embrace him, but he rejects all of this.

Claire is a strong character, but she cannot break Tom's will and goes downstairs to demand that Harry turn off the Victrola, which is disturbing her concentration. Claire

returns to Tom and the music stops. Harry has followed Claire into the tower room, and eventually Dr. Emmons and Adelaide join them. Claire is well aware that Dr. Emmons, although a dinner guest, is there tonight to observe her for signs of insanity.

Dr. Emmons notes that Claire is overwrought and needs much rest, but Claire looks for a distraction and finds it in Dick, who has joined the others in the room. Running to Dick, Claire begs him to take her away from this place and at that moment Harry knows that his wife has had an intimate relationship with Dick. The others are tired of Claire's antics and leave with Dick embracing Claire, who repeatedly asks Dick to show her mercy and give her everything because the others will give her nothing.

Act 2 Analysis

The author masterfully symbolizes the spiritual prison that holds Claire by positioning her in a tower room where she is isolated from the others. It is Claire herself who has put her in this position since she cannot bear the sameness and the rigid attitudes of her family and friends. Tom may be the only one who truly loves her, for he sees that it is not the consummation of their love that matters to Claire, but the quest. Claire always needs something to hope for beyond what others are able to give, which is the foundation for her unrest.

Claire's behavior and thinking represent the unrest of many women in the United States at this time in history as the Women's Rights movement begins to take root. The author has symbolized this early growth period with the use of Claire's plants, especially the unusual large and twisting ones that mimic the path of the women's struggle. There is also hope in growth, however, which is a positive element that Claire is unable to explain to the others.

Act 3

Act 3 Summary

Anthony works with new plants when Hattie runs into the greenhouse to tell him that Harry is acting dangerously and has been threatening to shoot Dick. Dick had gone out of the house late last night and has returned to pack his belongings. Anthony is annoyed at the interruption and dismisses Hattie's claims as none of her business.

Suddenly, Dick rushes into the greenhouse seeking shelter, and Anthony does not want him or any violence in this place. Harry has caught up to Dick now and is brandishing a revolver while continuing the threats. Anthony is appalled at the activity and knows that Claire would not approve of any of this behavior, especially today when "The Breath of Life" is supposed to bloom.

Claire is able to get the gun from Harry and notices Tom, who has come to tell Claire that he has decided not to go to India, that he'll stay with her, and that they can be happy together.

Anthony tries to restore some semblance of order in the room and reminds Claire that it is time to view "The Breath of Life." Claire cannot bear to look at the plant and encourages Anthony to do it and he returns with word that their efforts have been successful.

Anthony brings "The Breath of Life" plant into the room so that all may see the beautiful success. Even the men can see the vibrant beauty of the plant, but Claire is not happy, much to Harry's chagrin. Harry wishes desperately that his wife would be happy about something and if she can't feel joy for this pet project of her own making, then he is out of options. Tom, Dick, and Harry leave Claire alone with the plant.

Eventually, Tom returns to declare his love once more for Claire and promises to keep her safe. At this word, Claire bristles and realizes that Tom is no different from all the others who want to mold her into their idea of what she should be and what should make her happy. Claire finds a superhuman strength and is able to overpower Tom and strangle the breath out of him. Leaving Tom lying lifeless on the floor, Claire picks up the gun and shoots into the ceiling of the greenhouse which brings all the others running back.

Anthony stares at Tom's dead body as Harry enters the room to see the gun in Claire's hand. Immediately sizing up the situation, Harry realizes that Claire has finally ended her own distress. Anthony offers to take the blame but Harry pushes that thought away as Claire would not want anything that wasn't authentic. Claire is in another place in her mind now and the play ends as she sings the verses to a religious hymn.

Act 3 Analysis

Claire has reached the point of madness by this act, and there is no one to save her from herself so she takes matters into her own hands. When she realizes that Tom, who she thought was her last hope for a creative life, really just wants to control who and what she is, it pushes her past the point of no return. The theme of death pervades this act in spite of the long-awaited blossoming of "The Breath of Life" plant. For Claire to free Tom from his provincial state of mind, Claire must kill him, and in doing so, thinks it is her greatest gift to the man she loves.

It is symbolic, too, that the other men now see the beauty of "The Breath of Life" but only after its peak has passed, much like the lack of attention shown to the women they claim to love yet do not really know.

Claire symbolizes the need for women of the time to shatter the limitations around them to create new social, political, and economic change. For revolutionary thought to take place, revolutionary actions must occur. Claire destroys the two things she loves most, "The Breath of Life" plant and Tom, to bring attention to the necessity of change and the room for new thought and new growth. To Claire, nothing is too great a sacrifice if change and new growth will result.

Characters

Adelaide

Adelaide is Claire's sister who has been raising Elizabeth, Claire's daughter from her first marriage. She also has five children of her own. She is a proper Victorian woman who constantly chastises Claire for not taking on her responsibilities as dutiful wife and mother. She calls Claire "unnatural" and is appalled that she does not exhibit a traditional mother's love for her daughter. Adelaide is per- fectly happy with the role society has dictated for her. As she notes in the second act, "I go about in the world□free, busy, happy. Among people. I have no time to think of myself."

Anthony

Anthony is a rugged, older man who assists Claire with her work in the greenhouse. He is loyal to Claire and obeys any orders she gives. Anthony is devoted to his work with the plants and will even give Mr. Archer instructions when it comes to his actions in the greenhouse. Anthony stays out of the family's affairs unless they interfere with his botanical work. He believes in Claire's work, and, like her, is very captivated by the Breath of Life plant.

Claire Archer

Claire is the protagonist around whom the play revolves. She is a woman who feels trapped in circumstances beyond her control. She is trying to break free from this "prison" through her creation of new and unusual forms of plants. Claire's sense of self runs parallel with her botanical experiments. She is seeking "otherness" in her plants and in herself. She longs to escape from the forms that constrain her and conveys this desire symbolically through creating life that takes on a new, unrestrained form. She feels this is her only salvation. "We need not be held in forms molded for us. There is outness□and otherness." Claire believes that if she can recreate her plants, she can recreate herself. She is extremely unhappy in her current existence and is frustrated in her inability to truly communicate with those around her. Mere words are inadequate to try and convey her emotions and so, throughout the play, she resorts to poetry to try and get her meaning across. She is unsuccessful, however, and remains trapped in her own interior prison. Claire is not able to truly break from the patterns that imprison her, and the frustration and disillusionment that come from this realization push her ever closer to madness. Claire foreshadows her own fate very early in the play when she speaks the line, "Things that take a sporting chance□go mad." She does not necessarily believe that madness is a terrible thing. For Claire, it is her only chance of breaking free. If Claire cannot recreate the outside world in which she lives, she must turn to the only word she has total control over, her interior one. For Claire, madness is

the ultimate welcome escape. She sums up this paradox with the line, "Madness that is the only chance for sanity."

Harry Archer

Harry is Claire's husband. He is a pilot. He is also a congenial man who subscribes to the traditional Victorian values. He believes in behaving properly and that one should exhibit correct manners and decorum at all times. Propriety is very important to Harry, and he comments throughout the play on what behavior he believes a proper woman should exhibit. Throughout the play, Harry tries to restrain Claire's "strange" behavior and to pull her back into the role of a traditional Victorian wife. He constantly urges Claire to be happy and to be "herself," not understanding that these two things might be mutually exclusive. Harry believes a normal woman should be perfectly content with being a good homemaker, wife, and mother. He is patronizing to Claire and does not understand what her work with the plants means to her. He dismisses her projects with comments such as, "Well, I don't want to see it get you□it's not important enough for that." Harry does not understand Claire's behavior at all and believes that she is suffering from hysteria.

Richard Demming

Richard Demming is a houseguest and friend of the Archer's. He is known to his friends as Dick. Dick is an artist who produces abstract drawings. Many of the other characters in the play do not understand his artwork. Harry calls his drawings, "lines that don't make anything." Through his artwork, Dick too is breaking patterns by creating drawings with forms that people do not recognize. He is having an affair with Claire of which Harry is unaware at the start of the play. As an artist, Dick concentrates primarily on the visual aspects of things. For example, when Claire urges him to destroy the Edge Vine in act 1, he resists because it is "interesting in form." Dick loves Claire's physicality, her exterior self, but he does not understand what is going on inside her. Dick dismisses Claire's ramblings as "merely the excess of a particularly rich temperament."

Tom Edgeworthy

Tom is an old friend of Claire's who is her closest confidant. Tom is into meditation and mystical practices and is somewhat of a poet and philosopher. Of all the men in Claire's life, he is the most sensitive to her feelings. Tom tries to understand her torment, but he too ultimately fails. Tom is in love with Claire and has decided he must go away because he cannot have her love on his own terms. At the end of the play when he tries to pull Claire away with him, it is clear that he does not truly understand her either, and Claire sees this as the last straw. His inability to "meet Claire in her world" ultimately leads to the climax of the play. Of all of the characters, Tom's speech patterns most closely resemble Claire's with their sometimes stilted and disjointed meter. In this way, Glaspell symbolically indicates the chance for a connection between the two characters.

Elizabeth

Elizabeth is Claire's daughter from her first marriage. She has been raised by her Aunt Adelaide and has not seen her mother for the past year. She is poised, graceful, and self-assured. Elizabeth tries very hard to ingratiate herself to her mother, but she is not able to get through to Claire at all. Claire rejects her because Elizabeth represents all of the things that keep women "locked in" to their traditional roles. Unlike Harry, Elizabeth recognizes that things are rapidly changing in society, although she is not a willing participant in the change. In the first act, she notes that, "I'm not going to teach or preach or be a stuffy person. But now that□values have shifted and such sensitive new things have been liberated in the world□." Elizabeth is a product of her upbringing and is well-suited to fulfill the role that society expects of her.

Dr. Charlie Emmons

Dr. Emmons is a neurologist whom Harry enlists to try and help Claire. Dr. Emmons is a congenial man who tries his best to be non-threatening. He does not subscribe to the new Freudian theories of psychoanalysis that have been put forth. He holds on to the old belief that rest and isolation can help "cure" a hysterical patient, an idea that was common at the time the play takes place. Dr. Emmons has been brought to the house by Harry, who hopes he can find a way to help Claire revert back to her "normal" self.

Hattie

Hattie is the Archer's maid. She is loyal to the family and gets very concerned whenever she feels something is amiss. When Hattie notices Mr. Archer talking heatedly with Mr. Demming, she becomes very upset and tries to get Anthony to intervene. She serves an important function at the beginning of act 3 when she reports what occurred the previous night and what she has witnessed during the conversation between Mr. Archer and Mr. Demming.

Themes

Death and Rebirth

Numerous images and symbols of death and rebirth occur throughout *The Verge*. First and foremost are the symbolic elements lent by the plants. Through her plants, Claire brings forth life. She has the power to create this life, but she also has the power to destroy it, as she does at the end of act 1 with the Edge Vine. Claire also intimates throughout the play that she is not afraid of death and would perhaps find it a welcome respite from her horrible existence, "Why should we mind lying under the earth?" Claire believes that if people are "planted" in the earth, they might sprout forth anew into a better world. When she kills Tom at the end of the play, it is not out of malice, but love. She calls it her "gift" to him because in Claire's idiosyncratic mind, death is the best possibility for life.

