

MALE-DOMINATED SOCIETY IN *GLASPELL'S TRIFLES*

Nurhayati Purba¹, Findi Manik², Prima Jaya Daeli³, Julia Carolina Ginting⁴

Program Sastra Inggris, Fakultas Sastra, Universitas Methodist Indonesia

nurhayatipurba07@gmail.com, findimanik12@gmail.com, primajayadaeli2003@gmail.com,
lia.julia0930@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

This article looks at Trifles, a one-act play written by Susan Glaspell in 1916, as a strong social critique of the male-dominated society in the early 20th century. The play uses character development, meaningful symbols, and social commentary to show gender inequality and unfair justice. By comparing the male characters who ignore "small things" with the female characters, Mrs. Hale and Mrs. Peters, who pay attention to details like a dead bird and quilt stitching, the article shows how these small clues help explain Minnie Wright's actions. In the end, Trifles reveals how a male-centered legal system often fails to see women's struggles, while also highlighting the power of women's solidarity and the need for a more human and fair kind of justice. This play is still important today as an example of how gender, power, and different perspectives affect society

Keywords: *Trifles, gender inequality, symbolism, justice, female perspective, Susan Glaspell*

ABSTRAK

Artikel ini membahas *Trifles*, sebuah drama satu babak yang ditulis oleh Susan Glaspell pada tahun 1916, sebagai kritik sosial yang kuat terhadap masyarakat yang didominasi oleh laki-laki pada awal abad ke-20. Drama ini menggunakan pengembangan karakter, simbol-simbol yang bermakna, dan komentar sosial untuk menunjukkan ketimpangan gender dan ketidakadilan hukum. Dengan membandingkan karakter laki-laki yang mengabaikan "hal-hal sepele" dengan karakter perempuan, yaitu Mrs. Hale dan Mrs. Peters, yang justru memperhatikan hal-hal detail seperti burung mati dan jahitan selimut, artikel ini menunjukkan bagaimana petunjuk kecil tersebut membantu menjelaskan tindakan Minnie Wright. Pada akhirnya, *Trifles* mengungkapkan bagaimana sistem

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hukum yang berpusat pada laki-laki sering gagal memahami perjuangan perempuan, sekaligus menyoroti kekuatan solidaritas perempuan dan perlunya keadilan yang lebih manusiawi dan adil. Drama ini tetap relevan hingga kini sebagai contoh bagaimana gender, kekuasaan, dan sudut pandang yang berbeda memengaruhi masyarakat.

Kata kunci: Trifles, ketimpangan gender, simbolisme, keadilan, perspektif perempuan, Susan Glaspell

1. Introduction

Trifles is a one-act play written by Susan Glaspell and published in 1916. Even though the play is short and has only a few characters in one setting, it quickly became known as one of the most important works in American modern theater. What makes *Trifles* special is not only its mystery story, but also its deeper meaning. The play talks about serious issues like women's rights, gender inequality, and unfair treatment in a male-dominated society. Because of this, *Trifles* is often seen as an early example of feminist drama. The story is simple: a group of people visit a farmhouse to investigate a murder. The men look for evidence in the usual places, while the women notice small things in the kitchen, like a broken birdcage and bad stitching on a quilt. These small details help the women understand what really happened. The play shows how things that seem unimportant ("trifles") to men are actually meaningful and reveal the truth. It also shows how women's experiences and emotions are often ignored by the legal system. Susan Glaspell got the idea for this play from real life. Before she became a playwright, she worked as a young journalist at *The Des Moines Daily News*. She reported on a real murder case where a woman was accused of killing her husband. Glaspell saw how the legal system and the people around the case did not understand the woman's life or pain. This experience helped her write *Trifles* not just as a fictional story, but as a strong message about justice and how society treats women. Because of this, the play feels honest and powerful.

