

**CHALLENGING THE STATUS QUO OF WOMEN IN THE EARLY
TWENTIETH CENTURY IN THE WORKS OF DIANA OF
DOBSON'S AND TRIFLES ***
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Abstract

In the early twentieth century, women were consistently excluded from the literary studies and deprived of employment opportunities in America. Paul Lauter underlines that the 'American canon was sanctified by the male literary critics trained in formalism, reflecting the professor's concern that a truly American art is to be attractive when it embodies the values of masculine culture' (Lauter 34). It is not wrong to say that there was some prejudice against women in the literary works, especially in the dramatic works. The main reason for this was that women worked for long hours with low pay in the 1920s. Thus, they did not have the social and economic freedom. Of all the 20th century American women playwrights, Susan Glaspell gained her reputation due to the fact that she rebelled against the gender norms and played a crucial role in the American theatre. Also in Britain the early twentieth century is generally presented as being unsuccessful for the British female playwrights. In addition, in the 1920s it was acknowledged that the female playwrights were not prolific and that society tended to appraise female playwrights less favourably. However, in fact; the inter-war female playwrights were entering upon the male-dominated theatre. One of the ignored, but great English playwrights in the 1900s is Cicely Hamilton. *Diana of Dobson's* is her great work which was a commercial drama in the early 20th century England.

This paper emphasises the social problems and the social identity of the women in the early 20th century by illustrating an American and an English feminist play. *Trifles* which was written by Susan Glaspell reveals the poor conditions the women faced and the sexual inequality they encountered. The caged bird which symbolises the woman in the play is also representative for the women in society. The other play, *Diana of Dobson's* was written by the English suffragette Cicely Hamilton. Overworking, problems of poverty, ill-pay, and domestic service are some of the themes in this play. The main focus of this paper will, particularly, be on comparing and contrasting the social and economic roles of the women between the American and English plays by the women playwrights who had both lived in the early 20th century and manifested the achievement of the British and American female playwrights against the male-dominated drama.

Key words: Female playwrights, the caged bird, the role of the women, sexual inequality

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In the early years of the twentieth century, women were still like caged birds, imprisoned in wifehood and motherhood. They were striving for personal liberty, equality to man in rights, equal pay, education, especially through suffrage. Mary Wollstonecraft, an advocate of women's rights in the eighteenth century, protested against the gender oppression, the educational inequality between men and women, and demanded rights for women in her work. *A Vindication of The Rights of Woman*, in 1792 showed the predicament in which women were regarded as inferiors in society, which couldn't be resolved until the mid-twentieth century. During this time, women didn't have any higher education, didn't own any property and were deprived of marital rights as well as the right to vote. Men dominated almost all aspects of life. Women were "decorative, and useful in the home, but that's all" (Carter 188). They were confined to the kitchen, in which they spent most of their time cooking, doing the laundry, and doing their sewing. The oppression of women was a sight that attracted the literary attention of some female writers on both sides of the Atlantic such as the American playwright Susan Glaspell and the English playwright Cicely Hamilton whose plays, as this paper argues, spoke back to the repression of women in private and public spaces through their construction of willful, strong and daring female protagonists.

Minnie Foster was one of those women who was deprived of liberty and personal rights when she turned into Minnie Wright in *Trifles* (1916), Susan Glaspell's best known, one-act play. Because of the lack of evidence in her husband's murder, Mrs. Wright was the only suspect, who was arrested and held in prison, but she was not a suspect in the eyes of the sheriff, county attorney and the neighbouring farmer, Mr. Hale. Nonetheless, she was regarded as a convict. These three male characters executed with extreme prejudice against the arrested woman without having Mrs. Hale and the sheriff's wife interrogated.

While the murder was being investigated by the male authorities to find the evidence of the motive, they couldn't prove it and the males, especially the county attorney then degraded the women and when these two women made their way to the kitchen to find some clues for the alleged strangling of Mr Wright, Mr Hale said, "Well, women are used to worrying over trifles" (*Trifles* 4). This was just another example of how men underestimated women and treated them as their inferiors. However, the women found the evidence and revealed the truth through the disordered kitchen, ragged sewing and the strangled canary, things that were considered "trifles" by the men. When it turned out that John Wright had purposefully wrung the neck of the bird, the women justified Mrs Wright by saying that the caged bird had been her only companion as she did not have any children, so it was revealed that Mrs Wright had taken revenge on her husband and killed him by wrapping a rope around his neck. However, the neighbouring women did not tell anything about the evidence to the authorities. Veronica Makowsky suggested at this point:

