A DRAMA OF DETECTION: SUSAN GLASPELL'S *TRIFLES*

BİR POLİSİYE DRAMA: SUSAN GLASPELL'IN TRIFLES *ADLI OYUNU*

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Abstract

Though Susan Glaspell's well-known one-act play Trifles (1916) has been predominantly framed by the themes of female condition at the turn of the twentieth-century United States, it is intrinsically built on the concepts of detection and crime. The dramatic text reveals a narrative tendency that keeps deferring the detection of a case of murder committed within the farmhouse of the Wright family. Against the backdrop of its social and cultural context, the play gives voice to its female characters in the inspection of the crime whereas the male characters fail to detect the motivation behind the murder. This article argues that Trifles can be construed as a feminist crime account whose language and structure are couched in a narrative of deferral. The play subtly illustrates that the story of investigation not only shakes the strict bounds of convention but it also divulges precariousness of social justice particularly for women in the early twentieth-century United States.

Öz

Amerikalı kadın tiyatro yazarı Susan Glaspell'ın Trifles (1916) başlıklı tek sahnelik oyunu genel olarak yirminci yüzyıl başlarında kadınların ataerkil düzen içerisinde bulundukları zorluklar çerçevesinde ele alınmıştır. Amerika Birleşik Devletleri'nde küçük kasaba hayatında kadınların sıkışmışlığını Minnie Foster karakteriyle resmeden oyun polisiye edebiyat türünün bir örneği olarak değerlendirilebilir. Suç ve suçun tespit edilme uğraşı üzerine kurulan oyun metni John Wright'ın öldürülmesindeki sır perdesinin aralanmasının sürekli ertelenmesine yönelik bir eğilim göstermektedir. Kadınların ev alanı içine terkedilip sınırlandırıldığı toplumsal ve kültürel bir yapıya eleştirel bir bakış açısı getiren oyun, kadın karakterlerine cinayetin tespit süresince ifade özgürlüğü verirken, baskın düzenin uygulayıcılarından olan erkek karakterlerin cinayetin ardındaki nedeni tespit etmelerindeki başarısızlıklarını sahneler. Bu makale Trifles'ın hangi yönlerden feminist bir polisiye anlatı niteliği taşıdığını tartışarak, kadınları etkisizleştiren ve ev içine hapseden erkek egemen yargı ve sosyal uygulamaların hangi yönleriyle oyunun dili ve yapısındaki erteleme- bir başka deyişle anlam kaybolması- motifiyle ortaya koyulduğunu tartışmaktadır. Oyun, kadın karakterlerin yürüttüğü teftiş hikayesiyle katı ve kısıtlayıcı gelenek sınırlarının nasıl sarsıldığını sahnelerken aynı zamanda modern Amerikan toplumunda ataerkil önyargılar nedeniyle kadınlar için sosyal adaletin ne denli belirsiz olabileceğini de açığa vurmaktadır.

When Susan Glaspell worked as a "young reporter who had covered the story" (Bryan and Wolf xii) of the 1901 murder trial of Margaret Hossack, she perhaps would not have imagined at first that this case would influence her writing career so much. "A twenty-four-year-old reporter for the Des Moines Daily News", Glaspell was "one of the first journalists in the scene" (Bryan and Wolf xii). She reported the criminal case of John Hossack who was murdered in his sleep, yet the intriguing point of the case was that the suspect was his wife Margaret Hossack. Clearly, the influence of the case was so overwhelming for Glaspell that she put the case down on paper in two different genres, and the Hossack story became a narrative that is, as scholar Trevor Hope argues about gothic narratives, "belatedly reconstructed" (11) in a gothic setting of

American rural life. She wrote firstly her one-act play *Trifles* in 1916 and then adapted it to a short story "The Jury of Her Peers" in 1917. Of her experience as a reporter, she states, "When I was a newspaper reporter out in Iowa, I was sent down-state to do a murder trial, and I never forgot going into the kitchen of a woman locked up in town" (Glaspell in "*Trifles*, Background"). In the original production of *Trifles* in 1916 in Provincetown, Massachusetts, Glaspell herself *"played the role of Mrs. Hale"* ("*Trifles*, Background"), the female character who directs the real investigation in the play.