Susan Glaspell (1876–1948) was a famous American writer of plays, novels, and short stories. She helped create a theater group called the *Provincetown Players*, which supported new and creative ideas in drama. *Trifles* was one of their first plays. In many of her works, Glaspell wrote about women who struggled with unfair social rules and wanted to find their voice. She began her career in journalism (a field mostly filled by men at the time), later wrote for popular magazines like *Harper's* and *The Ladies' Home Journal*, and finally became a successful playwright. She even won the Pulitzer Prize for Drama in 1931 for another play. What's interesting is that Glaspell chose to use a short and simple play to deliver such a deep message. She wanted her story to reach a wide audience not just scholars or the elite. By using a murder mystery format, she caught people's attention and slowly guided them to see the real message: the quiet struggles of women in the home and the unfair ways they are judged. Her choice to

use familiar and popular forms of entertainment to share serious social messages shows her smart and effective way of writing. Overall, *Trifles* may seem like a small story, but it deals with big ideas. It uses a simple investigation to show how society often fails to listen to women and to understand their pain. The play calls for women to support each other and for a kind of justice that looks at real human emotions and situations, not just legal rules. This article will explore how Glaspell used characters, symbols, and setting to deliver her social message. The next chapters will explain the plot and setting, examine the main characters, study the symbols used in the play, and look at the social messages that *Trifles* gives, as well as its lasting impact today.

II. Literary Review

A. Short Summary of the Plot

Trifles tells the story of a murder investigation involving John Wright, a farmer who was found strangled in his home. His wife, Minnie Wright (formerly Minnie Foster), is the main suspect and is taken into custody. The story begins when Sheriff Peters, County Attorney George Henderson, and their neighbor, Lewis Hale, come to the Wrights' house to search for clues. While the men go upstairs and around the house looking for what they call "real evidence," two women, Mrs. Hale (Lewis Hale's wife) and Mrs. Peters (the sheriff's wife), stay in the kitchen. As they observe small domestic items, they slowly begin to understand Minnie Wright's emotional state and possible reason for committing the crime. The story moves forward when the women find important clues, but instead of sharing them with the men, they decide to keep them hidden out of sympathy for Minnie. The play ends with the men failing to find any clear motive, while the women silently protect Minnie through their quiet act of solidarity.

B. The Importance of Setting: The Kitchen as a Small World

The kitchen is the main setting of *Trifles* and plays a very important role. It becomes the place where the real story behind the murder is discovered. There is a clear difference in how the male characters see the kitchen, they think it's unimportant to their investigation and say things like, "There's nothing here but kitchen things." This attitude shows how men in the story dismiss anything related to women's space as useless or unworthy of attention. Feminist critics often see this kind of statement as a sign of how society looks down on women's roles and experiences. Traditionally, the kitchen belongs to the world of women. It is a "microcosm" or small version of the domestic space. The play, it shows how women's experiences are often pushed aside in a society led by men. The fact that the men cannot understand the meaning of this space shows their lack of connection to women's lives. The title *Trifles*, which means "small and unimportant things," is ironic. The men use this word to describe kitchen items, but in fact, these so-called "trifles" are the key to understanding the crime. The men's rejection of these clues is not just part of the plot, it's a strong critique of how society often ignores women's knowledge and insights. By making these "unimportant" things the center of the truth, Glaspell challenges the audience to think again about what is truly valuable in society.

and whose voices deserve to be heard. The play turns small domestic objects into a powerful tool to uncover deep truths and to question the blind spots of a male-centered world.

C. Symbolism of Domestic Details: Revealing Inner Truth

The small items found in the kitchen give us deep insight into Minnie Wright's emotional state, something the men completely miss because they focus only on hard evidence. Mrs. Hale and Mrs. Peters notice important details like broken jars of fruit, unfinished bread, a quilt left half-sewn, and a messy table. While the men are joking and criticizing, the women quietly observe. Together, these small signs reveal the emotional struggles of a desperate housewife. They suggest that Minnie lived a very lonely and sad life. The cold, strict nature of her husband must have made her feel trapped. The men, who are used to following strict procedures and looking for direct clues, cannot "read" the domestic space the way the women do. But Mrs. Hale and Mrs. Peters, through their shared life experiences as wives, can understand that the kitchen's disorder is not just poor housekeeping; it is a silent message. Minnie may have been trying to communicate her suffering through these quiet signs. The kitchen becomes a kind of hidden story, where the real emotions and problems are told without words. This shows the big difference between how men and women see and understand things. The home, in this case, becomes a place full of hidden pain that only women can recognize.