Patterns

Patterns of all kinds are prominent symbolic elements throughout *The Verge*. The play contains many visual and social patterns that serve to emphasize the restraints by which Claire feels trapped. Glaspell uses this symbolic element to emphasize the static, unchanging nature of Claire's world. The patterns are introduced early in the play in the first stage description of the greenhouse, "The frost has made patterns on the glass as if□as Plato would have it□the patterns inherent in abstract nature and behind all life had to come out. . . . And the wind makes patterns of sound around the glass house." Harry's actions in the play also exhibit definite patterns, ones that Claire finds unbearable. For example, in the first act, Harry refuses to eat his egg without salt. He has always taken his egg with salt, and he intends to keep on doing it that way, no matter what. Claire feels increasingly trapped by these social patterns, and thus, has a mounting desire to break free of them. Claire also attempts to break free with the patterns of her speech, but she is unsuccessful and becomes increasingly agitated, "Stop doing that!□words going into patterns; They do it sometimes when I let come what's there. Thoughts take pattern□then pattern is the thing." Glaspell uses the patterns as a metaphor for the way Victorian society trapped women into predefined roles.

Shattering and Exploding

Images of shattering and exploding occur throughout *The Verge* in both the dialogue and the action of the play. Claire wants to rearrange old concepts and ways of being, and she believes the best way to do this is to first explode what already exists. In act 1, the audience is introduced to Claire's desire to shatter conventions and affect change when she says, "I want to break it up! If it were all in pieces, we'd be shocked to aliveness." This theme is visually emphasized a moment later when Claire smashes the

egg. The theme is also tied to various objects and images throughout the remainder of the play. For example, in act 1, Claire talks of how plants can "explode their species," something she finds very "beautiful" and "brave." In act 3, Claire says to Tom, "Perhaps the madness that gave you birth will burst again." Of course, at the end of the play, Claire literally shatters the Breath of Life plant by knocking Tom into it, and she deliberately shatters the greenhouse when she shoots through the roof.

Locked Out and Locked In

In *The Verge*, Claire feels trapped within her circumstances, and Glaspell uses numerous visual and textual images to emphasize Claire's imprisonment. In act 1, Harry tries the trap door and finds it is locked. He then exasperatedly says, "Well I love the way she keeps people locked out!" This, of course, refers to the trap door, but on a thematic level, also refers to the larger issue of how Claire keeps everyone locked out from her own feelings. A short time later in the play, the theme is visually played out when Tom is locked out of the greenhouse. Later in the play, when Claire is trying to explain her view on why the war afforded such great possibilities she says, "We were shut in with what wasn't so." Claire was hoping that the war might help society to break free from its conventions and restraints and for human beings to find a better way to communicate with each other. Unfortunately, she finds that this did not come about and that human beings are still trapped within the same patterns and circumstances. At the end of the play, Glaspell once again foregrounds the theme of Claire's desire to escape from what she perceives to be her prison, with Claire's final speech. Her last word before sinking into the revery of the hymn is "Out."

Style

Expressionism

Expressionism was a movement in literature and the arts that took hold in the early twentieth century. It uses techniques of distortion and symbolism to try and convey inner human experience. In drama, expressionism can be thought of as "seeing the world through a particular character's eyes." For example, in *The Verge*, the sets appear deformed and certain elements are exaggerated because they represent Claire's experiences. When Claire feels trapped in her situation, Glaspell uses visual elements to clue in the audience. For example, in the second act, Glaspell has the audience view Claire in the tower through a "bulging window," one that might seem as if it is being pushed on from the inside. This helps to convey Claire's emotional isolation and also her desire to escape from the "prison" of her world. Other distorted elements are used throughout the play to also try and convey a physical expression of Claire's inner emotional state. For example, at the opening of the play, a strong shaft of light emanates from the trap door to illuminate the Breath of Life plant, giving it a special significance. The plant emerges as a bright spot in this dark world. The severe lighting lends a mystical quality to the scene. The plant itself is described as having "a greater transparency than plants have had," and it is in a "hidden place" within the greenhouse. This again emphasizes that it is a unique and yet strange living thing, much like Claire herself.

Blank Verse

Blank verse is lines of poetry that do not rhyme. Blank verse is most often associated with iambic pentameter in which each line contains five sections or feet ("iambs"), each one containing one soft and one hard accent as in the line, "I wish I had a dog to call my own." Blank verse does not necessarily have to conform to this iambic model as long as it maintains some degree of meter. Claire speaks in blank verse when she is trying to convey her dreams and emotions to the other characters. The more agitated she becomes, the more she uses this poetic device to try and get her point across. Claire's scene in act 2 with Tom in the tower is particularly full of blank verse.

Symbolism

Symbolism uses objects to stand for or represent something else. The play is filled with symbolic images that help to convey the playwright's message. For example, in *The Verge*, the Edge Vine symbolizes Claire's desire to create something that is new and has no pattern. The play is also filled with visual and textual symbols that allude to Claire's sense of isolation and entrapment. There are also numerous symbols that refer to the patterns that Claire is trying to break, such as the patterns of frost on the greenhouse window and the broken pattern of the tower into which Claire retreats.

There are also many symbolic elements that refer to twisting and breaking such as the twisting stems of the Edge Vine and the twisting spiral staircase that leads up to Claire's tower.

Farce

Farce is exaggerated humor that contains unlikely situations. It is often characterized by raucous physical comedy and the comings and goings of many different characters. *The Verge* uses farcical elements in some scenes to heighten the absurdity of the situation. For example, one of the most farcical moments in the play occurs in the first scene when characters are "blowing" in and out of the greenhouse door. Another farcical moment occurs when Tom gets locked outside in the cold, and the characters must try to communicate with him through pantomime. Glaspell uses farce in *The Verge* to emphasize the craziness of the world and also to inject some humorous elements into the play.

Historical Context

The early 1920s were a time of great change for the United States. World War I had ended in 1919 but was still exerting its influence. There was a postwar letdown in the country during which a large part of the population began to get restless. After the stress of the war, it seemed that much of American society was looking for a release. The country had been disillusioned by the devastating war and much of society was now questioning old values and beliefs. The old Victorian ideals of decorum and etiquette were going out of style and were being replaced by a new "modernity" that was much less restrictive. Attitudes toward sex became more open and a general eroding of family life began to occur. Many people adopted a looser moral code than they had followed previously, and society saw a real questioning of long-held beliefs and values. Even though much of the country was embracing new attitudes and beliefs, there was also a longing to return to a former, more innocent time. Warren G. Harding was elected President of the United States in 1920. His campaign slogan promised a "return to normalcy," and he won by a wide margin. Prohibition, which made it unlawful to sell and consume alcohol unless it was for "medicinal" purposes, was in force after the passage of the Eighteenth Amendment in 1919. This drove partying and alcohol consumption "underground," and a great wave of decadence broke out that was to culminate in the flapper era of the late 1920s. Gangsters took advantage of the opportunity to bootleg liquor for large profits, which also led to a great deal of mob violence during the era.

Concurrent with this new modernity, women were moving into a new position in society. They had gained the right to vote with the passage of the Nineteenth Amendment in 1920 and they continued to push for more freedom and equal rights. They began to take a wider variety of jobs outside the home. Up to this time, women who held jobs had been largely restricted to school-teaching, nursing, social service, or clerical work. They now began to work in publishing, real estate, and numerous other professions that had previously been considered appropriate for men only. Many women who did stay at home were able to spend less time on their domestic duties, as many laborsaving devices such as electric irons and washing machines became available. Some women were able to embrace their newfound freedom and found it to be a very liberating time. Others, like Claire in *The Verge*, were not able to reconcile their inner desires with the expectations of women that society had ingrained in them for so long. They found themselves caught in an inner struggle that was emotionally devastating for some. Many of the women writers of the day, such as Virginia Woolf and Charlotte Perkins Gilman, wrote about this inner turmoil.

Sigmund Freud's theories became very popular in America during this time. Freud had given his first lectures in the United States at Clark College, Massachusetts in 1909. The war temporarily drew attention away from domestic issues, however, so Freud's popularity did not really take hold in the United States until after World War I. Freud posited that mental illness was caused by "repression" of memories and experiences and could be cured if the underlying causes were discovered. This discovery would be affected by conducting extensive conversations between the patient and the doctor. Some psychoanalysts immediately subscribed to Freud's "talking cures," while others

still held on to the traditional ways of treating patients through rest, isolation, and electroshock therapy. Popular magazines and newspapers ran articles about psychoanalysis, and many "Freudian terms" made their way into everyday conversation.

World War I had a major impact upon the United States. Even though the war was fought overseas, many people had relatives in the military and thus, it played a significant role in their lives. Also, numerous young men returned wounded from battle and this became a constant reminder for many, of the horrors that human beings could perpetrate upon each other. As Harry notes in *The Verge*, "I'd like to have Charlie Emmons see her□he's fixed up a lot of people shot to pieces in the war." World War I heralded a kind of "loss of innocence" for America. Americans now realized that there was a significant threat from countries that once seemed very far away. Ironically, in Glaspell's play, Claire has a somewhat different view of the war. She sees it as a missed opportunity for society to remake itself, "The war. There was another gorgeous chance. . . . But the war didn't help. Oh, it was a stunning chance! But fast as we could□scuttled right back to the trim little thing we'd been shocked out of." To Claire, the war is a symbol of the possibility for the creation of a new world.

In this time of great transition, there was also a great deal of activity in the art world. The country was beginning to establish a cultural heritage. Movements in the European arts such as expressionism influenced many modern artists. Greenwich Village, New York, established itself as a haven for bohemian artists, who experimented with style and form in their work. The little theater movement also took hold during this time. It was a movement in which local artists established their own small theaters in order to produce cutting-edge works by American playwrights. The movement's beginning can be traced to Maurice Brown's founding of the Chicago Little Theatre in 1912. Many other little theaters were to follow, including the Provincetown Players established by Susan Glaspell and George Cram Cook.

Critical Overview

Although *The Verge* received mixed reviews for its first production by the Provincetown Players in 1921, unfortunately, the majority of them were negative. Many of the reviewers reacted negatively because they found the play dense and confusing. Some were also put off by Claire's view of the world. They found her to be unpleasant and annoying. Linda Ben-Zvi quotes Alexander Woollcott of the *New York Times* calling Claire "a neurotic and atypical woman," and went on to say, "We greatly fear that the average playgoer will be offended by Miss Glaspell's abject worship of the divinity of discontent." Others, who did not understand the play, offhandedly dismissed it. As Gerhard Bach reports, the title of Percy Hammond's review for the *New York Herald* pretty much sums up his opinion: "What *The Verge* Is About, Who Can Tell." One of the things several reviewers did note about *The Verge*, however, was the techniques that it borrowed from German expressionism. The film *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* had opened in the United States in the spring of 1921, just prior to the play's production. *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* was a film that became well-known for its use of distorted sets and exaggerated visual elements, and reviewers saw many parallels between the film's visual style and Glaspell's theatrical style. As J. Ellen Gainor notes, "Reviewers at the time of its premier also saw stylistic resemblance in the scenography to recent developments in expressionist film technique, especially, *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari.*" Even though many reviewers panned the play, some audiences did appreciate what Glaspell was trying to do. As Barbara Ozieblo notes in her essay, the play received acclaim by members of The Heterodoxy, a radical woman's club who saw that "here was a playwright who dared to show how society takes its revenge on a woman rebel." They strongly felt that Glaspell's message was important and should not be dismissed just because of the difficult stylistic elements. In fact, Gainor quotes Ruth Hale of *The Heterodoxy,* who wrote a letter to the *New York Times* in response to Woollcott's review, chastising him for his negative comments. She felt the play deserved support in spite of its complexity, "I do feel very strongly that, if we can not always quite understand, it would be smart of us to try."

