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## **DOMESTIC SPACE: A TERRAIN OF EMPOWERMENT AND ENTRAPMENT IN SUSAN GLASPELL'S "TRIFLES"**

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### **Abstract**

*This article focuses on "Trifles" a timeless play written by Susan Glaspell. This play is revolutionary for several reasons: it focuses on the living conditions of 19<sup>th</sup> century women; it reinterprets the role of domestic space; and it shows how sisterhood is forged in domestic spheres. Domesticity becomes one of the determining factors of the play due to the bonds it creates among major women characters. When Glaspell wrote the play, women were designated to inside the house and especially the kitchen, women's domains that do not assign important responsibilities and empowerment to men. This article argues that the typical entrapment of women can only be overcome through the sisterhood and empowerment of women.*

**Keywords:** Domestic Space, Women, Gender, Empowerment, Entrapment.

## **DOMESTİK ALAN: SUSAN GLASPELL'İN "TRIFLES" ADLI OYUNUNDA GÜÇLENME VE HAPSEDİLMİŞLİK**

### **Öz**

*Susan Glaspell'in "Trifles" adlı oyunu yazarın zamansız oyunlarından biri olarak kabul edilir. Bu tiyatro oyunu sadece on dokuzuncu yüzyılda kadınların durumu açısından devrimci değil, aynı zamanda güncel cinsiyet, feminizm ve alan teorilerinin tekrar gözden geçirilip yorumlanması açısından da önemlidir. Bu makalenin amacı, domestik alan bakımından Susan Glaspell'in "Trifles" adlı oyununu konu alarak yeni bir bakış açısı getirmektir. Bu bakış açısına göre domestik alan "Trifles" adlı oyunda zaman zaman kadınlar için bir hapsedilmişlik ve ezilme anlamına gelirken bazen ise kadınların güçlenmesini ve onlara atfedilen domestik yaşam alanına bir baş kaldırı imkânı olarak görülebildiğini tartışmaktadır. Bu makalenin amacı domestik yaşam alanında kadının hapsedilmişliği Trifles isimli bu tiyatro oyununda kadın karakterlerin güç birliği sayesinde üstesinden gelmiş ve kadınları güçlendiren bir hal kazanmıştır.*

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Domestik Alan, Kadın, Cinsiyet, Güçlenme, Hapsedilme.

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## **INTRODUCTION**

It is the institutional oppression of marriage that turns women into objects of patriarchy. Susan Glaspell's "Trifles" is one of the striking examples of how women's lives are both shaped and empowered under the restrictions of a domestic space. Domestic space is undeniably one of the fundamental elements of our daily lives. The impact of domestic space which reveals itself in different ways. Historically, domestic space has been defined as a terrain that used to protect families from past dangers. Since survival was the major concern, safe domestic space provided survival as a basic human requirement. In our modern lives however, domestic space has become more individualistic. It provides comfort and security and without having to address survival. Domestic space is related to how we, as individuals define domesticity and how we personally shape that space. Although domestic space was created with the intention of survival, it has always been a prominent factor in the determination of gender roles. It has also become a prominent feature in the construction of a person's identity and how they relate themselves to the society that they live in: As Smyth and Croft argue, "Thus was born the idea of the house as something in excess of its primary function as artificial shelter – as a place, in fact, which expressed something of the identity of the builder or owner or occupier, as well as something of the culture of the society in which it was built." (Smyth & Croft, 2006:13) As it is stated in the article titled, "The Housewife and the Stage: A Study of Domestic Space and Homemaking in Susan Glaspell's *Trifles*," "domesticity has been historically associated with patriarchal oppression. Roles designated only to women, such as being the daughter, wife and mother, are socially constructed, learned and performed within the domestic sphere." (Chaisilwattana, Yuwapa, 2015:1)

The first part of this article provides some background information about how Glaspell wrote "Trifles". This part explores Glaspell's motivations for writing this play and later, revising it into a short story. The second part of this article focuses on the spatial notions that can be related with "Trifles". In order to emphasize the spatial significance of the play and how the domestic sphere empowers the women characters by creating a symbolic bond of sisterhood, various examples are provided from the setting, the house of the Wright family. Historically, domestic space is gendered space domestic space has always been identified with the female, as belonging only, to women. The article also examines the importance of the title of the play "Trifles," and how the impact of gender roles and how a crime scene can become a playground for women resisting patriarchal hegemony that is imposed upon them.