D. Early Insight: The Men's "Blindness"

The men's failure to see the importance of the kitchen and its details shows the main conflict in the play, the difference between how men and women view reality and justice. The men are proud and confident in their roles as leaders, but this confidence makes them blind. They don't believe women can be helpful in serious matters like solving a crime. The male characters, who hold power as sheriff and county attorney, believe that their job and status make them the most capable. But their reliance on strict facts and their belief in their importance blind them to the small details that matter. The women, who are seen as less important, are the ones who solve the mystery. This creates an interesting contradiction: those with power end up understanding less, while those who are ignored see the truth more clearly. This suggests that power does not always mean better knowledge or judgment. In fact, the way society gives power only to certain people (like men) can stop true understanding, especially when it encourages looking down on others. The play shows that real insight sometimes comes from those who are left out, and that authority can be a barrier to empathy and full understanding.

III. Character Analysis

This chapter explores the main characters in *Trifles* and how Susan Glaspell uses them to examine issues of gender roles, emotional oppression, and different ways of understanding justice. By comparing male and female characters, the chapter reveals how each group's perspective shapes the story and its outcome.

A. Female Characters: Mrs. Hale and Mrs. Peters

Mrs. Hale and Mrs. Peters are the key female figures in *Trifles*. They serve as the main lens through which the audience discovers the hidden truth behind John Wright's murder. Mrs. Hale, the wife of a local farmer, feels deep guilt for not visiting Minnie Wright more often. She regrets not offering support when Minnie was going through emotional struggles in her marriage. This guilt gives her a strong sense of empathy and makes her more observant. She often takes the lead in pointing out small, important details in the kitchen to Mrs. Peters. Mrs. Peters, the wife of the sheriff, is introduced as a quieter and more obedient character. She feels loyal to the law and to her husband. However, as the play continues, she begins to change. She reflects on her own painful experiences, such as losing her child, and slowly grows closer to Minnie's emotional world. Her transformation from someone who respects the law to someone who chooses compassion makes her a dynamic and evolving character. The bond between Mrs. Hale and Mrs. Peters grows out of their shared experience as women in a male-dominated society. When Mrs. Hale says, "*We all go through the same things it's just a different kind of the same thing,*" she expresses a common reality of oppression that women face, even in different forms. This shared understanding allows them to connect deeply with Minnie's suffering and interpret the "silent messages" left in her household. Their ability to understand the meaning behind small, everyday items like unfinished sewing or a broken birdcage is a result of their shared domestic knowledge and emotional insight. In the end, their empathy leads them to make a bold moral decision: to protect Minnie by hiding the evidence. This moment marks a clear break between the women's perspective and the men's.

B. The Offstage Character: Minnie Wright

Although Minnie Wright never appears on stage, she is the emotional center of the entire play. Her character is developed through the memories and observations of Mrs. Hale and Mrs. Peters. As a young woman, Minnie, then known as Minnie Foster, was cheerful and lively, known for singing in the local choir. But after marrying John Wright, she becomes quiet, withdrawn, and lonely. Her isolation is presented as a direct result of her oppressive marriage and the wider patriarchal society. The house where she lives is described as being in a lonely valley, with no visitors and a silent, controlling husband. John Wright is portrayed as a cold and unfriendly man, who refuses to install a telephone or allow outside connection. His killing of the canary, the only source of joy Minnie had left, symbolizes the emotional control he held over her life. Over time, Minnie loses not only her freedom, but also her happiness and sense of self. Minnie represents many women who suffer in silence under emotional abuse. Her act of murder is not shown as simple violence, but rather as a desperate response to years of being ignored and isolated. Through her story, Glaspell gives voice to the hidden pain of many women whose suffering is often overlooked by society.