While *The Verge* did not receive glowing reviews upon its first production, recently it has been "rediscovered" by feminist theorists who find it an important and overlooked work. After a seventyyear absence, the play was once again presented in 1991 at a conference at Brigham Young University. Modern critics now recognize the value and daring in Glaspell's message and creative style and find *The Verge* an important work of feminist drama. Liza Maeve Nelligan notes, "*The Verge* operates under an increasing emphasis on an individuality that rejects old notions of 'femininity' and struggles to form a new definition of womanhood," and Marcia Noe writing in *Susan Glaspell: Essays on Her Theater and Fiction* calls it "a remarkable play." It seems that *The Verge* may have been a bit ahead of its time, but modern reviewers are now able to look at the play with fresh eyes, and many of them find it an important and courageous work.

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2
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- Critical Essay #6

Critical Essay #1

Kattelman is a freelance writer and researcher and holds a Ph.D. in theater from Ohio State University. In this essay, Kattelman explores the textual, visual, and social elements Glaspell uses to emphasize the themes contained in the play.

The Verge is a complex play, but if the elements are looked at individually, some of the mystery can be unraveled. By isolating the textual, visual, and social elements of the play, one can begin to see the picture Glaspell is trying to create. In the play, Glaspell uses the various elements to emphasize the play's underlying themes. While the basic story line revolves around Claire's descent into madness, the play contains a much bigger message relayed to the audience through a dense symbolic structure. As J. Ellen Gainor notes, "Glaspell represents the disintegration of Claire's world through a complex network of poetic language, floral and religious imagery, and experimentation with theatrical form that continues to challenge and perplex."

The textual elements of the play provide a clue as to what is going on within each character. This is particularly true, of course, of the character of Claire. Her speech patterns are strange and unusual, and not like the typical dialogue one would find in a realistic play. Claire plays with words and tries to create new images, just as she tries to create new plants. She is repeatedly frustrated in her efforts, however, and comments upon the problem when she declares, "Stop doing that!□words going into patterns." Claire's speech patterns reflect her inability to find words that can truly express her inner life. She tries to communicate but finds traditional speech inadequate. Claire must resort to poetry to help convey her deeper meaning. Unfortunately, it is poetry that the rest of the world does not understand. The broken structure of Claire's sentences also represents her attempt to break out of accepted societal structures. Her words are jagged, broken, and incomplete. She breaks out of accepted modes of speech because it is the only way she can try to convey her meanings. She ultimately fails. As Gainor comments, "Claire breaks away from sentences into verse, in the hope that she will come closer to what she wants to express, but she finds poetry equally confining." Tom's speech patterns also function as a symbol in the play. His sympathy toward Claire is reflected in the way in which his speech mirrors hers when they are alone. When Tom is trying to truly understand Claire, his sentences become more broken and poetic. This is particularly apparent in the second act during the scene in the tower when the two discuss their relationship. Tom speaks such phrases as, "You□ you brave flower of all our knowing" and "You rare thing untouched□not□not into this□not back into this□by me□lover of your apartness." Tom is unable to sustain his connection with Claire, and he eventually reverts back to more normal and recognizable sentence structures.

The visual elements of Glaspell's play are carefully laid out in her stage directions. She carefully describes the environment of the greenhouse and the tower, emphasizing the strange, expressionistic elements that compose each one. The greenhouse contains exotic plants and, in particular, a strange vine that is "arresting rather than beautiful." It is also described as "repellant and significant." These might be descriptions of Claire, herself. With her carefully chosen visual elements, Glaspell conveys to the reader that

this is no ordinary plant and that it will figure significantly within the meaning of the play. Glaspell makes a point of mentioning the patterns of frost on the greenhouse glass. These visually emphasize the patterns in which Claire finds herself trapped. When Glaspell states that "one sees a little way" into the room off to the left, she emphasizes the strange and mysterious place that Claire inhabits. The audience can see only partway into that room, just as the other characters in the play can only see partway into Claire's world. Even the action of the first scene points up the deeper meaning of the play. Claire and Anthony try to keep all of the male characters outside because they do not want their greenhouse space to be invaded. They would rather keep the men "out in the cold" than to let them into their world. Glaspell's description of the tower provides even more information about the meaning of the play. She notes that "jagged lines" break from the expected curve of the tower. Here, another pattern is smashed. She also notes that there are numerous "pricks and slits" in the metal. This relates directly to the line Claire later delivers when she tells Adelaide, "But never one of you□once□looked with me through the little pricks the gayety made□ never one of you□once, looked with me at the queer light that came in through the pricks." In this scene, Glaspell describes how the audience actually sees Claire through a large bulging window at the front of the tower. Again, here the visuals emphasize the themes. The window serves as a barrier, both trapping Claire and yet keeping her safe. It bulges to symbolize Claire's longing to push out, her longing to break free.

The social elements of *The Verge* can be seen through the relationships among the characters. The relationship each man in the play has with Claire signifies the various ways men treated women at the time. Harry just wants to be in control of Claire; Dick is using her for a physical relationship; and, Tom tries to understand but is still unable to relate to feminine experience. The men all have their preconceived notions of how Claire should behave, and they liberally offer their opinions throughout the play. Harry consistently bosses Claire around. In the first act, he tells her to "be decent," "don't take it so seriously," "be amusing," and "snap out of it" as well as scolding her outright several times. It is clear that Harry feels perfectly justified in telling Claire what to do. He is, after all, the man of the house, and during the time period of the play, it was customary for men to wield power over women. He is the breadwinner and, therefore, he should hold the power. This does not work out as planned for Harry, however, because Claire refuses to be subordinate. No matter what tactics Harry uses to regain his station as head of the household, he fails. In contrast to Harry, Dick is much more carefree and easygoing. His relationship with Claire is purely a physical one, and as long as that remains intact, he does not really much care how she behaves. He just wants to be left alone to work on his own creations, his drawings. While he seems to love Claire, Dick has little invested in the relationship. One gets the feeling that if it were to end he would just go on and find another mistress. Tom is the most benign of the male characters, but even he cannot break out of his masculine preconceptions. Tom desperately tries to understand Claire. He wants to connect with her on her own terms and even slightly takes on the speech patterns she exhibits. As Barbara Ozieblo states, "Only Tom gropes toward an understanding of her disjointed utterances." Tom ultimately fails in his efforts, however. He cannot break through to Claire any more than can the other characters. He shows his true colors at the end of the play when he says to Claire,

"You are mine, and you will stay with me! [Roughly.] You hear me? You will stay with me!" When Tom is backed into a corner, he resorts to giving orders.

The relationships of the female characters also provide a clue to *The Verge*'s underlying meaning. Elizabeth represents the proper modern Victorian woman. She is demure, polite, flirtatious, and cultured. She aims to please. Elizabeth holds the same opinions as "all the girls" because that is what is expected of her. She is a conformist and that is why Claire cannot tolerate her. Claire is appalled that she has created a creature that has taken on the very patterns from which she is trying to break free. By her very presence, Elizabeth points up the fact that Claire is biologically her mother, and no matter how much Claire abhors the fact, she cannot change it. Elizabeth's existence forces Claire into a role that she wants to disown but cannot. Claire may not act like a mother to Elizabeth, but she *is* her mother and will remain so no matter what happens. A similar dynamic occurs between Claire and her sister, Adelaide. Again, here is a woman who embodies everything Claire is rebelling against. Adelaide defines herself through her relationships with her family, an idea that Claire rejects unconditionally. She will not be a good sister to Adelaide, and she will not be a good mother to Elizabeth. She wants to be defined on her own terms.

The visual, textual, and societal elements in *The Verge* all combine to create a rich symbolic life for the play. In order to truly understand the work one must look beyond the surface to what the various pieces represent. By examining each component individually, the various themes become clear. With this play, Glaspell has created a rich tapestry designed to give a multifaceted message to the audience. It is not an easy one to grasp upon first reading, however. It takes a lot of effort and thought. The dense symbols in *The Verge* are the reason that Linda Ben-Zvi calls the play "Glaspell's most radical and challenging work."

Source: Beth Kattelman, Critical Essay on *The Verge,* in *Drama for Students,* Gale, 2003.

Critical Essay #2

In the following essay excerpt, Galbus examines elements of The Verge *within the context of Socratic and Platonic influences.*

Susan Glaspell's play *The Verge* (1921) depicts the story of Claire Archer, who attempts to breed a unique plant while her husband, sister, daughter and friends worry that her obsessive quest is driving her mad and vainly attempt to divert her attention. Glaspell refers to Plato in the first stage direction, asserting that a winter storm outside Claire's greenhouse would reveal the inherent Platonic forms of nature on the frost patterns of the glass. From that moment forward, "form" becomes the pivotal term of the drama. Claire tends her horticultural experiments and protests the confining forms of language, art, motherhood, and traditional relationships between people while expressing her desire for destruction and avoiding explanations of her experiment unless coerced. Glaspell utilizes ancient Greek philosophy and culture to dismantle Plato's static metaphysical form theory. At the same time, Glaspell's main character cleverly mimics Socrates' ironic style of dialogic interaction, questioning those who oppose her, and only minimally indicating the kind of new form that she seeks, suggesting that Claire Archer is a philosopher who has escaped Plato's cave.

Because recent feminist critics have questioned the gendered foundation of Platonic metaphysics, Glaspell's charge against Plato's forms obtains a sharper relevance. Platonic forms are the essential templates which make ideas or things the *kinds* of things that they are. Independent of the imperfect material world, forms are more real than any instantiation or copy of a form. Forms are the source of our personal conceptions and cause material things by serving as the model which they imitate. For example, the form of a rose in a greenhouse imitates the perfect Platonic form of rose. Although Socrates sometimes used ordinary objects to explain forms, his goal is to elucidate the forms of abstract ideas like virtue, justice and goodness. Ideally, human interpretations of virtue and justice could be measured against the unchanging, pure forms of those ideas. Unfortunately, people often act as if there are forms for behavior and societal roles. Because Platonic forms are unchanging, the application of the idea of forms beyond their intended scope can wreak havoc with human lives. Therefore, Glaspell's main argument against forms stems from their permanence. Glaspell revises Platonic metaphysics by using the term "form" to represent a new and original creation rather than a preexisting metaphysical form. She applies the term more broadly than Plato did by including gender roles and species of plants in order to demonstrate how pervasively the idea limits human activity. Using Judith Butler's work on gender as a constructed social category and her work on the implicit gendered role of matter in Platonic metaphysics, I argue that Glaspell foreshadows late-twentieth century criticism of Plato and depicts clearly why forms can hinder creativity, language, and societal roles. Glaspell's play is important in American dramatic and theatrical history not only because of its feminist agenda, but also because it anticipates late twentieth-century criticism of Platonic metaphysics.

Susan Glaspell (1876-1948) grew up in Des Moines, Iowa, and attended Drake University where she studied Greek and philosophy. She worked as a newspaper reporter for a few years, quit and moved to Chicago and then to New York, where she cofounded the Provincetown players with Eugene O'Neill. She wrote thirteen plays, fourteen novels, and more than 50 short stories and essays, and was the second woman to earn a Pulitzer prize in drama, for *Allison's House* (1931). She was a popular, formidable success surrounded by supportive, intelligent friends. Because her husband, George Cram Cook, loved ancient Greek culture, they moved to Greece in 1922, though Glaspell returned to the United States after his death in 1924.