There must have been more than a whodunnit story in Glaspell's mind obviously; her creativity posed questions that are related more to whydunnit and the miserable motivations behind the crime. Glaspell's narrative offers a vision of society and a psychodrama of a woman at the turn of the twentieth century in the United States. What seemed on the surface as the pursuit of a crime became a look into the loss of compassion and communication in an American family house. Glaspell personally wrote many articles on the Hossack case for the newspaper; and, her creative work came to life after she shifted her focus on Margaret Hossack who was accused of her husband's murder. This link in between her role as a legislative reporter and a writer brought the questions of crime and creativity together in *Trifles*. Her concern about her protagonist Minnie Foster's life reinhabits the Hossack case with an emphasis on Minnie's exclusion from society as a woman and the domestic violence she is exposed to.

This article argues that Susan Glaspell's *Trifles* offers a dramatic narrative of detection that is forever caught in deferral due to the unsolved murder of John Wright. Pointing to the link between the detective narratives and the idea of deferral, scholar Ayça Vurmay significantly argues that detection is *"constantly deferred in literary texts, thereby turning out to be a dissemination or proliferation of meanings, selves or reality. In other words, detection proves to be impossible or unstable as it is revealed in the very mechanisms of the genre, which relies on concepts of absence, play and suspension"* (1127-1128). That detection becomes impossible in *Trifles* is due to the loss of meaning caused by the male characters' failure to understand Minnie Wright's life. Glaspell playfully stages an inward struggle for supremacy and intellectual challenge between the male and female characters by underlining the male characters' constant privileging their mindsets and duties as superior to the female attitudes and domestic chores. In this struggle, playfulness of the process of detection and thus the dissemination of meaning as well as the truth go undetected

for the male characters while the female characters prove to be well qualified as detectives of this domestic crime thanks to their domestic instincts and their ability to sympathize with Minnie in the course of inspection. Glaspell's dramatic narrative is hence imbued with a process of deferral that permeates a production of meanings, which altogether gives way to decoding of the crime and Minnie's miseries in her marriage only by the female characters that prefer to keep silent about it at the end.

Though Glaspell's dramatic narrative is fraught with attempts to follow the traces of the murder and the murderer, it is caught up in an eternal state of deferral, a condition where traces become visible only to the female characters that come to act as female detectives. In his *Speech and Phenomena*, Jacques Derrida contends that a trace is not *"a presence but is rather the simulacrum of a presence"* (156). It can be argued that *Trifles* is a narrative of a murder, which rejects detection of traces that are not present but act as images, representations or, as Derrida puts it, as *"the simulacrum of a presence that dislocates, displaces, and refers beyond itself"* (156). All of the traces figured out by the female characters in the play point to the present yet invisible signs in the lives of John and Minnie Wright (previously Minnie Foster). Glaspell situates the male characters in a position where they skip significant traces mainly because they dismiss them as trifles and inconsequential worries of the women's world. Traces disseminate and meaning proliferates only in the process of detection carried out by Mrs. Peters, the sheriff's wife, and Mrs. Hale, Lewis Hale's wife. What seems trifles to the male characters is in fact complexity and ambivalence of the truth, whereas the very same truth operates as a riddle for Minnie Foster's female friends who can discern the oppression of constrictive traditions within marriage. The truth remains and will always remain in a state of dislocation and deferral for the county attorney, George Henderson, for the sheriff, Henry Peters, and for Mr. Hale, who all fail to raise consciousness about the miserable life of Minnie Foster. Though the text emphasizes the tremendous power of the sheriff and the county attorney as the men of law, the ability to detect the truth lies in the consciousness and sympathy the female characters develop as they come to detect the troubles in their friend's life. Thus, detection of the truth remains as a lack of vision and compassion as well as an eternal absence for the sheriff, the county attorney, and Mr. Hale.

Just like the Hossack trial, Glaspell left the case in *Trifles* as an incomplete one with an open-ended plot as if she left the verdict to the audience who are expected to discern the tragic potential in the play. Glaspell does not stage any judgment process

for Minnie Wright; Margaret Hossack's story likewise remained unsolved as she was sentenced to life due to inadequate evidence. Investigating the links between the Hossack case and Glaspell's work, scholar Patricia L. Bryan maintains that *"the legal perspective, represented by the men who are in charge of investigation and who will stand in judgment, is portrayed as narrow and rigid, based on preconceived notions about gender roles that make it impossible for them to recognize or understand the experiences of the accused"* (1297). Notably, the detection of the crime in the play serves as a prism from which to analyze the social problems inherent in American society in the early twentieth century. Glaspell structures her mystery play on the basis of the precariousness of social justice in a society where women are silenced, mistreated and shut down in between the walls of their houses. It is no wonder that Glaspell situated her work against the domestic ideology that is long constructed since the previous century with the twist of a murder story in a domestic setting. Though domesticity seemed to be an ideology created by women for the sake of women, it was inherently a patriarchal construct that created embellished paradigms for restriction of women's lives rather than their liberation. In every move the male characters make to detect the truth in the scene of crime, Glaspell reminds her audience that domesticity is basically a patriarchal construct that is originally devised by men who organized constrictive social areas and separation of spheres according to traditional gender norms.