The women display female solidarity by concealing the dead bird and their conclusions from the men. The sympathy of Mrs. Hale and Mrs. Peters arises not only from sisterly solidarity but from the two women's self identification as mothers, in contrast to the

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childless Minnie. Love, particularly maternal love, is associated with sound and its absence with silence. They realise that the pet was a kind of child-substitute for the solitary Minnie; the canary's voice was to displace the silence of a cold authoritarian husband and replace the sounds of the unborn children. Their maternal feelings not only help Mrs. Hale and Mrs. Peters understand the importance of the canary to Minnie, but also help them direct their solicitude toward Mrs. Wright herself through the memory of Minnie as a vulnerable, pretty young girl who loved singing in the choir.(Makowsky 62).

Men inevitably and commonly change the lifestyle of women. Minnie Foster was used to singing in the choir, so she did not enjoy the silence of having no children, but the keeping of a canary was, nevertheless, hindered by her husband. She just wanted her bird to break the deathly silence at home. Instead of her lively manner of life, John Wright reduced his wife to silence and caused his wife to run out of patience. While the writer is using a metaphor of the bird's song as the voice of the soul, "the women acknowledge that John Wright not only killed Minnie's canary, but her very spirit" (Makowsky 62). As it is obvious in the play, women were taken for granted as they were, supposedly, born to obey men according to their order of nature. Notwithstanding all the negative conditions women bore, Susan Glaspell wrote this play to put a lid on the sexual inequality and restriction of women's liberty and also to initiate women's solidarity. Interestingly, the plot of the play echoes a real-life conviction story that occurred at the turn of the century. Margaret Hossack "had been accused of bludgeoning her husband to death with an axe while he slept, and although there was no conclusive evidence, she was found guilty and sentenced to life imprisonment with hard labour" (Ozieblo 60).

When Susan Glaspell went to see the crime scene; Hossack farmhouse, she found out that the convicted older woman had been beaten to death by her husband. This story might have caused Glaspell to draw the scene of the bleak kitchen and the women's social conditions in the earlier twentieth century. These years could also be described as the struggle of decessing to be under the sway of the male dominated playwriting. Susan Glaspell on the one hand, tries to prove herself as a playwright and on the other hand struggles to earn women's rights. Regarding Glaspell's situation Annette Kolodny wrote that "Glaspell is also exploring the plight of the female writer; her trifles are as unnoticed and unappreciated by her culture as are Minnie's domestic artifacts by the investigating men" (Makowsky 63).

Susan Glaspell also experienced the position of the others by writing plays because at the time of the early twentieth century in America, female playwrights were still not welcome. Although Glaspell had nine novels, fifty short stories and fourteen plays, she was not acknowledged in the American dramatic and literary canon. Martha Carpentier summarised the secondary importance of women as writers in *Susan Glaspell: New Directions in Critical Inquiry*, and explained the other position of female writers as follows:

Paul Lauter has given some answers to the inevitable question of

why—one being gender, of course. From the 1920s through to the 1950s, in America women were systematically being excluded from the academies, while the American canon was sanctified by the male literary critics trained in formalism, and seeking to establish an assertive national identity through an indigenous literature reflecting ‘the professor’s concern that a truly American art is only attractive when it embodies the values of masculine culture’. (Carpentier 1).

However, Glaspell did not surrender. On the contrary, she, as a rebel, broke the gender norms and became a journalist, and in the early twentieth century she dedicated herself to a life of writing. ‘Feminist theatre and cultural historians and biographers have resurrected the pivotal role Glaspell played in the most important innovative moment in American theatre, with the Provincetown Players, 1915-1922’ (Carpentier 2).

Unlike the passive resistance of her characters in *Trifles*, Susan Glaspell rebelled against the injustices and the otherness that women were confronted by in American society. Thus, towards the mid-twentieth century America tried hard to get women’s social, political and economic rights by means of feminist efforts. These feminist efforts were cross-continental. Around the late 19th century and early 20th century in England the Women’s Liberation Movement interested the British theatre. Similarly, in America the feminist activity provided women with job opportunities or, at least, it changed the social status of women. Linda Kerber, who was an American historian and ‘a writer of women’s history’ made a pivotal statement in

Women’s America:

While the number of women in the work force continued to rise from less than 20 percent in 1920 to a projected 87 percent by 2000, the working women in the 1970s and 1980s saw the gap between the male and female incomes which remained virtually unchanged. By 1998 female workers earned 76 cents for every dollar earned by males, although the gap had substantially narrowed among the younger women. Part of the explanation for this persistent gap lies in the pay inequities. More fundamentally, however, is the continuation of occupational segregation and the undervaluation of work done by women. Around 80 percent of all working women still cluster in gender-segregated occupations in which wages are artificially low. That women made up two-thirds of all minimum-wage workers in the United States is, therefore, hardly surprising.

