

SUSAN GLASPELL'S *TRIFLES*, A FISH BONE IN THE THROAT OF MAINSTREAM WESTERN CULTURE

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Abstract: *Trifles* by Susan Glaspell (1916) dramatizes the failure of men to decipher the clues on a crime scene in the isolated farmhouse of the late John Wright. Their wives who had accompanied them succeeded in decoding and concealing the clues to protect and defend their sister, Minnie, the wife of the late John Wright, suspected of having murdered her husband. The men's failure to read the women's clues reveals their incompetence in understanding Nature as whole, and women in particular. This article seeks to examine how the incompetence of men in terms of reading the code of women's text is symptomatic to their misunderstanding of Nature. Through the ecocritical approach, the paper shows that the disharmonizing divide between the genders is the consequence of a wrong paradigm underlying the western philosophy toward Nature.

Keywords: Ecocriticism, mainstream culture, Nature, paradigm, silence.

TRIFLES DE SUSAN GLASPEL : UNE ARETE DANS LA GORGE DE LA CULTURE DOMINANTE OCCIDENTALE

Résumé : *Trifles* de Susan Glaspell (1916) dramatise l'échec des hommes à déchiffrer les indices sur une scène de crime dans la ferme isolée de feu John Wright. Leurs femmes qui les accompagnaient ont su décoder et cacher ces indices pour protéger et défendre leur sœur, Minnie, l'épouse de feu John Wright, soupçonnée du meurtre. L'échec des hommes à lire les indices féminins révèle leur incompetence à comprendre la Nature dans son ensemble, et la femme en particulier. Cet article examine comment l'incompétence des hommes en termes de lecture des codes féminins est symptomatique de leur incompréhension de la Nature. Grâce à l'approche éco-critique, l'article montre que la division inconciliable entre les sexes est la conséquence d'un paradigme erroné qui sous-tend la philosophie occidentale envers la Nature.

Mots-clés : éco-criticisme, culture dominante, Nature, paradigme, silence.

Introduction

Susan Glaspell's one-act play *Trifles* (1916) raises serious existential issues among which isolation and the need to feel connected to others, a clear sense of who one is and where and how one fits into the world, freedom, or experience of free will, and the desire to believe life is meaningful (Koole et al., 2006, p.213). The play "dramatizes the arrival at the then empty Wright farm of three men" (Rodriguez, 2002, p. 9), the county attorney George Henderson, Sheriff Henry Peters, and Lewis Hale, a neighboring farmer, together with the wives Mrs. Peters and Mrs. Hale. The men mean business by trying to investigate the crime scene and find out the motive of the crime. "The play conveys the emasculating experience of being a farm wife in a lonely, bleak landscape of Iowa during the latter half of the nineteenth century" (Manuel, 2000, p. 56). The three men are eager to find the evidence that will nail down Mrs. Wright for the murder of her husband since "Women who kill evoke fear because they challenge societal constructs of femininity-passivity, restraint, and nurture; thus, the rush to isolate and label the female offender, to cauterize the act. Her behavior must be aberrant, or crazed, if it is to be explicable" (Ben-Zvi, 1992, p. 14). Ironically and surprising though, it is the women who are mere followers to the farmhouse, understand Minnie Wright's "text", decipher her codes, and eventually conceal the very evidence the proud men are looking for. "Some critics on *Trifles* understand the play as a failure on men's part to be competent readers of women's texts" (Manuel, 2000, p.60). Yet, *Trifles* "goes beyond a mere exhibition of gender oppression" (p. 59). Beyond the exhibition of gender opposition, the play discloses the incompetence of men, the mainstream Western patriarchal culture to properly deal with Nature. Not only are women symbolically associated with Mother Nature, but they are also an essential element of Nature in whom resides the mysteries of life conception, life development and life perpetuation. Misunderstanding such a key element of Nature amounts to putting one's own life in great danger. This is what happened to John Wright (death) and the three men in their investigation, held in failure by the two women. This article seeks to examine how the incompetence of men in terms of reading the code of women is symptomatic of their misunderstanding of Nature in the context of *Trifles*. This paper also holds that the disharmonizing divide between the genders is the consequence of a wrong paradigm underlying the western philosophy toward Nature. Nature has its marks, its fingerprint and DNA in each of its components from the smallest to the largest, including humankind. By understanding the most insignificant of the elements of Nature, one grasps the essence of the whole Nature, and by misunderstanding the smallest of its components, one fails to realize what Nature is all about.