C. Male Characters: Sheriff Peters, County Attorney Henderson, and Mr. Hale

The male characters in *Trifles*, Sheriff Peters, County Attorney Henderson, and Mr. Hale, represent authority and the formal justice system. They are confident in their roles and believe they are the only ones capable of solving the case. However, their pride and strong belief in "facts and law" blind them to the deeper truth. They laugh at the women's concern with small

household items, thinking such things are unimportant. For example, Mr. Hale says, "*Women are used to worrying over trifles,*" not realizing that these "trifles" hold the key to the murder motive. This line becomes ironic, as the women who are dismissed as weak and emotional are actually the ones who solve the mystery through careful attention and empathy. The men focus only on physical evidence that fits the legal system: something clear, direct, and factual. They search for signs of anger or sudden violence that could explain the crime. But their narrow way of thinking prevents them from understanding the emotional context of Minnie's life. They fail to see the meaning behind the disorder in the kitchen, the unfinished sewing, and the dead bird. These domestic details, which the men ignore, tell the real story, one of emotional pain and silence. Their arrogance and refusal to take women seriously show the limits of the justice system when it ignores human emotion and experience. Through these male characters, Glaspell critiques a society that values legal facts over emotional truth and authority over empathy. The play suggests that true understanding often comes not from those in power, but from those who are willing to listen closely to the quiet struggles of others.

IV. Symbolism Analysis

This chapter explores how Susan Glaspell uses everyday household items in *Trifles* as powerful symbols. These simple objects in Minnie Wright's home, such as a bird, a quilt, a birdcage, and a jar of fruit, carry deep emotional meaning. While the men in the play ignore them as "trifles," the women can "read" these items and discover the truth behind the murder. Through these symbols, Glaspell shows how gender affects perception and how women's experiences can reveal what the legal system cannot.

A. The Dead Canary as A Silenced Voice

The most important discovery in the kitchen is a dead canary, carefully wrapped in silk and kept in a small box. This bird is more than a pet; it represents the joyful and free Minnie Foster before she became Minnie Wright. Its death symbolizes the loss of Minnie's happiness and spirit after years of emotional abuse by her husband, John Wright. Mrs. Hale says, "No, Wright wouldn't like the bird, a thing that sang. She used to sing. He killed that too." This comment connects the bird to Minnie herself. Just like the bird, Minnie's voice was silenced. The dead bird becomes a symbol of her emotional suffering, and its discovery helps Mrs. Hale and Mrs. Peters understand what may have pushed Minnie to kill her husband. In this way, the bird becomes a silent witness to years of pain and a reason for Minnie's desperate act.

B. The Quilt and the Stitching as A Sign of a Troubled Mind

Another important symbol is the unfinished quilt found in Minnie's sewing basket. The stitching is uneven and messy, showing that something was wrong with her state of mind. To the men, it seems unimportant, but to the women, it is a clue. There is even a short discussion about whether Minnie was going to "quilt it" or "knot it." This small detail becomes meaningful. Quilting takes time and care, while knotting is a quicker, less delicate method. The fact that Minnie chose to knot may suggest she was feeling stressed, rushed, or

overwhelmed. It even mirrors the way she killed her husband by strangling him. The quilt becomes a symbol of Minnie's mental state and the quiet chaos in her life.

C. The Broken Birdcage as A Symbol of Imprisonment

The empty, broken birdcage found in the house is another strong symbol. It represents Minnie's life inside a marriage that felt like a prison. Just like the bird inside the cage, Minnie was kept in isolation, far from the outside world. Her husband didn't allow visitors or even a telephone, keeping her completely alone. When Mrs. Peters sees that the cage door looks broken "as if someone had been rough with it," it suggests that there may have been a violent moment. The broken cage becomes a symbol of Minnie's trapped life and the final breaking point that led her to take control in the only way she could.

