Trifles: A Microcosm of the 19th Century

*Trifles*, by Susan Glaspell, is the sort of story that raises the defensive walls for many people. Most readers and critics agree that this play is about feminism, while others have different opinions. One opinion is the play is a microcosm of 19th century society, it is an example of how the kitchen became a symbol and a tool for their isolation.

*Trifles* covers the investigation of John Wright’s murder. The wife, Minnie Wright, is arrested and Mr. Hale, a Court Attorney, a Sherriff, Mrs. Hale, and Mrs. Peters come to the Wright house looking for evidence and bring back some things for Mrs. Wright. Upon entering the house, the two women stay in the doorway for several minutes, hesitating to step into the kitchen of the accused. A reason for Mrs. Hale’s and Mrs. Peters’ reluctance to enter is they are intruding in another woman’s domain. The idea of the kitchen being a woman’s domain stems from the old habits of many societies. Author Laura Frost comments, “Since the beginning of time, it has been proven that the kitchen is the women’s arena. It’s her battlefield . . . It’s a woman’s special area to go, to help her children learn, to cook with them. . .Perhaps, the kitchen is the woman’s domain
because she loves to know her family is well taken care of. In addition, of course a lot of nurturing comes from the kitchen” (Frost 1).

The kitchen is a central room to the house. It is where the food is cooked, the family eats, and perhaps, in some circumstances, the only place of gathering for the family. In essence, the kitchen is the one room in the house that the woman has complete control.

In the 19th century the woman is expected to cook. Not many men knew how to cook in their kitchens. The state of the kitchen is a sign of how well the house is run. Should the room be in disrepair, it reflects that the woman of the house is not a very good wife.

County Attorney Not much of a housekeeper, would you say ladies?
Mrs. Hale [stiffly] There’s a great deal of work to be done on a farm.
County Attorney To be sure. And yet I know there are some Dickson county farmhouses which do not have such roller towels.
Mrs. Hale Those towels get dirty awful quick. Men’s hands aren’t always as clean as they might be (Baym 1414).

When the men leave to investigate the rest of the house, the two women move around the kitchen, making observations of its state while cleaning it up a bit. As they work, Mrs. Hale makes the comment, “I’d hate to have men coming into my kitchen, snooping around and criticizing” (Baym 1415). The women only say they would hate having men come into their kitchen, but why not their entire house? It would seem, if the house was covered in dust and the furniture broken beyond repair, it wouldn’t matter as long as the kitchen was spotless. Plus, the woman is the one who runs the home during
this period so why care so much about the kitchen and not the rest of the house? The women cared because a woman did not “belong” anywhere but her bedroom, her children’s rooms, the living room when guests were present, and the kitchen. Critic Linda Ben-Zvi stated, “the fears of men who, even as they shape society, are desperately afraid of women, and so have fashioned a world in which women come and go only in certain rooms” (Ben-Zvi, 141). The fear Ben-Zvi is talking about is murder, especially if the victim is male. This structure of society limits the movement of women and almost makes it impossible for Mr. Hale and the County Attorney to discover the evidence hidden within the kitchen.

During the process of the investigation the men completely ignore the one room in which Mrs. Wright spent most of her time. Instead they go up to the bedroom and out to the barn searching for a motive. The men leave the women out of this search because, “the men seem convinced that the women are incapable of understanding anything relevant to the story of the crime” (Bryan 1307-1308). The men, assume the women can’t understand what is going on or what could be needed to convict Minnie, so they exclude them from the investigation, leaving them in the kitchen to worry about gathering the things Minnie asked them to bring her. For the men, it would be awkward to snoop around a woman’s kitchen, even if they are investigating a murder. For Mrs. Hale and Mrs. Peters, it would be a vicarious violation. Patricia Bryan commented:

The irony of the men’s arrogance becomes apparent once they leave the kitchen. . . Mrs. Hale and Mrs. Peters remain in the kitchen and gradually piece together the real story of Minnie Wright, her life and the killing of her husband. Evidence that appears disconnected and means nothing to the men reveals Minnie Wright’s
hardship and despair to the women. . . They sense the lonely and desolate feel of the house, down in a hollow out of sight of the road, where Minnie Wright has spent her days alone, without children and friends (Bryan 1307-1308).