The theoretical framework in which the analysis will develop is ecocriticism, a Nature-centered perspective, especially the ecolism approach. According to

Simon C. Estok (2009, p. 788), "Ecoholism is based on the concept of ecosystem, which is essentially a biotic community in interaction with its physical environment". And this environment must be preserved. Robert Wess (2010, p. 764) argued that "Ecocriticism needs theory, but it needs to theorize its distinctive subject. To fulfill its promise, it must settle for nothing less." Generally speaking, ecocriticism studies the relationship between literature and the physical environment. It is a Nature-centered worldview. This worldview may be anthropocentric or biocentric. The anthropocentric view places humans above Nature. The biocentric view puts humans as an element of Nature, among others. The conflicting difference between the anthropocentric and the biocentric views is cultural. If culture puts man as an element of Nature that must live in harmony with other elements the ecosystem will be preserved. It is important to note that "No portion of the system can indefinitely expand without damaging the system, including itself. From the standpoint of ecoholism, human beings are an ordinary part of the whole ecosystem, not superior to it" (Estok, 2009, p. 88). The German philosopher Gottlieb Fichte quoted by Serenella Iovino (2010, pp. 759-760) said, "The kind of philosophy one chooses depends on the kind of person one is." And Iovino stresses that point by mentioning that "These words easily apply to ecocriticism" (p. 760). Unfortunately, the Western philosophy advocates the superiority of man over Nature. This philosophy consists in taking the maximum profit of Nature and its components for man's comfort and pleasure. Jim Warren (2010, pp. 207-208) also argues that:

If ecocriticism is committed to making connections, then it is committed to recognizing that control of the natural environment, understood as a God-given right in western culture, implies ecophobia, just as the use of African slaves implies racism, as rape implies misogyny, as "flag-bashing" implies homophobia, and as animal exploitation implies speciesism.

Jim Warren (2010, pp. 207-208)

It is precisely this so-called God-given right which misleads the western philosophy. Serenella Iovino (2010, p. 760) concerning this western philosophy and mindset in Italy, vehemently complained that "Half a century of illegal building development, uncontrolled industrial pollution, and inefficient environmental policies have resulted in a progressive destruction of landscape, both natural and cultural." This Western philosophy is no exception, if not worst in America, a culture that produced Susan Glaspell and her one-act play, *Trifles*. It is also significant to note that the Western mainstream culture is male-dominated, patriarchal. And *Trifles* is grounded in that patriarchal society. In this American patriarchal society, the second-class citizenship reserved to women, who are human beings entitled to

enjoy the same natural life as men, indicates what extremely low esteem and reverence the West has for the other components of Nature.

1. Glaspell's Approach to Nature

To further the analysis, it is crucial to look at some important aspects of the playwright's life to grasp her writing philosophy. As she was maturing, Susan Glaspell joined the Monist Society. According to Rob Hardy (winter 2016-2017, p. 201), "The main idea of the Monist Society was that everything is one: past and present, you and I, the universe, and the human mind." He further explained that "In part, the society had its origins in the effort to reconcile the theory of evolution with the idea of God. The Monists taught that evolution had produced a diversity of forms that were all expressions of a single reality, through which all things are connected" (p. 201). So, this Monist philosophy strongly shows through *Trifles*. The male characters' barely hidden patronizing consideration of the female characters speaks volume.

2. A Humiliating Irony of Mainstream Western Culture

The answer to the question "why do the men refuse to read Minnie's text?" (Manuel, 2000, p. 60) is that they do not refuse but fail to read Minnie's text. This is where resides the humiliating irony in *Trifles* this section is highlighting.

2.1 Isolating and Confining Women

Glaspell, in *Trifles*, has brought the American society to court. And to understand such a society, one needs to examine it. Marvin Harris (1927-2001), quoted by Mariam Lopez Rodriguez (2002, p. 10), considered that "all human systems consist of three interwoven levels: infrastructure, structure and superstructure." Paraphrasing Harris, Rodriguez highlighted that "The infrastructure deals with the modes of production (production of food and other forms of energy) and reproduction (expanding, limiting, and maintaining population size)" (p. 10). In *Trifles*, the reader gets to know that the setting is a farmhouse, and the Wrights are a childless family. As far as social structure is concerned, Rodriguez viewed it as dealing with "domestic and political economies (regulating reproduction, basic production, socialization, education and enforcing domestic or social discipline respectively). She further explained that the superstructure is about "the behavioral (arts, games, sports) and mental elements (values, emotions and traditions) of a culture" (p. 10).

In the U.S., all these three levels of social organization seem to have excluded or relegated women at a lower position. "Bearing this classification in mind, the objects employed by Glaspell in *Trifles* fall within the category of the domestic

economy as they are all connected with the home and family life" (Rodriguez, 2002, pp. 10-11).