Glaspell exposes that Minnie Wright and her neighbors Mrs. Peters and Mrs. Hale were all born into this repressive tradition of domesticity, by which women must strictly abide; or else, they were not considered ideal women and were expelled from the domestic sphere and society. This sequestration, however, grants Mrs. Peters and Mrs. Hale insight into the inner workings of the domestic life of Minnie Wright. The scene opens with a "gloomy" tableau where the audience sees the *"kitchen in the now abandoned farmhouse of John Wright"* (Glaspell). The kitchen as the crucial space of American domestic interiority is now deserted after the murder as the audience first sees the empty house that is now *"a gloomy kitchen, and left without having been put in order"* (Glaspell). The kitchen together with the interiority of the house becomes a text to decipher for the female characters from the very first moment while the male characters fail to simply read the carceral nature of small-town domestic life. The moment they enter the house both Mrs. Peters and Mrs. Hale look "nervous" and "disturbed" (Glaspell). They know deep inside that there must be something wrong with Minnie now that the house is in a mess. The mess is supplemented by "other signs of incompleted work" (Glaspell), which uncover the imperfect and decomposed

parts of Minnie's life. They are incomplete- just like the end of the play- simply because no house with *"unwashed pans under the sink, a loaf of bread outside the bread box, a dish towel on the table"* (Glaspell) could be a true woman's house in accordance with the domestic ideology. All of this incompleteness is a domestic insufficiency for the county attorney and the sheriff, whose harsh criticism and contempt about Minnie's kitchen become visible with the start of their investigation in her house.

Deferral permeates through the interrogation into Minnie's domestic abilities to keep the house and her food in order. For oppressive patriarchy that is responsible for the creation of the domestic sphere as a prison for women, domestic skills are the biggest merits for measuring womanhood. Dirty towels, frozen fruit, disordered kitchen are all faults the county attorney and the sheriff find with Minnie. However, Mr. Hale's words point to Minnie's psychology that gives more concrete clues about the truth. Glaspell's juxtaposition between the male characters' unkind words and the female characters' distant stance toward them together with their ability to sympathize with their friend, Minnie, reveals Glaspell's critique of domestic oppression. Incapacity to understand Minnie's psychology illustrates patriarchy's profound moral failure to perceive the needs and oppressed condition of women who suffer from confinement in their miniscule domestic spheres. Mrs. Peters and Mrs. Hale's gestures disclose that the county attorney and the sheriff's unsympathetic remarks function as traces of Minnie's entrapment within her marriage. Though the sheriff and the county attorney act authoritatively to show that their investigation is a serious official business, Mrs. Peters and Mrs. Hale reflect their perceived fear about the way things happened from the traces they are able to detect in the cold farmhouse. The way they stand attached from the male characters in the beginning symbolizes how detached the male and female spheres are and how aloof the male characters stand from understanding and sympathizing with women's concerns.

Detection takes the form of reading the clues of the crime scene that is Minnie's home. In spite of the conceited dominance of the male characters in the investigation, Glaspell shows that the true dominance lies in sympathy and compassion since interpreting the murder of John Wright lies in the capacity to comprehend the problems in the house. Detection works not only on the level of the specific murder committed within the farmhouse but also in relation to the process through which the female characters and readers alike trace social oppressions and domestic violence at work in American society. As critic Lucy Sussex explicates about women's

crime narratives, the female characters' attempts to read the clues signify an errand into *"a narrative that is previously masculine in content"*, for *"the (male) detective has not solved a mystery, and the answer lies with a woman"* (1). Such an errand starts for the female characters when Mr. Hale tells the story of crime that happened the day before upon his entrance into the house. Though he recounts every detail he witnessed the day before his present account, Mrs. Peters and Mrs. Hale take the control of the investigation silently as they carefully read the clues in the house and Minnie's responses to Mr. Hale.