The Verge has puzzled critics, though it has not been widely circulated or performed. Until the Cambridge edition of selected Glaspell plays was published in 1987, *The Verge* was out of print, and there are no known reviews of it between 1925 and 1991. The play has been described as "tormented and bewildering," a "remarkable piece of psychological literature" that combines "comedy and melodrama, feminism and a critique of feminism, social criticism and metaphysical enquiry" reflecting its internal complexity. Although Glaspell's *Trifles* and the fictional version of the same plot, "A Jury of Her Peers," have been widely anthologized since their recovery in the 1970's, the majority of Glaspell's work has been neglected. *The Verge* provides far less resolution than *Trifles,* a realistic drama that employs domestic clues to determine whether a woman has murdered her husband. *The Verge* is an expressionistic story about a scientist determined to breed a new form of plant purely for the sake of its invention.

The existing scholarship on *The Verge* focuses mainly on Glaspell's revolutionary treatment of gender. Several scholars note Glaspell's tendency to link women's freedom to language. In "Susan Glaspell's Contributions to Contemporary Playwrights," Linda Ben-Zvi discusses Glaspell's ability to forge "women-centered" drama with its own language and distinct point of view. Ben-Zvi maintains that language oppresses women unless they invent their own dialects to signify their distinct meanings. Similarly, Ann Larabee indicates that for Glaspell, language makes direct correspondences and metaphors that capitulate to old men and ancestors. Other critics have emphasized Glaspell's treatment of gender roles. Barbara Ozieblo claims that *The Verge* shows humankind trapped by patriarchally established norms within which only men are permitted to pursue a quest for self-discovery. Ozieblo calls Glaspell's theme ambivalent because Claire's project requires a stressful, perhaps impossibly continuous innovation of new forms. C. W. E. Bigsby's introduction to Glaspell's plays notes that around 1913 Greenwich Village "came to stand for the determination of women not to be trapped in the roles offered to them" and implies that this attitude pervaded Glaspell's plays once she and her husband moved there. Veronica Makowsky's sweeping study of Glaspell's fiction and drama, *Susan Glaspell's Century of American Women,* traces themes of the entrapment of motherhood, the maternal role of the artist, and the cost of children to mothers, all of which appear in *The Verge.* Christine Dymokowski states that Glaspell stresses the organic nature of truth, the natural violence of creation, and the uniquely female capacity to give birth to new life.

A smaller number of critical responses take a psychological tact. David Sievers' 1955 study of Freud's influence on the American theater calls *The Verge* a portrait of manic

depressive psychosis and "possibly the most original and probing play that has been written in America by 1921." Isaac Goldberg's 1922 study of modern drama calls *The Verge* "one long abstraction in three acts." Focusing on its theoretical agenda, he insists, "there is more than rebellious womanhood in these dramas; there is consciousness of valid self, or of a passion for freedom, of dynamic personality; there is craving for life in its innermost meaning." Both the feminist and psychological interpretations of *The Verge* recognize Glaspell's emphasis on individual freedom and the entrapment of women through traditional roles as well as ordinary language.

Glaspell's play critiques Platonic metaphysics and the societal limitations on gender roles. It is fruitful to study *The Verge* in the context of Judith Butler's recent explication of the connections between gender, Platonic metaphysics, and contemporary phenomenology. Butler has argued both that gender is a performative category, created by its repetition and reinforced by cultural constructions, and that the ancient Greek distinction between matter and form is created "through an exclusion and degradation of the feminine." In "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution," Butler dismantles the notion that gender is a permanent form rooted in biological sex. She uses a phenomenology that takes the social agent as an *object* rather than a subject of constitutive acts, to demonstrate her contention that gender is "an identity constituted in time" through a stylized repetition of acts, rather than a stable locus of identity from which acts proceed, acts which express supposedly essential gender traits. The repetition conceals the origin of this created category which is so pervasive that we are tempted to assume that those who resist it are unnatural or deviant. In *Bodies That Matter,* Butler links the body's materiality to the performance of gender by discussing the gender-related terms in Plato's metaphysics. Comparing Plato's *Timeaus* with Irigaray's deconstruction of Plato in two chapters of *Speculum of the Other Woman,* Butler claims that Plato's form theory depends on seeing matter as "a substitution for and displacement of the feminine." There are two modes of materiality: one formed and intelligible, the other displaced by the binary opposition between matter and form. The latter cannot be named because, properly speaking, pure unformed matter does not exist. For Plato, all objects participate in a form. Butler believes that the feminine aspect of metaphysics is simultaneously locked outside the matter / form distinction, but is also its condition; the composite structure between matter and form relies on invisible, unformed "feminine" matter.

Butler's reading depends on the connotations of ancient Greek terms in Plato's *Timeaus,* which she reads as "a collapse and displacement of those figures . . . that secure a given fantasy of heterosexual intercourse and male autogenesis." Because of the masculine bias Butler sees within the metaphysics, she argues that material bodies ought not be an uncontested ground of feminist theory or practice. Whether or not one agrees with Butler that gender is constructed, her reading of Plato sheds light on the anomalous circumstance of Claire Archer's role: a female artist who dares to re-form matter, and who disdains the repetition of form and wants to replace it with something new and more flexible. It also brings to the fore Glaspell's sensitivity to her own position as a female playwright experimenting with gender, language and invention in a patriarchal culture.

The Verge creates a complex critical response to Plato's confining forms. In addition to using the term "form" and alluding to Plato's cave scene in *The Republic,* Glaspell's Claire Archer cleverly mimics the character and attitude of Socrates in *The Verge.* The historical Socrates was Plato's teacher, but Socrates was suspicious of writing, and preferred to exchange his ideas with his students through dialogue. Plato preserves Socrates' style of teaching by writing dialogues in which Socrates is the main character, although there is considerable academic debate about the accuracy of Plato's depiction. Claire Archer repeats Socrates' comic and ironic posture and questions people's mistaken understanding in order to destroy conventions that inhibit human potential, including her own. Like Socrates, she evades direct questions, claiming ignorance and protecting her project. Her quest is solitary and concrete; she develops a new plant just as she tries to develop a lifestyle unconfined by the conventions of marriage and motherhood. Although Socrates is married and has children, his family only appears briefly in *The Phaedo* before his execution. Claire Archer's life is less conventional. During the play she is living with her second husband while two of her former lovers, her sister and her daughter from her first marriage visit. In spite of their seeming openness to unusual marital and family relationships, their flexibility does not extend to Claire's work. She defends its merit and her absorption in it while they suspect that she endangers her health by challenging so many conventions. They seek soothing explanations of her erratic behavior which Claire refuses to provide because the words would contain and limit her endeavor. The forms she seeks are not binding, but liberating precisely because of their originality. Thus Glaspell modifies the static, patterned metaphysics of Platonic form theory using a Socratic style of inquiry in order to replace it with original, revisable forms.

A pervasive Platonic allusion that Glaspell employs is a reference to the cave scene from the *Republic.* For Plato, the philosopher's task is to acquire knowledge of the forms which order the cosmos. Ordinary people routinely assume information based on limited and erroneous perceptions. It is efficient, but misguided. The Allegory of the Cave illustrates human beings' habitual misperception. The Allegory is central to Glaspell's play because Claire Archer accuses her friends and family members of being like Plato's cave dwellers, unable to see what she has discovered outside. The Allegory depicts people living in a cave with a long entrance open to the light along its entire width. Their legs and necks have been fettered since childhood, so that they remain in the same spot and cannot turn their heads. Behind and above them a fire burns. Between the fire and the prisoners, shadows are cast from puppets. Plato compares human beings to prisoners watching shadows of objects on a wall. They mistake the shadows for the objects because they have had no reason or experience to question that belief. When someone escapes the cave and sees the sun and learns what things look like in real light, he returns to teach the others, but appears crazy because his perspective is so unusual.

By pursuing her work as an amateur horticultural scientist trying to breed a hybrid plant, Claire has left the cave of convention which dictates the behavior of genteel women. Her horticulture becomes a symbolic and practical means of moving beyond traditional forms of womanhood. Like Socrates, she is an ironic figure with a project she does not expect others to understand or approve. Yet Claire does not advocate her inquiry for

anyone else and she has no students. She does not voice an agenda to change women in particular or people in general to go with her "to the verge," beyond form. Having created a greenhouse of her own in which she labors, she is disinterested in other people's curiosity. Anti-social and solitary, her scientific work separates her from the surrounding community.

Like Socrates in the *Republic* and the *Apology,* Claire defends herself to a mini-polis of family, friends and servants. The male characters in *The Verge* could be placed on various levels of Plato's divided line, which immediately precedes the Allegory of the Cave. The line shows varying levels of reality in ascending order in order to illustrate the metaphysical relationship between ideas and objects. The line is divided into four sections. The lower sections represent things that can be seen; the upper sections represent things known by the intellect. The lowest segment of the line contains the sensual qualities of matter, like the redness and smoothness of an apple, "shadows, then reflections in water and on surfaces of dense, smooth and bright texture." The second section contains "that of which this is a likeness or an image." Items at this level include matter and form composites, like plants, animals, people, and artifacts. The lower intelligible section of the line contains the mathematical descriptions of things, such as the numerical property of roundness, and the highest section contains the form itself, the idea of the pure form. Claire's husband, Harry Archer, is rooted in the sensual and the physical as he seeks comfort and entertainment at the lowest level of the divided line. He thinks Claire should be happy because she "has everything." Dick Demming is an abstract artist who draws "[l]ines that don't make anything" and can't tell a person anything. Tom Edgeworthy, Claire's lover, understands her fear of language, but is wary of her search for pure forms. He recommends that Claire be left alone because she "isn't hardened into one of those forms she talks about. She's too□aware. Always pulled toward what could be□tormented by lost adventure." His name alludes to the project that almost succeeded, her Edge Vine, which, like Tom, returned to its source rather than exploding into a new species. Only Claire seeks transcendence at the top of the Platonic line, where she can identify old forms and attempt to create new ones.

Plato's *Republic* takes place outside Athens' walls, where Socrates can more safely discuss the perfect political state. *The Verge* takes place in Claire's territories, her greenhouse and her tower, but both places are frequently invaded by others. Glaspell's language emphasizes boundaries and borders which Claire desires to transcend. As the play opens, Claire and her assistant, Anthony, are working in the greenhouse. Due to a storm and a broken furnace, Claire has diverted the house's heat to the greenhouse; her Breath of Life, "the flower that I have created that is outside what flowers have been," is about to blossom and needs a constant temperature. Because the house is cold, Harry Archer orders the maid to serve breakfast in the greenhouse, and is clearly more interested in salt for his eggs than in Claire's project. Claire thinks of little besides her plants which outweigh anyone's needs. Harry worries condescendingly that Claire takes her plants too seriously. He explains, "I don't want to see it get you□it's not important enough for that." Unfortunately, Claire is less self-assured and articulate than Socrates and dependent on Harry to understand her project so that he will leave her alone.