## **THE BACKGROUND OF THE PLAY**

"Trifles" was written by Susan Glaspell in 1916 for the Province town theater. This date is crucial in terms of women's rights because, Glaspell wrote the play at the height of the American Women's Suffrage Movement. This play stands

as one of the forerunners of women's liberation movement, an early example of a resistance to patriarchal oppression through domestic sphere. Critically, the female characters are linked by rural isolation in a desolate geography and "their individual struggle with patriarchy emphasize the play's insistence on the importance of gaining political rights for women as a major theme" (Al-Khalili, 2013: 132). In Noelia Hernando-Real's book, *Self and Space in the Theater of Susan Glaspell*, Glaspell describes herself as a woman sitting near the wharf observing the sea. She equates that view with a theater stage. As she imagines further, she associates the stage with a kitchen. She also states that while she was working as a journalist she was influenced by an actual murder case. She also emphasized the importance of visualizing a stage, and for her that was enough, to trigger her creativity:

So I went out on the wharf, sat alone on one of our wooden benches without a back, and looked a long time at the bare little stage. After a time the stage became a kitchen,—a kitchen there all by itself. I saw just where the stove was, the table, and the steps going upstairs. Then the doors at the back opened, and people all bundled up came in—two or three men, I wasn't sure which, but sure enough about the two women, who hung back, reluctant to enter the kitchen. (Hernando-Real, 2011:7)

As Glaspell pointed out, the stage itself has become a territory of her own to present the audience, with her sense of freedom, the limitations that have been put upon women and how women in return have rejected that oppression to revert it back to a sense of power in the domestic space. Iris Marion Young comments on how domestic space can have the potential to empower women in her article, "House and Home: Feminist Variations on a Theme." Young writes "Despite the oppressions and privileges the idea historically carries, the idea of home also carries critical liberating potential because it expresses uniquely human values." (Young, 2005: 124) Moreover Karen Alkalay-Gut writes that the two women characters, "by joining together can they, isolated and insignificant in their society, obtain for themselves and extend to others the support and sympathy that will help them endure the loneliness..." (Alkalay-Gut, 1984:1)

### **ADAPTATIONS OF SPATIAL NOTIONS INTO "TRIFLES"**

To begin with Gaston Bachelard's, *The Poetics of Space: The Classic Look at How We Experience Intimate Places* entitles him as the modern philosopher of "the house." Bachelard is famous for his philosophical interpretation of the house, in other words the domestic space. He states that "the house... is a privileged entity for a phenomenological study of the intimate values of inside space...both its unity and complexity, and endeavor to integrate all the special values in one fundamental value." (Bachelard: 1958, 3)

The setting and the landscape carries a special significance throughout the play. In the play, Glaspell focuses also on women whose lives are restricted inside

the domestic sphere. They are trapped inside the monotonous geographical setting of the Midwestern States. “Usually considered as a realistic playwright, Glaspell influenced by the landscape of her home state Iowa in the Midwest, is good at using the prairie and the flatness of the Midwest as the setting of her works.” (Shih, 2013: 132) The play is set in the farm house of John Wright and through this unchanging setting, each detail that is related with the domestic setting is presented to the audience as a crucial clue about the murder and the murderer. The limited time that is set purposefully by Glaspell increases the tension of the audience.

While on the surface, Glaspell’s play seems like an ordinary detective-like structure, on a deeper level the play explores the psychology of women who are repressed by a domesticated farm life in the Midwest America. The first and the most striking encounter for the reader or the audience is the messy kitchen in the setting of the play. Although the kitchen has been characterized as an insignificant place from a man’s perspective, it holds all of the crucial clues that cannot be recognized by the male characters. For example, the kitchen is described as having “unwashed pans under the sink, a loaf of bread outside the breadbox, a dish towel on the table” (Glaspell, 1917: 1078). This description is important because it gives clues to the audience about the psychological state of Minnie Wright. For instance, the patriarchal order placed expectations on women that were usually defined by their husbands. Also the quotation provides deeper clues about the fact that, this murder was accidental and happened spontaneously, and that Minnie Wright was a woman who was oppressed by the expectations of the society that equated women with perfect housekeeping.