Whatever clue Mr. Hale tells of the scene, the county attorney and the sheriff dismiss them as trifles for the investigation. When the county attorney tells the sheriff, *"You're convinced that there was nothing important here—nothing that would point to any motive"*, the sheriff replies, *"Nothing here but kitchen things"* (Glaspell). Their dismissal gives way to the deferral of the truth about the crime while only Mrs. Peters and Mrs. Hale come to notice the oppression within the house. The moment of clarification of the crime begins for the female characters when Mr. Hale recounts that he sees Minnie Wright rocking back and forth in the rocker, listless and without any remarkable notice of the visitor. The meaning concerning the truth comes to proliferate when Mr. Hale gives clues about Minnie's psychology. Mr. Hale's words elucidate Minnie and John's relationship when he narrates that John was not presumably the kind of husband who cared what his wife wanted (Glaspell). This remark of John's contempt functions as a hint about their relationship in a way that helps Mrs. Peters and Mrs. Hale construct a meaning whereas the very same meaning withdraws from the male characters when the county attorney says, *"I do not want to talk about that"* (Glaspell). The county attorney promptly brushes over what kind of a man John Wright is. Yet, Mrs. Peters and Mrs. Hale grasp their friend's isolation and loneliness in John Wright's attitudes. This withdrawal of the meaning instigates the eternal deferral of the detection of the crime in the scene while the meaning proliferates as Mrs. Peters and Mrs. Hale match Mr. Hale's words with the oppression in Minnie's life.

This process of withdrawal of the meaning continues when Mr. Hale recounts his conversation with Minnie after his entrance into the house. That Minnie looked "queer", "done up", "unconcerned" and was "dull" during her talk to the county attorney and her cold remarks concerning the fact that John was "dead" (Glaspell) upstairs prove the best clues about her psychology for her friends. Mr. Hale's account evinces that Minnie does not even feel the cold as she has become totally numb, only

hysterically pleating her apron that reminds her of her eternal confinement and oppression. Mr. Hale's account reveals that Minnie did not welcome him as she was sitting on her rocker apathetically. He further stresses her indifference when she replies to Mr. Hale's question as to where John Wright is. Though she numbly speaks that John is lying dead upstairs with *"a rope around his neck"* (Glaspell), her words indicate the shock she is going through. Minnie simply says that she did not wake up when John was strangled in his sleep though she sleeps in the very same bed and that later she did not even notify anybody. Although the county attorney and the sheriff only get surprised at Minnie's act and dismiss it again as an inconsequential sign, Mrs. Peters and Mrs. Hale take Mr. Hale's words as symptoms of Minnie's collapsed psychology, especially after he recounts that Minnie begins to "laugh" and then stops and looks "scared" (Glaspell). All of Mr. Hale's observations about the aftermath of John Wright's murder serve as traces of Minnie's psychology, which proliferates the meanings that lead the way to the truth.

All of the county attorney and the sheriff's contemptuous phrases and assertions defer the detection of the crime. Pleating functions as a defense mechanism for Minnie as it is one of the best things she apparently knows in her secluded life. Just like pleating, perhaps, one of the best things she could do in her house was to preserve her food. The county attorney and the sheriff make disdainful statements about the rottenness of food and the "nice mess" (Glaspell) in the kitchen but skip once again the reason why the consumption of food is left incomplete. In the face of all of these derisive remarks, Mrs. Peters surfaces Minnie's worries when she remembers Minnie saying that her jars "would break" (Glaspell) due to cold weather. Indeed, all of these signs about the preservation of food in Minnie's kitchen serve as symbols of the loss of communication between the husband and the wife. Minnie's efforts to keep her preserves intact are but desperate attempts to compensate the void in her relationship. Glaspell contrasts the attribution of insignificance to the "preserves" and the female worries over "trifles" (Glaspell) with the enormity of the crime when the sheriff answers, "Well, can you beat the woman! Held for murder and worryin' about her preserves" (Glaspell). All of the male characters fail to notice the pressing need of Minnie's attachment to her preserves as a replacement for the lost connection with her husband. Though the kitchen is to be a locus of creativity and productivity, it became a space of suppression and imprisonment for Minnie. Keeping her preserves intact symbolizes the last of her efforts to sustain her life under the gloomy atmosphere of her house.