Most of the plot revolves around the attempts of Harry and the other characters to make Claire behave the way they think she should, while she tries to complete her work in spite of them. Claire is frustrated by the traditional choices her sister, Adelaide, and her daughter, Elizabeth, have made, though Elizabeth admits that she has to be wellmannered because she doesn't do anything interesting. Both relatives are concerned with the utility of Claire's horticultural experiment. Elizabeth describes Claire's work as "doing one's own thing" and "doing a useful, beautiful thing." Elizabeth can't understand the use of making plants "different if they aren't any better." This perturbs Claire, who seeks the intrinsic challenge of creating a new form without respect to its extrinsic value. Unfortunately but predictably, Elizabeth charges that Claire's project is morally wrong unless she improves the plants by making them more beautiful. Adelaide suggests that Claire find a way to be like her, "free, busy, happy. Among people, I have no time to think of myself." This conformist choice strikes Claire as a conspiracy in which people try to be alike "in order to assure one another that we're all just all right." Claire accuses Adelaide of "staying in one place because she hasn't the energy to go anywhere else" through a creative venue of her own. Claire does not want to be like the people that surround her. Instead it is as if she is in the cave trying to escape, hoping that there are more options outside, but not knowing for certain.

Claire frequently ignores Harry's directions and suggestions. When Claire refuses to explain to Dick the procedure for cross-pollenating a plant to give it fragrance, Harry charges that Claire doesn't try to make her work less mysterious, and insists that she should answer Dick's questions if she can. It is almost as if he suspects there is safety in its articulation, and danger in its mystical, unspoken state. She complies, and in the process, says that she is giving her flower a scent she'll call "Reminiscence," which echos Plato's suggestion in *The Phaedo* and *The Phaedrus* that knowledge depends on recollection. Claire worries that her new plant might find itself "lonely out in what hasn't been." The scent provides a metaphorical kind of memory of the plant's biological predecessors. When Dick insists he understands Claire's explanation, Claire responds in skeptical Socratic fashion, "I wonder if you do." Because her attitude disturbs Harry, he encourages her to be amusing for Tom, her former lover who will be leaving soon. Instead, Claire flirts with Dick, speaking about perversion and suggesting that Harry might think she is Dick's latest strumpet. Harry chastises her for not behaving like the refined "flower of New England" that she is, ironically invoking a plant to correct her. The hint of New England ancestors upsets Claire, and she insists that "[w]e need not be held in forms molded for us. There is outness□Land otherness." Glaspell constantly shifts Claire's moods, conveying the unstable but provocative basis of Claire's personality, making her mimic the flexible form she seeks. Glaspell suggests that forms confine and contain individual beings rather than reveal true being.

Claire's evasiveness is underscored by her irony and her refusal to explain her goal. Her attitude is attractive and frustratingly elusive. When Harry and Dick discuss Claire, Harry stammers, unable to categorize Claire easily because she is not archetypal:

. . . you might know all there is to know about women
and not know much about Claire. But now about (*does not want to say passion again*)□of, feeling□Claire

has a certain□well□a certain□

DICK: Irony?

HARRY: Which is really more□more□

DICK: More fetching, perhaps.

HARRY: Yes! Than the thing itself. But of course, you wouldn't have much of a thing that you have irony about.

Harry is as unable to articulate Claire's personality as she is unable to describe what a new form might accomplish for her. When Harry asks Claire why she refers to World War I as a "gorgeous chance" and she replies, in true Socratic fashion, "I don't know□precisely. If I did□there'd be no use in saying it." For Claire, language is most interesting when one's knowledge is tentative and imprecise. To practical Harry, this makes no sense. Tom seems to understand that articulation can damage an idea or emotion when he replies to Claire, "The only thing left worth saying is the thing we can't say."

Harry repeatedly pushes Claire to articulate her project in order to demystify it. After rejecting Elizabeth's offer to assist her in the greenhouse, Harry again pushes Claire "[t]o get down to brass tacks and actually say what she's driving at" so that she can "realize just where" she is. Claire prefers not to "nail it to a cross of words" but explains that her plants have found otherness, "They have been shocked out of what they were□into something they were not; they've broken from the forms in which they found themselves. They are alien. Outside. That's it, outside" and she continues, "when you make a new pattern you know a pattern's made with life. And then you know that anything may be□if only you pattern's made know how to reach it." Claire Archer's new patterns include the new plant and the lifestyle she has created for herself. Implicitly, Glaspell reinforces the relation between language and forms. Since language consists primarily of categories, and categories are directly related to forms because they indicate the kind of being things are, it is necessary that Claire be frustrated by words and by Plato's forms.

Source: Julia Galbus, "Susan Glaspell's *The Verge:* A Socratic Quest to Reinvent Form and Escape Plato's Cave," in *Journal of Dramatic Theory and Criticism,* Vol. 15, No. 1, Fall 2000, pp. 81-95.

Critical Essay #3

In the following essay excerpt, Bottoms tells how he came to make a production of The Verge, *the challenges therein, and the insight he gained from the experience.*

Shortly after seeing my 1993 production of Sam Shepard's *Fool for Love* at the University of East Anglia, Christopher Bigsby, my PhD supervisor, handed me his edition of Susan Glaspell's plays and told me that if I really wanted a directing challenge, I should tackle *The Verge* (1921). After reading it, I politely told him that I would not dare. Perhaps the play was, as Bigsby writes, "a remarkable, if imperfect work," which attempts a "radical revisioning of all aspects of theatre," but I was also inclined to agree with his suggestion that it often "dissolve[s] into mere pretension, a frantic posturing by characters about whom we know little." Yet the play continued to haunt me: could its perceived shortcomings be overcome in production, or would they simply become more obtrusive? Three years later, I mounted *The Verge* at the University of Glasgow as the centerpiece to the first international conference devoted to Glaspell's work. In this article, I would like to chart some of the thinking that led to this change of heart and to the key choices made in our production process. Not only did *The Verge* prove to be one of the most challenging and personally rewarding plays I have ever worked on, but the experience of staging it rendered numerous insights directly relevant to current critical debates over Glaspell's work.

The playwriting of Susan Glaspell has attracted an increasing amount of long overdue critical attention in recent years. Yet scholars' enthusiasm for her work on the page has not been matched by a corresponding enthusiasm from theatre producers willing to stage them. Consequently, most articles on Glaspell's plays deal only with their textual potential, often in relation to contemporary literarycritical theory or the socio-historical context framing her work. (Glaspell's playwriting career was fairly short, mostly concentrated within the period from 1915 to 1922, not coincidentally the heyday of the Provincetown Players, the company she cofounded with her husband George Cram Cook.) The continuing viability of Glaspell's plays as texts for performance in our own era, as opposed to their importance as historical documents, has remained a moot point, especially in relation to *The Verge.* Almost universally regarded as her most radical and exciting writing experiment□many view its idiosyncratic linguistic extravagance as an early example of *l'ecriture feminine*□the play has nevertheless been considered deeply problematic as a blueprint for production, if not totally unstageable.

Our Glasgow production attempted to disprove that latter assumption, although admittedly it was not without flaws of its own. This was a studentacted production with a tiny design budget in a severely limited black box studio, and several parts of the show never quite gelled. The conference participants were divided over its effectiveness, some remaining suspicious of our more stylized production choices, while others applauded them as a logical extrapolation of Glaspell's writing. Nonconference audience members were similarly divided, many perceiving the play as exactly what its detractors claim: an overly long, seriously prolix piece of confused feminist invective. Yet enough

people left commenting on the "inspiring" and "emotionally draining" quality of the experience to suggest we had tapped at least something of the play's potential.

Given *The Verge*'s boundary-breaking subject matter, perhaps any production of it would prove to be contentious. The play focuses on Claire Archer, a visionary who has abandoned all the conventional niceties of her upper middle class existence in the pursuit of what she calls "otherness." In her bizarre greenhouse, she crossbreeds plants into strange new forms that break beyond what was previously conceived to be "natural," her obsessive devotion to this task appearing to be an expression of a more personal quest to break beyond the roles available to her as a "natural" woman (wife, mother, charitable worker, flower arranger). On the page, Claire's restless urge for personal transcendence is most apparent in her words; periodically exploding into vivid monologues that defy simple comprehension, she stretches the limits of the English language in a bid to express her unspeakable desires.

My initial impression upon reading the play in 1993 was that any attempt at production would stand or fall on the question of how it dealt with Claire's linguistic "excesses." For if the character is a flawed genius, it seemed equally true that her verbal flights obtrude awkwardly into otherwise naturalistic scenes between her friends and family. One option would be to cut back those speeches, to let Claire's actions, rather than her words, speak for her, and so smooth the play into a fairly consistent piece of sub-Ibsenite symbolistic naturalism. Yet that still left the problem of the play's highly melodramatic climax, in which Claire tips over the verge into madness (or otherness?), strangling her platonic soulmate, Tom Edgeworthy, at the very moment he has agreed to become her lover, the commitment she has just spent two acts trying to win from him. This scene comprehensively shatters any neat, logical reading of the play's plot progression; it remains dramatically viable *only* if Claire's earlier use of unhinged language is left intact, thereby indicating an instability that could signal either creeping insanity or the threshold of revelation. It seemed to me that cutting these speeches or doctoring the ending would destroy precisely what was most radical and provocative about the play as a script, rendering Claire a mere pawn within the overly familiar plot mechanics of three-act naturalism (rather than a figure whose spiraling words frequently imply a desire to transcend the frame of representation itself). In short, *The Verge* is compelling precisely insofar as it is *not* a "well-made play"; yet these same qualities at first prevented me from seeing how I could bring it to life onstage.

My conviction that the play would be unworkable if presented "straight" was borne out by a production at the Orange Tree Theatre in Richmond, London (a small, professional fringe venue), which, by sheer coincidence, mounted *The Verge* in April 1996, in a run that closed on the very same night as did our five-nights-only Glasgow production. In order to present the play as period-set naturalism, the director of the Orange Tree version, Auriol Smith, made extensive cuts in the script, most notably reducing Claire's lengthy (and highly "unnatural") verse monologue in act 2 from 33 lines to only 12. Glaspell scholar Marcia Noe cites this speech as "the most radical example of Glaspell's innovative use of language to break free of the prison of forms." The sadly ironic result of such changes was that, though the theatre was praised for its high production standards, the play itself was almost universally dismissed by reviewers as an awkward

and unconvincing piece of out-of-date naturalism "that is trying to flower into something quite different, and in spite of the care lavished upon it, doesn't quite."

In a paper on the Orange Tree production delivered at the Glasgow conference, Sheila Stowell argued that *The Verge* is, at root, a naturalistic piece; the perceived failure of Smith's approach therefore exposed the basic weaknesses of the play. Stowell explicitly rejected Gerhard Bach's argument that *The Verge* is expressionistic, pointing out that there is little in the script to justify that contention. For while the two settings of greenhouse (acts 1 and 3) and tower retreat (act 2) are both Claire's private spaces, whose bizarre descriptions can thus be read as visual projections of Claire's unsettled mind, the action that takes place in those settings mostly consists of a kind of heightened realism. Furthermore, though the three men in Claire's life are named Tom, Dick, and Harry□suggesting laughable cartoon males revolving around Claire, the central female consciousness□they are far from being mere expressionist ciphers. Rather, they are clearly drawn individuals with hopes and fears of their own. Stowell argued that any production that presented the play in a more stylized or expressionist manner than had the Orange Tree would be more a product of directorial re-visioning than an interpretive development from Glaspell's text.