It is only in this domestic sphere that the reader can find clues in particular about the personal life of Minnie Wright and in general about the situation of women in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The domestic sphere seems to be designated into different categories where, for example, the kitchen is designated to women, and these codes of limitations are set by the male victim of the murder. From a men’s perspective of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and even today, women’s proper place is the home and kitchen and these areas set the standard for the “perfect housewife.” Through its dialogues and symbols, the play also describes how female and male characters perceive home and domestic space in a different manner. Mael comments on the importance of the kitchen in “Trifles” and how that domestic space encourages the women characters to silently agree to withhold the evidence from their husbands: “Through their attentiveness to the “trifles” in her life, the kitchen things considered insignificant by the men, the two women piece together...the events which may have led to the murder...they make a moral decision to hide potentially incriminating evidence.” (Mael, 1989:281)

From the perspective of the male characters the house is a physical space only. They attach no emotion to it. Men expect to be served by their wives and husbands treat their wives like property. As Garbari states in her article, “Greek writer Xenophon, who insisted that the gods made women for indoors, and man for

outdoor pursuits.” (Marjorie, 2012: 126) Moreover, the idea that women are there for the service to men is stated nicely by Young: “The patriarchal gender system allows men subjectivity that depends on woman’s objectification and dereliction; he has a home on the expense of her homelessness, as she serves as the ground on which he builds.” (Young, 2005: 128)

On the other hand, domestic space represents for the female characters, isolation, entrapment, and loneliness. Al-Khalili explains that, “In *Trifles*, the simple farmhouse which appears as a background to this domestic violence situation becomes an instrument that directs the audience not to condemn the wife for the crime, as the motive displayed through the careful scrutiny of the domestic space reveals a life of abuse” (Al-Khalili, 2013: 133). Glaspell cleverly directs the audience’s interpretation of events as well as the audience’s allegiance to the characters. Rather than seeing Minnie Wright as a murderer of her husband, the audience sympathizes with a woman who was trying to find a way out of her entrapment both in the domestic space and also in the society in general. There are several minor but crucial examples related to the oppression that Minnie has felt. For instance, the change of her name from Minnie Foster to Minnie Wright after marriage indicates her state of psychology that changes after marriage. When she was Minnie Foster she was described by Mrs. Hale (in a conversation with Mrs. Peters) as a woman who “used to wear pretty clothes and be lively, when she was Minnie Foster, one of the town girls singing in the choir” (Glaspell, 1917: 1082). This quotation clues the audience to Minnie Wright’s past she was a lively person, who took care of herself, and in some way she had access to a social life. Later it becomes more clear that Minnie Foster was dedicated to singing. However, her marriage to Mr. Wright silences her. Also this last name symbolically indicates that male decisions are always “right” or even the idea that the husband as the decision maker. Moreover, as the play moves on, we discover that Minnie Wright is totally enclosed inside the house, as if she is jailed there by her husband. She has no sense of mobility, not even a restricted one. For example, as a married woman, she’s not able to join the Ladies Aid or the choir. As she is pulled into a deep depression and frustration, their house does not hold a telephone line while the other women of the desolated community can connect with each other at least through the phone line.

Another symbolic element of the play is the caged bird in the house, just like her entrapment inside the domestic sphere. Besides being “caged” inside her house, the bird and Mrs. Wright are both silenced by the oppressive male dominance and power. The women in the story see different facts and reach different moral and legal conclusions than the men in the story. For instance, as Angel states, “It can be deduced from the evidence discovered in the kitchen that Minnie Wright was emotionally abused, but there is no direct evidence of physical abuse.” (Angel, 2003: 549) Angel also comments on the importance of the bird cage as a symbol of Mrs. Wright’s entrapment by Mr. Wright when he was alive. “Minnie was symbolically caged, confined in her isolated home and her abusive marriage... In the course of the

story Minnie never appears in person; she is imprisoned – caged in jail.” (Angel, 2003: 551).