From the very beginning of the play, Glaspell's dramatic text itself becomes a reference to the cause of its own inscription, a relapse of all sorts of violence in the domestic archives of the US nation. Glaspell utilizes the gothic atmosphere of the "gloomy kitchen" of the farmhouse to question the role of marriage and women's inferior and oppressed position in American family life. It can be argued that the text acts as a repository of memory, an archive for all women under the same condition and a personal as well as a national archive for both Minnie Foster and the women of an entire nation. Glaspell's text can be regarded as a *"recurrence of 'archives' not just as privileged architectural loci of memory but specifically as the repositories (domiciles and dungeons, safehouses and oubliettes) of texts, as the material substrate of the word"* (Hope 10). As Derrida argues in his "Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression" (1995), archive denotes two things at the same time: "commencement and commandment" (9) and it is the "archons" or patriarchs who hold the hermeneutic power in their hand as they themselves *"accorded the hermeneutic right and competence"* (10). Derrida maintains that archons *"have the power to interpret the archives",* and *"entrusted to such archons, these documents in effect state the law: they recall the law and call on or impose the law"* (10). However, Glaspell reverses the hermeneutic power in her play by switching the conventional male and female roles. She replaces the archons' power to perceive and interpret the personal archive of John and Minnie Wright with the female characters' ability to sympathize with Minnie and their capacity to look into the implications in the archival abode. In the Derridian sense, archives dominated by archons domiciles the patriarchive, yet in Glaspell's play, the same patriarchive constructed by John Wright's oppression rejects being read by the patriarchs who built, commenced and commanded the same oppressive substrata.

Minnie Foster's kitchen and house can thus be considered an archive that calls for decoding the truth in the midst of patriarchs of the play who merely prefer to command and dominate the investigation with despicable words. What the sheriff and the county attorney fail to understand as the men of law is that the truth lies beyond the detection of the murderer. Potential meanings as to Minnie's life and her desperation in her marriage proliferate only for Mrs. Peters and Mrs. Hale as they both physically and emotionally draw closer to each other after all of these mocking remarks. While the county attorney seems to take notes and wants to investigate the upstairs, the barn and around the house, Mrs. Peters and Mrs. Hale perceive the meaning of her friend's subjugated status, the psychological burden she had to carry over very long years in her oppressive marriage by following the clues Mr. Hale gives

in his conversation. From this point on in the play, Mrs. Peters and Mrs. Hale step foot on the sphere of law that is constituted and enacted by the male world. Janet Stobbs Wright explains that in *Trifles "the law is side-stepped and a female context replaces the male context of law"* (225-226). This contextual exchange is also a subtle interchange of conventionally gendered social spheres, and is made possible by the male characters' condescending attitudes and the female characters' instinct to preserve Minnie's innocence just like Minnie did her best to preserve her food.

As Yvonne Shafer contends, *Trifles* is *"experimental in technique and puts forth in a moving way the plight of a woman brutalized by her husband—a woman who never appears in the play"* (78). As opposed to the absence of its female protagonist, Minnie, Glaspell gives voice to Minnie's female characters. The authoritative behavior of the male characters leaves the truth impossible and undetectable, creating a silent clash between the male and female characters, a silent conflict that is only felt by Mrs. Peters and Mrs. Hale. Feeling that Minnie is subject to the men's criticism and prejudices, Mrs. Peters and Mrs. Hale defend their friend with their words first and then protect her against the cruelty of patriarchy. Mrs. Peters and Mrs. Hale's gradual perception of the truth during the process of detection efficiently furnishes insight into the loss of communication and the need for compassion in Minnie and John Wright's relationship. It further clarifies the male characters' inability to sympathize with the women's forced confinement. The more the sheriff and the county attorney disdain what they view as trifles in women's sphere, the more effectively they in fact alienate themselves from reading the truth of Minnie Foster's life and from detecting the crime.

Mrs. Peters and Mrs. Hale reconstruct the meaning out of the domestic materials like a riddle; however, the pretentious officiality of the male characters disables them from reading the very same domestic clues. When the county attorney washes his hands and wipes his hands with the towel, he criticizes Minnie's *"dirty towels"* and *"kicks his foot against the pans under the sink"* (Glaspell). Mrs. Hale defends her friend by reminding the county attorney that there is "a great deal of work to be done on a farm" (Glaspell). Significantly, she adds that these towels *"get dirty awful quick"* and that *"men's hands aren't always as clean as they might be"* (Glaspell). The county attorney takes Mrs. Hale's words purely as a superficial "loyalty" to the female sex; however, Mrs. Hale points to his lack of sympathy and expresses how farmers' wives are busy consuming their time and energy in the house chores and farm (Glaspell). Supporting her friend as she tells her observation about