Although I agree that *The Verge* is neither an expressionist nor symbolist play per se, simply to label it as naturalistic seems equally misleading. Just as Claire seeks to transcend the forms established for plant life and femaleness, to create deviations from the norm that she can only describe as "queer," so the form of Glaspell's play constantly deviates from its baseline naturalism toward not only expressionism and symbolism, but also melodrama and outright farce (witness the pepperpot sequence in act 1, or the opening of act 3). *The Verge* is best described as a "queer," hybrid play that refuses to settle into a single pattern as adamantly as Claire refuses to settle for a fixed gender identity. The challenge, then, for any production team, is to find a form of presentation that can reflect the stylistic restlessness of the text, and so provide an updraft for Claire's attempts to rise above the banality of her surroundings, rather than to confine her in the prisonhouse of naturalism. I felt strongly that, in this case at least, to suggest that final creative authority rests with either the playwright's text or auteur director is to present a false dichotomy. *The Verge*, quite simply, demands an innovative approach to staging, and this should come as no surprise when one considers that Glaspell wrote it for production by the Provincetown Players, in the year after they had reconstructed their theatre to mount (triumphantly) Eugene O'Neill's equally "unstageable" experiment, *The Emperor Jones. The Verge's* very refusal to conform also inspired Edy Craig and Sybil Thorndike's desire to produce it in London in 1925. Their intention from the start was to embrace the play's ambiguous, unsettled form rather than render it "assimilable": "People will think it entirely mad," Thorndike wrote to Craig, "but I'm longing to do it, aren't you?."

Critical Essay #4

My own solution to the challenge of staging *The Verge* was inspired by two very different books: Michael Vanden Heuvel's *Performing Drama/ Dramatizing Performance* and Diane Elam's *Feminism and Deconstruction.* Vanden Heuvel's notion of dialogic performance contributed significantly to my understanding of, and approach to, the play's formal demands. Rather than trying to create a consistent, unified stage illusion, Vanden Heuvel suggests that much is to be gained by developing situations in which text and staging exist in a kind of double-exposed creative complementarity, each informing the other with neither assuming final (monologic) authority. This principle proved fundamental to the development of our production concept. Without Diane Elam's anti-essentialist exploration of gender identity in *Feminism and Deconstruction,* however, the production itself might never have happened. Elam countered the concerns I had as a male director tackling such a boldly woman-centered piece of theatre with her assertion that men's worried avoidance of participation in feminist discourse can amount to "ignoring responsibility in the guise of conceding authority (to women)," something as potentially dangerous as the opposing pitfall of crudely appropriating feminist discourse for one's own ends.

Elam's work also strongly influenced my thinking about the play itself. Building on the work of both feminist and poststructuralist scholars, she contends that women have too often sought to liberate themselves from objectification within patriarchally prescribed gender roles, only to fix themselves in equally limiting alternatives: "the achievement of a definitive or calculable subjectivity is, as Derrida points out, not solely liberatory." The potential of deconstruction for feminism, she argues, thus lies in its ability to both legitimate and facilitate an endless deferral of gender-role definitions. Such a notion equates closely with Claire's lone struggles in *The Verge:* her need to transcend definition entails not only a resistance to male preconceptions, but also a refusal to allow *herself* to rest in an understanding of who she wants to be. "Let me tell you how it is with me," she tells Tom in that pivotal verse speech in act 2:

I do not want to work,
I want to be;
Do not want to make a rose or a poem
Want to lie upon the earth and know. (*closes her eyes*)
Stop doing that!□words going into patterns;
They do it sometimes when I let come what's there.
Thoughts take pattern□then the pattern is the thing.

Claire's repeated cry of "[s]top doing that!" underlines her sense that the greatest threat to her dream of "otherness" comes not from the rather ineffectual men in her life, but from her own need to stop and settle. That search for otherness can perhaps be understood in terms of Elam's notion of pursuing "incalculable subjectivities." A key to staging *The Verge*, then, might be to pursue this idea in Claire's characterization. Her linguistic flights are often regarded as literary experiments on Glaspell's part, and

difficult to realize effectively onstage; but could they not be presented so as clearly to emphasize the fluid subjectivity of a character who will not allow herself to define herself even *to* herself?. . .

Critical Essay #5

One of my chief interests in mounting the play was to discover how Claire might come across in production, since critical opinion based on textual readings stands firmly divided over the way she is to be perceived. As Marcia Noe writes:

> Much of the critical commentary on this play. . .
> centers on Glaspell's attitude toward her protagonist.
> . . C. W. E. Bigsby states that "Clearly Glaspell
> is critical of Claire," and Arthur Waterman writes
> that "we must realize that Claire has gone too far."
> By contrast, Christine Dymkowski believes that
> "Claire's madness at the end of the play is a personal
> triumph."

The tendency to view Claire's fate as a kind of cautionary tale□a depiction of the dangers of pushing individualism or self-absorption to extremes□ is not limited to male critics, and has also been in.uenced by research into Glaspell's own biography. She herself remained childless and later in life wrote of motherhood as the ultimate achievement for a woman. Do such biographical details throw light on Glaspell's attitude toward Claire's somewhat narcissistic rejection of familial responsibility? And yet Claire is also clearly the driving force and center of the play, a passionate voice for liberation and nonconformity. Karen Malpede goes so far as to suggest that Claire's murder of Tom should be read as an act of revolution. For Noe, "the fact that there is no consensus on this point suggests that Claire should be viewed from a new critical perspective," and her own theoretical reading seeks to refute criticism that the play's language is "obscure and tedious."

From a practitioner's perspective, however, the best defense for theatre writing is to hear it spoken onstage. Indeed, in my view, as long as one continues to read *The Verge* simply as a text for literary analysis, the either/or dichotomy of cautionary tale versus laudatory tract will keep reproducing itself. Noe's own article is a case in point; for all its crucial insights, it concludes by reverting to intentionalism of the she's-gone-too-far variety: "Through this remarkable play Susan Glaspell attempts to show us the futility of attempting to transcend form, a lesson which the proponents of *l'ecriture feminine* would do well to heed." Embarking on the production, I hoped that Claire's embodiment onstage might offer a way out of this conceptual binary trap by altering the question from "What is Glaspell's attitude toward Claire?" to "Who is Claire?"

The question of embodiment is fundamental in Claire's case because Glaspell resists the usual, "truth"-revealing mechanics of the naturalistic text: Claire's words are quite explicitly inadequate for expressing how she feels, what she needs. Onstage, the body language of the actor should allow Claire to "speak" far more fluently about her state of mind than she can with English. And yet the actor only has Claire's words as a starting point for building characterization: somehow they need to be internalized before what they fail to express can be externalized physically. To discover and manifest the subtext

one has first to absorb the text, and yet that text is, by Claire's own account, not a reliable representation of her subjectivity. How were we to deal with this paradox? Again, Glaspell seemed to demand a creative leap from us that would mirror Claire's own; here, too, a kind of dialogic interaction of text and performance would be crucial. The performer would need not merely to extrapolate a portrayal of the character from Claire's words, but actively to interpolate *herself* actively into the undecidable blanks of the text.

This conviction led me to cast as Claire a local performer, Judith Milligan, whom I had seen in various physical/visual theatre productions, but who had never previously worked with spoken text or dramatic character. Although a risky choice, we would be working without inculcated habits regarding the use of text as an indicator of character psychology: Judith would not be looking to perform the usual Method miracle of submerging oneself beneath a distinct, well-rounded entity. Moreover, she loved the part from the outset, sensing a personal affinity with the character despite the fact that much of the script at first seemed opaque to her. Over the rehearsal period, Judith worked to discover and refine points of contact between herself as a performer and the words she spoke as Claire, until a hybrid figure, whom we playfully tagged "Judith- Claire," emerged with a life of her own.

In effect, the approach adopted in exploring Claire's characterization was a more complex version of the outside-in method used with Tom, Dick, and Harry. Because Judith felt she needed some basic sense of the character's physicality before she could begin working in depth with the text itself, we isolated some of Claire's most convoluted speeches and treated them as suggestions for choreography. Examining the recurrence of certain basic concepts in Claire's vocabulary ("otherness," "reminiscence," "by-myselfness," and so forth), signifiers for which she clearly has very precise emotional referents but which for her listeners remain frustratingly undefined, we created abstract physical gestures suggesting something of the quality of those terms. Thus "otherness" gave rise to what we began calling the "thwarted tree" gesture (after the "thwarted tower" of act 2 and the botany of acts 1 and 3): Judith would thrust her left arm out directly in front of her, at a right angle from her body, with her forearm then jutting skyward at a right angle from her upper arm. In this aborted reaching-out gesture, her palm was open, fingers half-curled like gnarled twigs, the whole gesture animated by a kind of forced tension, a twisting of tendons around the central fixed axis of the arm. By contrast, the gesture for "reminiscence" was very small and delicate, akin to the scent she names after it: Judith would bow over her hands, which cradled something unseen, the fingers of one hand rotating around its tiny center, while the palm of the other rotated around them in shielding protection.

Working on the speeches in this way, we generated a vocabulary of movements that Judith gradually began to internalize emotionally. As with the other aspects of the production, these external elements started out fairly large and crude, but developed into something far subtler and more nuanced. When interviewed about the production some time later, she noted:

> The more we physicalized it, the more real the gestures seemed. And it's not that we made them larger, but that they got smaller. . . I didn't find them all for myself, but once I had them, it actually became easier to use them. Once I'd got into the physicality of it, it just felt right, when I was doing it. It's difficult to explain, because we did start with the words, but the words never felt right, she doesn't *like* the words, which is why we found the gestures. Which is not a failing of the text; the text is so important.

As this creative dialogue between the text and performance developed, Judith reached the point where she would freely use a gesture developed to illustrate one phrase in juxtaposition with a completely different one, and because of that juxtaposition would find herself able to key into an emotional sense of what was underlying the speech. This fluid use of physical and verbal registers meant that, by the time of the production, few instances were left of signature movements actually being used alongside the phrases they had been created to illustrate. Judith felt this separation was necessary; otherwise the gestures would be too schematic, a fixing of meaning when the whole dynamic of the character moved away from such fixity. As she explains,

> every time she says that word "outside," you don't always need the gesture, because it's a very specific thing that goes beyond the word "outside." There are moments when she uses that word, but this is her problem with language. It doesn't always fit . . . and that's where the physical side comes in. This is how it feels! I don't know how to *tell* you, but this is how it *feels!*

Judith thus arrived at an intuitive sense of Claire's hunt for incalculable subjectivity through the interplay of text and movement. This in turn became apparent to the audience, who could tune into a sense of her search without actually being able to pin her down. For example, in his article for the *Eugene O'Neill Review,* Seth Baumrin found that the production "ably transformed Glaspell's theoretical posture into performance" by realizing her "leitmotifs . . . in the underlying gestus of the actor. Milligan found a physicality to Claire Archer which asserted and clarified the character's thoughts without falling into the trap of merely relying on language."