The more Minnie Wright is in need of a “voice” in the domestic sphere, the more Mr. Wright demands silence in the house. Their expectations are totally different from each other. While partners in a healthy marriage negotiate these differences, Mr. Wright thinks of himself as the sole decision maker and does not consider his wife’s expectations or wishes in the marriage. His expectation of silence in the house becomes the reason why he kills the canary. This act of killing the canary to enforce silence is the same thing as killing Mrs. Wright due to enforce her silence “She was kind of like a bird her-self- real sweet and pretty, but kind of timid - and fluttery. How she-did –change” (Glaspell, 1917: 1085). Minnie Wright and the canary were connected by the sense of isolation, loneliness, and entrapment to a designated space by a superior power.

The major assumption that places like the bedroom or the kitchen are safe places because they are generally associated with women or children, it is assumed in the play that this setting cannot be related with the crime scene is also supported by the argument that “if place is created by people, then the sense of place and identity of place are also socially constructed and man-made” (Shih, 2013: 240). If we consider space as a social construction especially in the play “Trifles”, then we can consider different interpretations of space. The most obvious example in this play is the gendered interpretations of female characters and male characters. In *Space, Place and Gender*, Doreen Massey argues that examining spatial division is one of the ways in understanding how gender relations are constructed in a significant place (Massey, 1994: 179). The play explicitly shows that the things men perceive as “unimportant” or “unnecessary” or trifles are actually crucial, important and necessary, especially since they are facts in a murder case.

The first major gendered division in the play is the kitchen which is always in focus, but somehow neglected. Only the female characters that stay in the kitchen for a detailed observation. The other two male characters never take the kitchen into serious consideration, because for them, it is a women’s place that is insignificant for them doing unnecessary things there. Hence it is not only men that see the kitchen as a women’s space, but is also women who consider it as a territory belonging to themselves. The only difference between these two attitudes is that while men see in as an unimportant place, for women it is their ground for freedom where there are never interrupted by the dominance of patriarchal power. As Mrs. Hale says, “I’d hate to have men coming into my kitchen, snooping around and criticizing” (Glaspell, 1917: 1081). Moreover, Irene Cieraad in her article “’Out of my kitchen!’ Architecture, Gender and Domestic Efficiency” states, “...the twentieth century link between housewifery and kitchen had everything to do with the work and domain of the nineteenth-century domestic servant. The kitchen was not only the workshop of domestic servants but also their living space.” (Cieraad, 2002: 265) Domestic space can sometimes be a ground for freedom, as the women characters Mrs. Hale and Mrs.

Peters form bonds of sisterhood after they discover Mrs. Wright has killed her husband. Their bond to each other, and the manner how they secretly try to protect exemplifies feminine power and sisterhood. The kitchen as a domestic space has become an oppressive force for Minnie Wright before she killed her husband. While the women perceive the kitchen as a category of space that should not be intruded by men, it is understood that actually, Mr. Wright has intruded that space beginning with the death of the bird.

Another example to how men and women interpret the domestic space differently is the female and male characters' focus on in the interpretation of the mystery about the crime. It is only the male characters who have the opportunity to move freely in and outside the house. The male characters go upstairs, investigate the bedroom, go outside of the house, observe the barn area. Meanwhile the female characters are fixed in the kitchen and the living room. Besides this stasis attached to the female characters, they are also frustrated because they are occupying somebody else's domestic space. The men do not have such a feeling of frustration because they think that it is their "right" to intervene the space and inspect how the crime has been committed. As Hernando-Real states Glaspell portrays to the audience that mobility is gendered and that there is a spatial confinement that women must obey: "Mrs. Hale and Mrs. Peters are trapped in the Wrights' kitchen, symbolizing pioneer women's entrapment at their farms. Glaspell symbolizes Minnie Wright's confinement to the kitchen in her rocking chair. As Daphne Spain has warned, even chairs are subdued to gender hierarchies in the geography of home" (Hernando-Real, 2011: 35).