her house, Mrs. Hale explains that Minnie's house *"never seemed a very cheerful place"* (Glaspell). The county attorney misinterprets Mrs. Hale's words once again when he implies that this has to do with *"the homemaking instinct"* (Glaspell). Mrs. Hale essentially refers to her long observations over the years and to the impossibility of this house to be a cheerful place with John Wright in it (Glaspell). Though Mrs. Hale's words indicate the weight of Minnie's feelings and her psychological state within the house, the county attorney disregards the possible feelings that might be useful as clues for the investigation, saying that he wants to *"get the lay of things upstairs"* (Glaspell).

Nevertheless, the gist of things is embedded in Minnie's sentiments that set the scene for the murder. In her female characters' approach to the mystery of the murder, Glaspell dramatizes what Philip Van Doren Stern argues in his 1941 article about the mystery stories:

> The whole genre needs overhauling, a return to first principles, a realization that murder has to do with human emotion and deserves serious treatment. Mystery story writers need to know more about life and less about death—more about the way people think and feel and act, and less about how they die (Stern).

Stern places a special emphasis on the idea that "the great need of the mystery story today is not novelty of apparatus but novelty of approach". Likewise, Glaspell accentuates the role of sentiments in the perception of the truth in Minnie and John's life and the murder itself. Glaspell takes her audience into the deeper parts of what Stern calls the comprehension of human emotions that reign in Minnie's life through the long dialogue between Mrs. Peters and Mrs. Hale. As Stern suggests, the female characters get to know more about Minnie's life than about John's death as their dialogue keeps the suspense and mystery alive for the audience. After Mr. Hale, the sheriff and the county attorney leave for the upstairs to find serious clues, allowing Mrs. Peters and Mrs. Hale to observe Minnie's kitchen in detail without the male pressure. In their search of a clue, Mrs. Peters and Mrs. Hale also turn into their own lives with the help of the sympathy they form with Minnie's life. As a result of this ability for empathy, *"a web of sisterhood is woven which connects the lives of all three enabling Mrs. Hale and Peters to counter patriarchal law"* (Mael 281). Mrs. Peters and Mrs. Hale highlight the importance of their kitchen for them, talking about how disturbed they are when men snoop around their kitchen and criticize them (Glaspell). They voice their feelings in relation to the violation of their dearest sphere, where they find the only chance to be productive as they also suggest its value in

relation to Minnie's fondness of her apron and quilts. Although the sheriff and the county attorney make fun of Minnie's choice of apron for the prison, Mrs. Peters and Mrs. Hale understand very well that these items are the only things that Minnie feels genuinely connected to in the absence of love and a companion in her loneliness.

Examination of the kitchen deconstructs of Minnie's "dismal life" (Mael 281). The kitchen affirms the oppression John Wright exerts over Minnie, becoming the site where the real investigation starts in the play. As hard workers of the domestic sphere, Mrs. Peters and Mrs. Hale know the value and difficulties of domestic chores and how the house care requires dedication. During the process of her observation, Mrs. Hale puts herself in Minnie's shoes and imagines how Minnie was to put the loaf of bread into its place if she had not been put in prison. She feels deep inside how pitiful it is for Minnie to leave her bread and fruit outside without care *"after all her hard work in the hot weather"* (Glaspell). Mrs. Hale figures out the reasons why Minnie "kept so much to herself" and how she is made to feel "shabby" though she used to *"wear pretty clothes and be lively, when she was Minnie Foster, one of the towns girl singing in the choir"* (Glaspell). Mrs. Hale compares Minnie's present condition with her past vivacity, remembering how lively she used to be. She shivers while she is telling Mrs. Peters how "hard" John Wright was as a man, adding that he was *"like a raw wind that gets to the bone"* (Glaspell). The meanings related to Minnie's life proliferate, opening new paths to the female characters' comprehension of the oppression within the house. Even Minnie Foster's name, as Alkalay-Gut explains, is descriptive of the overwhelmingly repressive gender codes in society:

> The name Minnie is derived from the German word for *love;* this potential for love is nurtured and cherished in Minnie's maiden name Foster; when she discovers her ideal man, Mr. Wright (Right), it is transferred to her husband. Mrs. Wright is then an emblematic romantic heroine of standard tales for women, whose potential is 'fulfilled' through the right man, when she becomes acceptable as 'Mrs. Wright' (72).