D. The Broken Jar of Fruit as Lost Hopes

Among the many "small things" in the kitchen, the broken jar of fruit also holds meaning. Preserved fruit usually represents effort, care, and planning for the future. Minnie had spent time preparing those jars to make something sweet last longer. But now, the jar is shattered, and the fruit is ruined. This broken jar can be seen as a symbol of Minnie's broken hopes. Whatever happiness or order she tried to keep in her life was now destroyed. It adds to the picture of a woman living in emotional chaos, with no more strength left to hold on.

V. Social Commentary

A. Critique of the Patriarchal Legal System

Trifles is not just a story about a murder mystery. It is also a deep criticism of the male-dominated legal system of its time. The play shows how the justice system often ignores women's experiences and perspectives. The male characters, such as the county attorney and the sheriff, rely only on facts and legal evidence when investigating Minnie Wright. They search for direct proof and clear motives, without trying to understand the emotional and psychological pressure she might have been under. Susan Glaspell presents a justice system that is "blind" to the oppression of women. Since it is created by and for men, the system naturally overlooks voices from the margins. The men in the play often dismiss the women's observations, thinking they are too focused on "trivial things." However, what the men see as unimportant is actually the key to understanding Minnie's pain and reasons. This suggests that real justice cannot be found through law alone; it must also consider empathy, human experience, and the deeper context of each situation, especially for those who have long been ignored.

B. The Relevance of Gender Issues Today

Although *Trifles* was written over a hundred years ago, its themes are still very relevant today. Gender roles, domestic abuse, and the struggle of women to be heard remain important social problems. In the early 20th century, women were often seen as less important, and their identities were defined by the men around them. Sadly, many of these issues continue in

today's world many women still face inequality, discrimination, and even hidden abuse in their homes and workplaces. This play reminds us to listen to voices that are often pushed aside. Mrs. Hale and Mrs. Peters show how shared experiences among women can create strong bonds of empathy and understanding. Their silent solidarity becomes a powerful act of resistance. Even though their choice is made in a quiet and private space, it sends a strong message about women supporting each other in a society that often does not care about their stories. *Trifles* encourages readers and viewers to keep fighting for fairness and equality, especially for those who are still unheard.

C. Art as a Tool for Social Criticism

Susan Glaspell uses *Trifles* as more than just a play it becomes a tool to talk about serious social issues. By setting the story as a simple murder mystery in a home, she cleverly hides a strong message about gender and power. This shows how art can be used to challenge unfair systems and to give space to voices that are often silenced. Through her use of setting, character development, and everyday objects as symbols, Glaspell not only entertains the audience but also makes them think deeply. The play asks important questions: What does justice really mean? Who decides what matters? Who gets to speak, and who is ignored? As one of the first feminist plays in American literature, *Trifles* opened the door for other works that speak out against injustice and fight for social change. It proves that art is not only for entertainment it can inspire awareness and action.

VI. Conclusion

In conclusion, *Trifles* is a short but powerful play that uses ordinary domestic details and gender roles to present a sharp critique of early 20th-century society. Glaspell shows how truth and justice are often hidden in places people ignore. The male characters, focused only on legal facts, miss what really matters, while the women, guided by empathy and shared experience, uncover the truth. Symbols like the dead canary, the broken birdcage, and the unfinished quilt represent Minnie Wright's emotional suffering. The kitchen, which men see as unimportant, becomes the center of the story. It is where the truth is quietly revealed, and where solidarity between women becomes a quiet but powerful form of justice. The lasting power of *Trifles* lies in its ability to speak to all generations. It reminds us that justice is not always about rules it's also about understanding, compassion, and listening to those who have been silenced for too long. Glaspell's play continues to inspire important conversations about gender, power, and the role of art in making society more fair and human.

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