The process of developing Claire was not without its difficulties. The first act, in particular, remained a problem for Judith right up until production week. "It's the most difficult to play as Claire, by miles," she notes, because this act is dominated by the men, through whose perspectives the exposition is mostly elaborated. Claire appears three times, reacting to their comments with long speeches before disappearing again. Though we could choreograph Claire's outbursts as set pieces, providing some conceptual understanding of her concerns, Claire interacts very little with those around

her. In Judith's words, "there isn't anything to grasp as an actor." Struggling for a way "in," her initial instinct was to respond to the men with dismissive indignation, even contempt: they are in her space, they are taking up her time, they are talking nonsense. From my directorial perspective, however, it became clear that a softer, more playful edge was also needed if Claire were not to alienate the audience entirely before she had had a chance to express herself on her own terms, in her own time. Such contradictory demands proved difficult until we hit on the solution of Judith playing "outside" Claire for much of the first act, presenting the character as she is seen by the men, as the fascinating, infuriating, beguiling enigma whom they all love but do not comprehend. "The character as Tom, Dick, and Harry look at her," Judith concluded, "is the person the audience needs to see at that point." Not until the scene with her daughter, Elizabeth, at the end of the act does the audience sense how high the emotional stakes are for Claire. This intensification of mood allowed Judith to begin to move "inside" Claire, building toward the climactic moment of tearing up of the Edge Vine, the action that propels her into the traumatized isolation of the second act.

Acts 2 and 3 came together more smoothly, since they revolve far more tightly around Claire. Although Judith initially found the huge tracts of language with which she had to grapple quite daunting, my suggestions regarding pacing and tone shifts again provided an external structure (in this case rhythmic, temporal) from which to work her way "inside." And as she gradually found a way into these scenes, it became clear to us that Claire's behavior, however erratic and bizarre it might appear at first glance, follows a throughline that is supremely logical in its own way. Put simply, that throughline is itself a trajectory of deferral. After destroying the Edge Vine, which Claire perceives as having failed to "break out" into otherness (instead falling back into a stable, predictable form), Claire finds herself casting around desperately to refocus her energies. Throughout acts 2 and 3 she engages in a restless transference of her hopes from one object to another, turning in particular to her other new plant, Breath of Life, and to her platonic relationship with Tom, which she now seeks to transform into a fuller, sexual one. Each possibility, precisely insofar as it remains unfulfilled, holds out the chance of providing her with the otherness she craves.

While Claire's wild casting about seems, on one level, a traumatized response to her own precipitous destruction of the Edge Vine, the events of Claire's past also seem characterized by this search for hope in things outside of herself, and in which she makes enormous psychic investments. Her marriage to Harry, for example, manifests this same urge: she once saw in his life as a pilot the chance of taking flight into something beyond, and her disappointment in him stems from his stubborn insistence on keeping his feet firmly on the ground. Likewise, Claire's rejection of Elizabeth can be understood as disappointment with another failed "experiment," something underscored when she tears up the Edge Vine at precisely the moment she wishes to lash out at her daughter. The sheer intensity of Claire's emotional investments also led us to conclude that her fascination with strange plants is far from being merely symbolic□a dramatic metaphor for her own inner search. Rather, Claire needs to get *outside* herself by forging identifications with other objects. In Deleuzian terms, her search to unchain her subjectivity from the usual feminine prescriptions inspires an urge for constant "becoming"; becomingplant, becoming-fiight, becoming-(one with)-Tom, and so on.

"She's looking for exactly the same thing in everything that she does," Judith suggests. "Everything she does is for that feeling . . . *flight!* Call it what you like, but the way I played Claire, that feeling was utterly central."

Source: Stephen J. Bottoms, "Building on the Abyss: Susan Glaspell's *The Verge* in Production," in *Theatre Topics,* Vol. 8, No. 2, September 1998, pp. 127-47.

Critical Essay #6

In the following essay, Waterman explores Glaspell's blending of experimental views and techniques with more traditional elements in The Verge. The plays written by Susan Glaspell for the Provincetown Playhouse between 1915 and 1922 illustrate a characteristic not usually found in *avantegarde* playwrights and little theatres, but one that is common to both this playwright and the theatre that produced her plays; namely, an unusual blending of traditional values with radical attitudes typically associated with an experimental artistic group. The traditional outlook derives mainly from the midwestern background of so many of the Players, especially George Cram Cook, the founder and director of the Provincetown, and Susan Glaspell, Cook's wife and the theatre's leading playwright. They were like many midwesterners who were born late in the nineteenth century in a small rural town and were brought up with a conscious awareness of their pioneer ancestry, with its heritage of freedom and independence, only to discover in the staid, conservative society around them a disregard, even a denial, of their forefathers' ideals. They fled, these midwestern children, first to Chicago, then to New York, where they were joined by eastern counterparts, who also arrived in Greenwich Village bringing with them attitudes that were at once oldfashioned and bohemian.

Inheritors, produced by the Provincetown in 1921, clearly shows the midwestern basis for most of Susan Glaspell's art. The play covers three generations of Iowans, beginning in 1879 when a Hungarian immigrant and an American pioneer work together to establish a state university, hoping that future generations will continue their vision of hope and faith for America. The next generation is represented by the son of the immigrant, now the university President, who stifles campus dissent in order to appease a state Senator; and the son of the pioneer, who has turned bitter after the death of his son in World War I, perverting his father's idealism into misanthropy. The third generation consists of Madelaine Morton, one of the campus radicals, meaning she defends the rights of minorities, and the President's son, who is an incipient Nazi in taking repressive actions against the dissenters, especially Madelaine. The play questions whether the old vision can endure unchanged as time passes, as the Midwest develops from an isolated, agrarian locale to a complex, modern society, whose sons die on foreign soil and whose twentieth century culture complicates its once uncomplicated idealism. The success of the play comes in large measure from our acceptance of the midwestern setting as the region where the American Dream once found its greatest expression and now faces its greatest challenge. Born in Davenport, educated at Drake University, a political reporter for the Des Moines *Daily News,* Glaspell knew her region intimately and dramatizes brilliantly the essential dangers facing the old liberalism, seeing how it could be narrowed and corrupted into political expendiency and suppressive acts□all in the name of the very beliefs now being threatened. With a conscious irony she shows how the tradition that fostered the Dream could be used to restrict it, and with a foresight that is prophetic she chose the campus as the place where the testing of inherited values would lead to an explosive

confrontation between defenders of the "American" way of life and individuals insisting on their rights at any cost.

Inheritors is probably Glaspell's best play. But it was a play that faced its author with few overwhelming dramatic problems. Its development, characters, language, and tone are all clearly available and readily created once the essential plot has been established. The personal and ideological differences between Madelaine and her Uncle create a conflict that is inherently dramatic, so Susan Glaspell's strategy, by no means an easy one, was to choose from a great many dramatic possibilities for presenting this conflict on stage. Indeed, the play's success undoubtedly depends on this *given* situation: forceful, universal, compelling□in short, good, sound theatre.

When she came to write her next play, *The Verge*, also produced in 1921 by the Provincetown, she faced a different problem, which was how to find the dramatic equivalents□the words, gestures, symbols, and setting□that would depict a liberated woman who was also an experimental biologist, as radical in her profession as she was in her sexuality. Claire, the heroine of *The Verge*, is quite unlike Madelaine; Claire is more alone, more desperate, more visionary, and more dangerous than is the younger girl. Claire is what Madelaine might have become if she hadn't been raised in the Midwest and had not inherited her grandfather's belief in communal responsibility as a part of this idealism. The play shows how far Susan Glaspell had advanced from her nineteenth-century Davenport background to where she could by 1921 present the "new" woman in all her orginality, yet still retain enough of her midwestern background to qualify her response to Claire and to question the validity of her search. In her laboratory Claire experiments with plants in order to train them to alter their natures and grow into new forms. During the play her horticultural attempts are scoffed at, sympathized over, ignored, misunderstood, and abused; consequently, she becomes increasingly more hysterical. Obsessed by her own inner need to reach a new feminine identity and frustrated by her plants' failures to create their own radical forms, she kills the one man trying to understand her and ends the play singing insanely against a backdrop of twisted biological freaks.

The Verge borders on the edge of being absurd and the plot certainly has its melodramatic moments. Moreover, Claire's aspirations, which shape the entire play, are more lyrical than dramatic, so they need someone to explain and interpret her feelings, someone, that is, more like a novelist than a playwright. Glaspell has to express Claire's obsession in terms that make her understandable, even acceptable; yet she has to present the conflicts within and around Claire in a dramatic and effective way. She had to draw upon everything she had learned in her seven years of playwriting for the Provincetown, then invent several new techniques to make meaningful and dramatic her new woman. For Claire is seeking a new feminine self, trying to become a Nietzschean woman-artist, superior to the ordinary person and, thereby, justified in her extreme behavior. To her credit, Susan Glaspell succeeded in making Claire the most talked about dramatic character of the season and *The Verge* the most interesting play of its time.

Alexander Woolcott complained that Miss Glaspell "could not think of any other way of dramatizing Claire than by having her talk and talk and talk about herself with the egocentric ardor and helpless garrulity of a patient in a psychoanalyst's office." Although Woolcott failed to appreciate many of the fine things in *The Verge*, he is right in criticizing Claire's talkiness. Late in the play, after Claire has been driven almost mad by the massive refusal of the other characters to take her idealism seriously, she begins to speak poetry, desperately trying to find the verbal equivalents for her radical vision, while at the same time she senses that this speech pattern is warning of instability: "Sometimes□from my lowest moments□beauty has opened as the sea. From a cave I saw immensity."

Let me tell you how it is with me
I do not want to work,
I want to be;
Do not want to make a rose or make a poem□
Want to lie upon the earth and know. (*Closes her eyes*)
Stop doing that!□words going into patterns
They do it sometimes when I let come what's there.

Thus Claire does sound at times more like a woman in a novel than one on stage. Her talkiness obviously places an extraordinary burden on the actress who plays Claire and who must somehow provide suitable stage actions to accompany Claire's many long speeches. In the Provincetown production, Margaret Wycherly, in a sequin dress and wearing long beads, portrayed Claire as a nervous, fidgety woman, who, dressed as she was and moving as abruptly as she did, gave striking visual counterpoint to Claire's set speeches. Woolcott called her "gorgeous," but Stark Young objected to her busy stage manner, saying it interfered with the intellectual content of the play.

If Claire's extreme character required Susan Glaspell to interpret her heroine through words, the special emphasis of the play on psychological and biological experiments gave her an opportunity to create two brilliant and symbolic stage sets. The two settings of *The Verge* comprise the most innovative technique in the play and were the one aspect of it praised by all the critics. As the lights come up on the opening scene, we see a greenhouse:

This is not a greenhouse where plants are being displayed, nor the usual workshop for the growing of them, but a place for experiment with plants, a laboratory.At the back grows a strange vine. It is arresting rather than beautiful. It creeps along the low wall, and one branch gets a little way up the glass. You might see the form of a cross in it, if you happened to think it that way. The leaves of this vine are not the form that leaves have been. They are at once repellent and significant.

Dominated by the brooding shadow of the vine, spotted with light and shadow, enveloped in the wind's sound, this set superbly conveys the bizarre and groping qualities of Claire's experiments. This is her world, strange, a bit frightening, but also attractive and powerful. The partially concealed room at the rear and the trap-door leading below allow for some interesting staging, with a variety of exits and entrances, and also indicate the private nature of Claire's domain, with certain areas marked out as hers alone. Act Two opens on a twisted, incomplete tower room. This is a distorted, straining place, where the madness that ends the play can be anticipated in this jagged, ominous landscape. It is also a private place, not a womb necessarily, but a retreat certainly, suggesting the aloneness of Claire and her psychological withdrawal from the human voices below. This set particularly illustrates how far Susan Glaspell had developed in her dramatic skills, so that here she could draw upon the rich theatrical experience and training she had undergone with the Players, and apply her intimate knowledge of what could be done on that tiny stage, with its dome at the rear, to create a symbolic picture as experimental as the new expressionistic sets being created in Europe. In *The Verge* Susan Glaspell moves away from the heritage of stage realism she followed in *Inheritors* to invent one of the most suggestive sets ever seen on the American stage.