Considering that all of Minnie's efforts, liveliness and life have long been wasted by the harshness of her husband, Mrs. Peters and Mrs. Hale feel disturbed by all cruel comments and by the sheriff and the county attorney's efforts to *"get her own house to turn against her"* (Glaspell). No matter how emphatically Mrs. Peters reminds Mrs. Hale that *"the law is the law"* (Glaspell), they never give up following the traces that may help them see Minnie in a favorable light. Acting just like juries in a court, they empathetically feel that they cannot take sides with any form of unpleasant

treatment that can be enacted by the patriarchal law against Minnie. At the very same time, they also cannot help pondering over the possibilities: Mrs. Hale asks Mrs. Peters whether it is Minnie that committed the murder as they come to believe that the murder is an "awful crafty" (Glaspell) one. Mrs. Hale disperses the possibility by explaining the incongruity in Minnie's request for her apron in the prison. In their role as female detectives, Mrs. Peters and Mrs. Hale become both interrogative and protective towards their friend in every step they take in their inspection of the kitchen. Sensing the oppression, they also act out and reflect their fear and reservations about the sheriff, the county attorney and Mr. Hale in the process of the empathy they are forming with Minnie's dreary life in her house.

In every expression about Minnie and her kitchen, Glaspell explores the possibility for her female characters to enable resistance against violence. If detection means discovery of the truth, the text conceals it from the male characters who fail to perceive the agony beneath it. Deferral itself brings the production of meanings embedded in the last decade of Minnie Foster's personal history. As Mrs. Peters and Mrs. Hale tell in the course of the play, there has been a remarkable transformation in Minnie Foster's character over the years, which resulted in Minnie's exclusion from society. The exploration of this transformation by the female characters also provides detailed pictures of the artistry in Minnie's quilt work and her ability to sing like a bird. This insight into her long lost abilities evinces that her artistic skills stand in stark contrast with the domestic violence she is exposed to.

As the play progresses, Mrs. Peters and Mrs. Hale unearth the domestic violence within Minnie's sewing basket that helped her piece her quilts with skill. They wonder whether Minnie was going to *"quilt it or just knot it"* (Glaspell), a remark that the sheriff repeats mockingly after Mrs. Hale for women's work. While quilting refers to an artistic production, knotting denotes a more rough way of fastening something with a string or rope. Glaspell lays bare the contrast between quilting and knotting in a striking way; since knotting signals John Wright's murder as he was strangled with a rope, and quilting symbolizes the artistic quality of Minnie's quilts. Mrs. Peters and Mrs. Hale are empathetically struck by the potential reasons of Minnie's incomplete work, implying the possibilities of violence that interrupted her work. Instinctively, Mrs. Hale pulls at a knot and rips the sewing and stiches the parts that are not sewed well and thus left imperfect (Glaspell). With every stich Mrs. Hale weaves for Minnie's incompleted quilt, she not only feels more connected to her friend

and help her out with her work, but also unstitches the truth about John Wright's murder.

Mrs. Peters and Mrs. Hale's detection of the strangled bird and the birdcage with its broken door unties the knots of the truth about the murder for them. Mrs. Peters expresses the incongruity of a lively animal like a bird living in such an oppressive house, and conveys how roughly the door of the birdcage been handled. The signs of oppression they witness in the house make them draw closer both physically and emotionally to each other as Mrs. Peters expresses her gladness about Mrs. Hale's companionship. The suspense rises with each clue and they sense how John Wright has victimized Minnie in this "lonesome place" and how lonely she was without any friend or company (Glaspell). Considering that John Wright was "a hard man" (Glaspell), Mrs. Hale reproaches herself about leaving Minnie alone as a friend for long years after articulating the idea that spending even one day with John Wright gives her the shivers. As Mrs. Hale is the one who was raised in the same town with Minnie, she knows and expresses her surprise at Minnie's transformation from a woman who *"was kind of a bird herself—real sweet and pretty, but kind of timid and—fluttery"* (Glaspell) to an introverted resident of the town. Both Mrs. Hale and Mrs. Peters voice Glaspell's ideas about the restrictive and oblivious small town folk life when Mrs. Peters states, *"we just don't see how it is with other folks until – something comes up"* (Glaspell).