(Kerber 373).

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Just as America was suffering from pay inequalities during the twentieth century, England was also challenging against the low payment in the early years of the twentieth century. Feminists of that period contested it and, consequently, undertook steps to pursue their personal rights. "Among those who actively challenged the relegation of women to a private, domesticated world were a number of self-conscious feminist playwrights who used the overtly public forum of drama as a point of entry to the debate" (Stowell 1).

As Stowell asserts, Cicely Hamilton is one of those feminist playwrights who used playwriting as a vehicle for the expression of the female enfranchisement in England. Suffrage plays in British drama flourished in 1908, and led the suffragettes to gather in an organisation called "The Women Writers' Suffrage League" (WWSL) and The Actresses' Franchise League (AFL). These organisations argued against not granting women the right to vote. Cicely Hamilton 'whose plays and pageants were among the most potent weapons in the AFL/WWSL arsenal, and who was an articulate speaker for the suffrage cause' (Stowell 3) depicted in *Diana of Dobson's* (1908), the conditions of women in employment, marriage and law. The protagonist of the play, Diana Massingberd, is a rebellious and impoverished character who struggles to be paid equally to the male wages for the same work and fights against low wages. Diana like the other middle class women suffers from overwork as a shop assistant in a large drapery. All the shop-girls have to live and work in the dormitory attached to the drapery.

The women work under harsh conditions to earn their own living by themselves. However, they are neither paid as they deserve nor the same amount as men are paid for the same kind of work. Hamilton argues that "although it may be unseemly to point it out, women, like men, must eat. To eat they must have money. To have money they must either have a man to support them or else adequate employment so they can earn a living on their own. The preservation of the human race, with which so many men exclusively associate women, depends entirely upon women's own preservation" (Hamilton 35). Clementina Black defines sweating in her book *Sweated Industry and The Minimum Wage*, as "any method of work under which workers are extremely ill-paid and extremely overworked". As Black says, Diana and the other women work for excessive hours and force them "to toil under insanitary conditions" (Hamilton 41).

Diana realises that the employers gain advantage from the young women, so this results in cheap labour which leads to austerity. Diana says: "Oh, that is the way to make money" (107), so the living-in system and the cheap labour are the substantial problems of the society. As a result, Virginia Woolf says in *A Room of One's Own*, an independent income enables a woman to say and write what she thinks; a financially independent woman can conclude, "he has nothing to give me" (38).

As a historical fact, the victory of female enfranchisement was achieved in England in 1918; on the other hand America's victory was in 1920 with the passage of the Nineteenth Amendment to the United States Constitution. Until this triumph of the women, they were seen as passive

beings, not having the right to speech, the right to vote and the right to bear testimony to the justice. In fact, they did not live as human beings. Both Minnie Wright and Diana had common burdens because of their gender, though they lived in different countries; one in America, the other in England and at different periods in the twentieth century. However, their unjust treatment in public and private places is what brings these protagonists under the same umbrella.

Minnie Wright was deprived of the right to live by committing murder; she was already imprisoned in home, so being put into jail didn't indicate much difference to her as she was already deprived of her freedom in her home. To live in jail was, therefore, not hard for her; perhaps this is why she ventures murder. In Diana's case, she was confined to the dormitory and the drapery store because it was the economic conditions which hindered the lifestyle she longed for. Throughout the history of women, the undergoing problem is not that women wanted more rights than they deserved or desired. The problem was that women were not granted existing rights as they should be and, thus, as a result, there became a huge gap between men and women in terms of social, economic, political and legal status until the suffrage was granted.

I would like to conclude my paper with a quote from Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Women* which, arguably, summarises what Minnie and Diana aspired to achieve:

I then would fain convince reasonable men of the importance of some of my remarks; and prevail on them to weigh dispassionately the whole tenor of my observations. – I appeal to their understandings; and, as a fellow-creature, claim, in the name of my sex, some interest in their hearts. I entreat them to assist to emancipate their companion, to make her a help meet for them! Would men but generously snap our chains, and be content with rational fellowship instead of slavish obedience, they would find us more observant daughters, more affectionate sisters, more faithful wives, more reasonable mothers – in a word, better citizens (Wollstonecraft 288).

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