Despite the fact Mrs. Hale and Mrs. Peters were in Minnie’s house accompanying their husbands in an investigation, the men act as they would at their own homes, leaving the women in their place while the men conducted their “important” business. It is in this place, the single faceted world of a woman that Mrs. Hale and Mrs. Peters find all the evidence needed. In a room where the only education is cooking, sewing, and cleaning, Mrs. Hale and Mrs. Peters exercise a full understanding of the law. The women do not show any understanding exceeding their husbands, but knowledge equal to what Mr. Hale and the County Attorney profess to be experts in.

Another reason the men do not see the evidence in the kitchen is:

The signs common to women’s experience can make up a complex text capable of many readings; that in such a text women can read esoteric messages that are not easily accessible to men . . . They read the text of Minnie Wright’s kitchen because they understand its signs . . . (Radner & Lanser 413).

Critics Radner and Lanser suggest in their article that it was impossible for the men to find the evidence because they didn’t know how to. They were looking for the obvious sign of motive, something that would anger a man enough to kill someone. Mr. Hale and the County Attorney didn’t take time to consider the subtle signs of mistreatment and unhappiness in the house. The men had already laughed at what they consider small and silly things for women to worry about, thus the small displacements,
such as the askew pots, the erratic sewing, and the bread on the table, which would have led them to the convicting evidence for Minnie Wright’s trial were ignored. Mrs. Hale and Mrs. Peters were able to see all of this because they were “in tune” with Minnie. The women knew the habits of a housekeeping woman and could see things were amiss. Mrs. Hale or Mrs. Peters did not deliberately search for the evidence. They were looking for a few things Minnie had asked them to bring to her. Upon fulfilling their errand, they stumbled on the convicting evidence. However, it’s not just Minnie Wright living in this microcosm.

Mrs. Hale and Mrs. Peters suffered from isolation imposed upon them by the 19th century society. Though these women were happily married, their kitchens became a symbol and a tool for their own type of isolation. These two women had duties at home and because of these duties they, mainly Mrs. Hale who was a good friend of Minnie, had no idea what had been happening to Minnie in her home. “Mrs. Hale Why, I don’t know whether she did or not—I’ve not been here for so long. There was a man around last year selling canaries cheap, but I don’t know as she took one; maybe she did. She used to sing real pretty herself” (Baym 1417).

It was because of this inability to visit Minnie, to step outside of the little box that contained an oven, a sink and a table that Mrs. Hale and Mrs. Peters had no idea what was happening. With this extra isolation in all the women’s lives Minnie felt that her burden was two times greater than Mrs. Hale’s or Mrs. Peters’.

Mrs. Peters But I’m glad you came with me, Mrs. Hale. It would be lonesome for me sitting here alone.

Mrs. Hale It would, wouldn’t it? But I tell you what I do wish Mrs. Peters. I wish I had come over sometimes when she was here I—wish I had.
Mrs. Peters  But of course you were awful busy. Mrs. Hale—your house and your children.

Mrs. Hale  I could’ve come. I stayed away because it weren’t cheerful—and that’s why I ought to have come. I—I’ve never liked this place. Maybe because it’s down in a hollow and you don’t see the road. I dunno what it is, but it’s a lonesome place and always was. I wish I had come over to see Minnie Foster sometimes. I can see now—(Baym 1418).

Susan Glaspell’s *Trifles* is not about which gender is better than the other, who belongs where, or feminism. This play is a microcosm of the 19th century society, how the kitchen became a symbol and tool for the isolation of women at times driving them to madness to the point that they commit murder.
Works Cited

Ben-Zvi, Linda. ““Murder, She Wrote’: The Genesis of Susan Glaspell’s *Trifles*”


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