George Henderson, the county attorney, and Mr. Peters, the Sheriff, do not recognize that the domestic space which holds all of the clues and the solution to the incident. Mr. Peters says "nothing here kitchen things" (Glaspell, 1917: 1080). For all the male characters in the play, domestic space has an "ambivalent nature" (Symth & Croft, 2006: 21) For this reason men are unable to "read" the clues that are actually obvious to the female characters. The female characters reveal the truth under the murder, because they how to interpret these clues in a functional way. Mr. Henderson and Mr. Peters search for clues in places that are totally unrelated with the incident such as the barn and the bedroom. The mindset of these male characters has categorized domestic space as irrelevant and unimportant that without even observing the space in detail, they just see the overall picture as a messy kitchen. Evidently, the clues are all out there, scattered around the kitchen and the living room are, where the female characters notice these clues one by one, and "read" them in the proper way. In this sense the women characters who hold the power and, the male characters are in the need of women's information and sense of interpretation related to the domestic area.

The way women investigate the domestic area is very different from men. They literary collect pieces of clues and put them together to reveal the ultimate truth about the death of Mr. Wright. Things that are unimportant and messy for men

become functional clues for women such, as the ruined fruit preserves, the loaf of bread that has not been put in the breadbox, an unfinished quilt, and an empty birdcage. Whenever the two women talk about the how the food has been left out, Mr. Hale assumes that “women are used to worrying over trifles” (Glaspell, 1917: 1080). But it is actually these “trifles” that solve the mystery about the murder of Mr. Wright. Another piece of information that is put together by Mrs. Hale and Mrs. Peters is that when they find the empty bird cage and later find the bird whose neck has been wrung, they associate a parallelism between the value Minnie Wright has attached to that bird, and later how that bird has been silenced by Mr. Wright. The ultimate truth that they reveal about the crime is that Mrs. Wright has actually done the same thing to Mr. Wright. After revealing these clues, only after silently talking to each other, these women regret the fact that they have not visited Mrs. Wright so often. Since she does not have children she was prone to a heavier sense of entrapment and isolation when compared to the other women in the county.

Susan Glaspell’s major concern was to show the audience that there was a strict distinction between the power attributed to men and women. For instance, in terms of space, the women are confined to specific areas in the house which for men is unimportant. At the beginning of the play, men enter the house vigorously and after that, women enter the scene in an uncomfortable way, as if not to do anything wrong or not touch anything as if they have been cautioned by men. The male characters are presented through their job titles such as the sheriff and the county attorney, while the women are simply the wives of these men. Women are presented as not being able to have any affiliations other than being the wives of men. As Angel states, “men refer to women as Mrs. Wright, Mrs. Hale, and Mrs. Peters. To them, the women have no separate existence; they are identified only as extensions of their husbands.” (Angel, 2003:553)

## **GENDERED CLUES, GENDERED SPACES**

Glaspell structures the play in such a way that only the female characters are able to solve the mystery behind the death of Mr. Wright. She designs the clues that the characters collect, on purpose, in a way that it is very difficult for the male characters to notice the clues and interpret them in the right manner to solve the mystery behind the death of a male character. At the beginning of the play, when Mr. Hale is critical about the dirty towels in the kitchen, he considers Mrs. Wright to be a bad housewife, but never considers the possibility that Mrs. Wright might have killed her husband. Mrs. Hale comments in defense of Minnie Wright stating that “Those towels get dirty awful quick. Men’s hands aren’t always as clean as they might be” (Glaspell, 1917: 1080) and suggests that Mr. Hale has no idea about what kind of a housewife Mrs. Wright has been.

The clues that the female characters are collecting one by one start coming from the kitchen. When Mrs. Hale begins to observe her surrounding, she realizes that the incident happened very suddenly, because everything in the kitchen seems



to be unfinished. For instance, the first thing that Mrs. Hale recognizes is that Mrs. Wright was putting sugar in a jar, but the task was left incomplete. The most important piece of information we get here is that Mrs. Hale is envisioning her own life of female domesticity in order to get clues about Mrs. Wright and the ordeal that she must have gone through.