Mrs. Peters and Mrs. Hale understand that John and Minnie Wright's marriage headed for trouble with the progress of their interrogation in the house. They now know the bird with its wrung neck wrapped up in a piece of silk, and instinctively do not share this information with the sheriff and the county attorney. Instead, Mrs. Hale impulsively speaks on behalf of Mrs. Peters, saying that they think the cat got the bird. Meanwhile, *"their eyes meet"* and *"a look of growing comprehension of horror"* (Glaspell) appears in their face. Rumination on Minnie's experiences after her marriage and the oppression in the house gives Mrs. Peters and Mrs. Hale the opportunity to empathize with her. Highlighting Mrs. Peters' memory of a similar experience as a young woman when a boy took a hatchet before her eyes to kill her kitten, Glaspell demonstrates the prevalence and mundaneness of social crimes. Stitching all the clues, Mrs. Hale concludes that she now knows that it is John Wright who killed the bird although Mrs. Peters repeats twice that they do not *"know who killed him"* (Glaspell). Sharing the same knowledge and now learning from their investigation in Minnie's house, Mrs. Peters and Mrs. Hale point to the sorrow of

loneliness in Minnie's life. Mrs. Peters expresses how horrible the stillness that Minnie was exposed to after her bird's death. In a similar fashion, Mrs. Hale gets lost in her memories of Minnie's youth as she recalls the days when Minnie *"wore a white dress with blue ribbons and stood up there in the choir and sang"* (Glaspell). She mournfully regrets not visiting her once in a while and kept her company, concluding that leaving Minnie alone for all those years is the real "crime" that needs interrogation (Glaspell). Mrs. Hale's sorrowful words identify the fact that Minnie has already been buried alive after her marriage.

Mrs. Hale acts as Glaspell's mouthpiece in elucidating her feminist concerns. Referring to Minnie's loneliness and victimization within her house and marriage, she asks, *"who's going to punish that?"* (Glaspell). Mrs. Hale compares Minnie's imprisonment with the crimes that she believes to be punished as a consequence of Minnie's victimization and desperate moments in the face of her husband's oppression. She articulates that she has arrived at Minnie's house belatedly because she knows *"how things can be—for women"* (Glaspell).

> Mrs. Hale: I tell you, it's queer, Mrs. Peters. We live close together and we live far apart. We all go through the same things—it's all just a different kind of the same thing. [Brushes her eyes; noticing the bottle of fruit, reaches out for it.] If I was you, I wouldn't tell her her fruit was gone. Tell her it ain't. Tell her it's all right. Take this in to prove it to her. She – she may never know whether it was broke or not (Glaspell).

As Glaspell's mouthpiece, Mrs. Hale accentuates that the meanest crime is the inability to form sympathy with the oppressed people particularly when they live so close to one another. In exposing Minnie's tragedy, Glaspell critiques how violence becomes mundane and how such painful repression begets unfathomable tragedies in the lives of ordinary people, particularly women. In the male characters' sarcastic remarks and prejudices, Glaspell affirms the precariousness of social justice for women in patriarchal social structures. Mrs. Peters and Mrs. Hale's perception of the crime and their preference to keep silent becomes their struggle against patriarchal authority. The text similarly withholds the truth from the male characters while it lays bare for its audience the oppressive social practices of patriarchy.

Though Glaspell paralleled the lives of Margaret Hossack and Minnie Foster, she was in fact writing a model of life for an ordinary woman in modern American society. Glaspell ends her play without a verdict, leaving the end of the play and

Minnie's tragedy open to discussion. Instead of a verdict, Glaspell presents the codes of female creativity as the final implication of the male characters' incapacity for comprehending the domestic violence in the house. The county attorney once again asks whether it is knotting or quilting, and Mrs. Hale answers, stating that they *"call it—knot it"* (Glaspell), referring in fact to the way John Wright was killed. As to this very moment, in the stage directions, Glaspell depicts Mrs. Hale as keeping her *"hands against her pocket"*, which implies Mrs. Hale's instinct to hide the bird and the sewing box and protect her friend against the potential punishment. Mrs. Hale's sudden instinctive act uncovers that this is the only answer that she thinks suitable for the male characters as she senses that they lack compassion and insight into the truth. Consequently, Glaspell enables her female characters to weave Minnie's story into their own stories, revealing the critical point where they perceive that they also share a similar fate with Minnie. Glaspell's female detectives leave the detection of the crime in an endless state of deferral for the male characters by stitching together the *trifles* in Minnie's miserable life and house.

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