Although the sets of *The Verge* indicate how experimental Susan Glaspell could be, other aspects of the play show how traditional she was, and how much her midwestern background was still influencing her art. Claire is surrounded by five people□ two women and three men□and Susan Glaspell goes back to old-fashioned well-made procedures by illuminating Claire through these five, to show by contrast how Claire's feminism is different from and preferable to the fiat, insipid natures of most of the other characters. Her husband, Harry, is a typical male chauvinist, so totally insensitive to his wife's behavior that he is more comical than pathetic. Harry worries more about getting some salt for his breakfast egg than he does about his wife's apparent infidelity with a house guest and her increasingly strange behavior. Dick, who is Claire's lover, is attracted sexually to her and can sense something of what she is striving for since he is an artist. But he cannot accept her willingness to destroy her plants when they refuse to grow. He protests when she rips out her latest creation the Edge Vine at the close of Act One and by his protests he loses her. She will no more wait for him than she will let her plant retreat to what is was. The third man is Tom, who is closest to Claire in vision and affection. Tom was once Claire's lover, but now has moved beyond physical passion to mystical contemplation and at first plans to leave to search her spiritual oneness, but by Act Three decides to stay and protect Claire. With Tom Claire finds her closest partner, one who understands her, a lover-thinker capable of going with her to "otherness," to, that is, as far as it is humanly possible to go. Most of Act Three centers on the growing response Tom makes to Claire's need of him, culminating in the last scene where he promises to stay and love her. When Claire realizes, however, that with her Tom has found enough and will try to stop her from going beyond even his love and his faith, she strangles him.

We have to understand that it is precisely because she is drawn to Tom's offer of a safe haven that Claire kills him. He is her true enemy, for he is the tempter drawing her back from "otherness," so in a frenzy of love for him and out of her own desperate need to go

on, she strangles him, crying "It is you puts out the breath of life." As the play ends, Claire is completely alone and apparently transfigured□close to religious ecstasy, and beyond the human community□nearer, literally, to God. We can understand why Claire appealed to the Village feminists: in killing Tom she rejects the most sinister temptation of all, namely her own desire to conform to an identity better than any other, except this identity is one given her by Tom. It is *his* version of what she should be and, as far as he is concerned, it will not change once she accepts it. Like her plants, Claire will not stagnate, be fixed into a role. She will not, that is, be like the other women in the play: her conventional daughter and her middle-class sister, both of whom disapprove of and misunderstand Claire.

Susan Glaspell meant us to agree that Claire has lost control and gone too far. There are actually two currents in *The Verge;* one is Claire: so powerful a presence that her energy and strength dominate and direct the flow of action and events; the other a current of stability, best exemplified by Tom and the other woman, a quieter flow attempting to channel Claire's more dangerous and strident flood. Unfortunately the forces of stability are unable to satisfy adequately the greater force of exceptional power. In other words, we have not yet found the means to give the exceptional person in our society the expression of her fullest capacity without stifling her, and, as a result, we have driven her to extremes dangerous to both herself and to us. Claire is as much a victim as a heroine: a victim, not of male chauvinism, although Harry might like to think so, but of a closed world which restricts her identity by forcing on her roles of wife and mother, that insists on dulling her brilliance as a woman and a scientist, and that twists her desire for "otherness" into something depraved and crazy. Claire is a pariah because she is different as a woman, a person, and a biologist, and there is not room in the "normal" world for her difference.

The true opposition to Claire has to be from the audience. Moved by her desperation, we are nonetheless shocked at her murderous behavior at the end. We reject her. We have to, although the play does not provide any suitable alternative. This is the true radical nature of *The Verge* and it explains why the critics were divided so widely over its success. With a hindsight not given to the critics of the 1920's, we can see that *The Verge* is a remarkable achievement, one that in its attitude toward woman's identity is far ahead of almost any other play written in the next decades or so, and in its dramaturgy shows how far Susan Glaspell had advanced in her years with the Provincetown. Living in the Village she absorbed many of the bohemian notions of the then "radical-chic," and from the Provincetown she learned a new craft of playwriting. In *The Verge* she brings together her dramatic gifts with the intellectual milieu of the *avante-garde* and balances these against her more conservative midwestern background. For all of its limitations: a language flow at times close to rant, a careful boxing in of her heroine with well-made supporting characters, a lack of any complexity in plot or mood, *The Verge* is a major play. It brilliantly fulfills the avowed purpose of the Provincetown: to produce only original plays by native playwrights. Also, it gave to the American stage a play that spoke not simply to the Village audience that patronized the tiny theatre, but also a play that faced by extension the question of the limits being enforced by the American society on her most gifted and extraordinary citizens. In 1919 the Palmer raids began, in 1920 Sacco and Vanzetti were arrested, and in 1921

immigration quotas were established□events that signified for a liberal and generally permissive person and artist like Susan Glaspell that limits, indeed, were being invoked and that conformity to the status-quo was the desired aim of the 1920's, that what she had presented in *Inheritors* was, in fact, an actuality.

It is possible, therefore, and I believe entirely accurate to view *The Verge* as a play reaching beyond its obvious feminist emphasis to the larger question of how a society can best direct the energies of its more gifted eccentrics to constructive ends, without, on the one hand, repressing those exceptional qualities that define the genius nor, on the other hand, allowing that eccentricity license to move beyond normal and legal limits to violent and disastrous ends. *The Verge* does not resolve the question, perhaps no resolution is possible, but it does dramatize the issue. Like *Inheritors*, *The Verge* deserves a place in American theatre, and should be revived, for it transforms a serious social question into a moving and rewarding play.

Source: Arthur Waterman, "Susan Glaspell's *The Verge:* An Experiment in Feminism," in *Great Lakes Review: A Journal of Midwest Culture,* Vol. 6, No. 1, Summer 1979, pp. 17-23.

Topics for Further Study

Patterns are an important element of *The Verge*. What patterns do you notice in your life? What social and psychological patterns can you identify in society or in your own actions or habits? Are there any of these under which you feel trapped?

Expressionism uses distortion and exaggeration to convey the inner life of a character. It can be thought of as seeing the world through a character's eyes. If you were to design an expressionistic set of the way in which you see the world, what would it look like? What elements would be distorted and why?

Research the women's suffrage movement. Who were some of the leaders of this movement? What were their arguments for giving women the right to vote? What were the main arguments presented by the opposition?

The Verge takes place during the time of Prohibition. Research this period in American History. What groups were strongly in favor of Prohibition? What groups were against it? Why did each side hold their particular views? What changes did the period of Prohibition cause in United States society?

Carefully read Susan Glaspell's description of Claire's tower at the beginning of act 2 of *The Verge*. What do the visual elements of the tower symbolize? If you were to direct this play, would you follow Glaspell's description? If so, why? If not, how and why would you change the way the tower is supposed to look?

Research Sigmund Freud. How did he change the way mental illness was treated? At the time, his theories were considered quite revolutionary. Do you think they still seem revolutionary today? Why, or why not?

Compare and Contrast

1920s: Women have just won the right to vote in the United States with the passing of the Nineteenth Amendment on August 26, 1920. They see it as an important victory and vow to use their votes wisely to effect important change.

Today: Most voters are apathetic about their right to vote. Many do not even bother going to the polls, and election turnout is often very small.

1920s: The first scheduled radio broadcast emanates from KDKA, Pittsburgh.

Today: Thousands of radio stations broadcast constantly throughout the United States and the world. Consumers can now subscribe to satellite radio with hundreds of commercial-free stations.

1920s: The fear of communism grips the United States as it is considered a threat to the democratic way of life. This fear comes to be known as the "red scare."

Today: With the break-up of the Soviet Union, communism is no longer considered a major threat. Terrorism is now the main threat to U.S. security.

1920s: The internal horn Victrola makes owning a phonograph practical for many Americans. Millions of people purchase a Victrola for their home. The piece of furniture containing the device is rather large and is usually placed in the parlor.

Today: Personal, electronic, hand-held devices are available that can store thousands of songs within minimal circuitry.

1920s: Prohibition is in full force. Alcohol is illegal throughout the United States. Gangsters take advantage of the opportunity and begin to bootleg alcohol for large profits.

Today: Alcohol is legal in the United States, and its sale and distribution is controlled through governmental and state legislation.

1920s: Early in the decade, it is considered scandalous if a woman's hemline is nine inches above the ground.

Today: Women's fashions include apparel that reveal legs, arms, and midriffs.

What Do I Read Next?

Trifles (1916) is Susan Glaspell's most famous work. This one-act play is a murder mystery that explores the different way in which men and women see the world. It is recognized as an early example of a play that portrays "female bonding."

Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *The Yellow Wallpaper* (1899) is a short story that explores a woman's slow descent into madness. It is a staple text for feminist historians.

Elmer Rice's play *The Adding Machine* (1923) explores the effect the machine age has had upon man . It is still a widely-studied and widelyperformed piece of expressionistic drama.

Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse* (1927) is a stream-of-consciousness novel, a style that was popular in the 1920s . It is considered to be one of the most important works of feminist fiction of all time

The Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson (1976), compiled by Thomas H. Johnson, is considered to be the most authoritative collection of her work. This is the only work that contains all 1775 of Dickinson's poems in a single, chronological volume. Claire's fragmented dialogue resembles the fragmented phrases of Dickinson's innovative poetry.

Further Study

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Bigsby traces and analyzes the innovations that took place in drama during the first part of the twentieth century. He provides extended critical accounts of some of the most influential playwrights and theatrical groups of the time.

Black, Cheryl, *The Women of Provincetown Players, 1915-1922,* University of Alabama Press, 2001.

Black provides an in-depth look at the Provincetown Players and the women who were most important in creating and sustaining the experimental theater group.

Hillenbrand, Mark, *Produce Your Play without a Producer: A Survival Guide for Actors and Playwrights Who Need a Production,* Smith & Kraus, 2001.

Hillenbrand provides step-by-step instructions for all aspects of putting on a play, from the initial readings through the final performance. The book also contains a lengthy bibliography and lists of national and regional theater organizations, drama bookstores, rights and royalties agencies, and state arts agencies.

Styan, J. L., *Modern Drama in Theory and Practice: Expressionism and Epic Theatre,* Vol. 3, Cambridge University Press, 1983.

Styan traces expressionism on stage from its forerunners at the turn of the century in Germany through its later manifestation in other countries, including the United States. He also provides an extensive history of epic theater around the globe.

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Introduction

Purpose of the Book

The purpose of Drama for Students (DfS) 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, DfS 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 DfS 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 DfS 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 DfS 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 DfS 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

DfS 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 Drama 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 DfS series.

A Cumulative Nationality/Ethnicity Index breaks down the authors and titles covered in each volume of the DfS 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 Drama for Students

When writing papers, students who quote directly from any volume of Drama 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 DfS 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.□ Drama for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 234-35.

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

Miller, Tyrus. Critical Essay on □Winesburg, Ohio.□ Drama 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 DfS, 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 Drama 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 DfS, 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 Drama 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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