The second clue that these women get is the one they get from the quilt that Mrs. Wright was putting together. As the men investigate upstairs, the women discover the quilt and find out that she was working on a “cabin pattern” (Glaspell, 1917: 1083). This important clue provides information about how Minnie Wright felt psychologically. This pattern is famous for its shape which can basically be described as a square or rectangle shape which encloses and entraps whatever is put inside. It is similar to how Mrs. Wright feels when she is left alone with the domestic duties that she has to handle all day long, isolated from the community of female friends in the county. As the two women were discussing whether Mrs. Wright was going to quilt it or knot it, the men come down stairs and make fun of this conversation, again because they believe such things are not rational and make no direct connection to the murder of Mr. Wright. Hence what these women also discover that the men cannot see is that there is a sudden change in the manner Mrs. Wright works on the quilt. The previous pieces that she has quilted are done very neatly, but the last one that she was working on seems to be out of shape, as if Minnie Wright does not know how to quilt. This is the moment when we can say that Mrs. Hale and Mrs. Peters form a sense of sisterhood in order to protect Mrs. Wright. The reason why they do this silently is because whenever they tend to make a remark about domestic issues, the men dismiss the women’s talk as frivolous.

The third clue is related to the bird and the bird cage. The women discover the bird cage, wondering where the bird can be if there is a bird cage in the house. The next thing that they find out is that the cage door is broken, thinking that somebody must have acted very roughly about the cage door. As these women process these bits of clues together, they regret that they have left Minnie Wright alone both in terms of space and friendship. As the women are looking for Mrs. Wright’s sewing tools, they discover the dead bird in the sewing basket. This is the moment when they decide to hide the clues from their husbands. As the women collect clues about the incident, the men have not made any progress in understanding how the crime has been committed. The only meaningful information that these men have is that any other person from outside of the house has not entered the living area of the Wright family. The manifestation made by these intelligent women is stated in the following quotation by Mrs. Peters: “It was an awful thing was done in this house that night, Mrs. Hale. Killing a man while he slept, slipping a rope around his neck that choked the life out of him” (Glaspell, 1917; 1086). Although this comment seems to take sides with the victim it also manifests the parallel between how the bird has been killed and the long years of isolation of Minnie Wright has led her to the commitment of this crime.

## **CONCLUSION**

With all of her plays but especially “Trifles” which this article focuses on can be considered a timeless play written by Susan Glaspell. This play is not only revolutionary in terms of the conditions of women in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, it is also groundbreaking in terms of the contemporary interpretations of gender, feminism and spatial discussions. The purpose of this article was to focus Glaspell’s “Trifles” in terms of domestic space. The significance of domestic space is actually inevitable in this play because, where there are women characters in play that is written under the influence of the 19<sup>th</sup> century than, the space designated to women was inside the house, especially the kitchen, which was considered a woman’s domain only because, men do not have any important thing to do there. So it is again with the patriarchal power of men, that the kitchen is uniquely designated as a women’s space.

In this sense, when we think about Susan Glaspell’s “Trifles” we may consider her as a playwright who had the aspiration for women beyond her time. With her plays, she wanted to influence the position of women in society, especially since her main concern was to stage women as main characters. By writing “Trifles” she portrays a world in which women are restricted by the rules of patriarchy, and where the women must conform to the rules of their husbands with no legitimate right of decision making. In terms of space, men with the patriarchal rule provide themselves with freedom in public space and in the house domain, whereas their wives are limited only to a characteristically female space that is the kitchen.

Lastly, it becomes obvious that the title of the play “Trifles” is carefully chosen by Glaspell not only because men consider the domestic sphere unimportant, but also because what men consider unimportant may sometimes turn out to be important information in the solution of a murder. Through values such as sisterhood and empowerment among women it becomes clear in this play that the way women interpret space and the way men investigate it is very different from each other from a gendered perspective. This play reaffirms that space, its connotations are gendered and socially constructed. All in all, Glaspell structures her play on a uniquely female domestic space where the act of keeping a good home becomes a cultural code which is only comprehended by female characters.

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