To relegate women at a second-class citizenship, the western mainstream culture has to isolate them. Lillian Schanfield (1997, p. 73) observed that "Mr. Wright had succeeded apparently in isolating his wife from everything that fed her spirit." Mr. Hale a neighboring farmer talking to the County Attorney and the Sheriff said that "'I'm going to see if I can't get John Wright to go in with me on a party telephone." I spoke to Wright about it once before and he put me off, saying folks talked too much anyway, and all he asked was peace and quiet" (Glaspell, 1916, p. 890). By refusing to go in a party telephone with his neighbor, John increases the restrictions on his wife. Schanfield sustained that "Most significantly, a telephone would have given his wife access to the outside world" (1997, p. 74). This Mr. Wright cannot tolerate.

Not only is Mrs. Wright isolated, but also confined. Mrs. Hale reports that "She used to sing. He killed that too," (Glaspell, 1916, p. 988). This simply means that Mr. Wright prevents his wife from participating in the church choir. Mrs. Hale bitterly complains that Mrs. Wright "didn't even belong to the Ladies' Aid" (pp. 983-984). By cutting off any external link that his wife might have, Mr. Wright totally controls his wife. One may be tempted to think that Mrs. Wright's isolation and confinement is unique in its kind. "But Glaspell insists that Minnie's confined situation is not an exception: both Mrs. Peters and Mrs. Hale remain in Minnie's kitchen throughout the entire play while the three men wander around the house and the barn as symbolic evidence of their far greater mobility" (Rodriguez, 2002, p. 12). The way the men present on the scene, moving up and down, inside and outside the farmhouse reveals how they treat their wives at home and women in general. So, the issue is not peculiar to Wright only, but is a systemic looking-down upon women. It is the American society as whole that looks down upon women. "Mobility for men Confinement for women" (p.12). Besides isolating and confining women, men have a sneaking way of using language that reinforces their disdain and mockery on women. But by behaving this way they blatantly fail to seize the essence of women and the potential wealth and danger they might be. "For the County Attorney, the Sheriff and Mr. Hale domestic material culture is not only a language they cannot decode, they don't even realize there is a message hidden in it; as Mr. Hale states: "Women are used to worrying over trifles" (p. 12). Schanfield (1997, p. 71) also noted that "Often inter-related, these tactics include not only physical and sexual abuse, but also emotional, economic, verbal abuse and isolation as methods of control and domination." As they have been oppressed through isolation, confinement and mockery, women are creative enough to cope with the situation and offer themselves alternatives. Rodriguez observed that:

And, in the same way in which the Romans did not pay any attention to a mosaic with a fish in it, since this was a rather common design, and in the same way in which the Vietnamese torturers ignored the excessive eye blinking of their prisoners, the three men on stage in *Trifles* – Henderson, Hale and Peters – overlook all the clues to the murder that Minnie Wright left behind.

Rodriguez (2002, p. 11)

These alternative ways the women design become a tool of resistance to the world of men.

2.2 *Contempt for woman and her space*

Apart from the use of language, the isolation, and the confinement to degrade women, the very attitude of the men in the story is taletelling. When the three men enter the kitchen, they observe many things and put the blame on Mrs. Wright for not keeping her kitchen in good shape. They simply overlook the responsibility of their fellow man, Mr. Wright who is supposed to fix broken things in the house. The broken stove is a vivid example. "The men go on to discover the broken stove, which they feel also illustrates Minnie's failure as a housewife" (Rodriguez, 2002, p13). They too are not different from Mr. Wright, in their way of dealing with women. "However, they choose to ignore that repairs around the house have traditionally been considered part of man 's work, therefore John Wright's inferred failure to repair the broken stove is just another unfulfillment of his marital duties" (p. 13). Right from the exposition of the play, the audience is presented the kitchen in undesirable dirty manner. The kitchen is supposed to be the territory of women. Yet, a close look at Minnie Wright's kitchen, shows the so many intrusions and repetitive attacks, if not invasions, violations of this space by John Wright. For instance, a towel in the kitchen must be clean and neat. But this is not the case here. "With regard to the stained towel, there are at least two ideas that should be considered. First, it symbolizes Mr. Wright's disrespect for his wife's world and work: coming from outside the house he entered Minnie's space to spoil one other working tool" (Rodriguez, 2002, p. 12). This disrespect for his wife is rampant in the mainstream culture they are living in. "Secondly, this could be Glaspell's way of indicating that Wright has dirty hands-metaphorically and literally speaking-which suggests his abuse may have been not only mental but also physical. As Mrs. Hale indicated: "Men's hands aren't always as clean as they might be" (Rodriguez, 2002, p. 12). The hands of men symbolize their action. So to say, men's actions (hands) are dirty and continuously stains the clean towel of women in the women territory (the kitchen). In addition, the broken stove makes cooking a headache for Mrs. Wright, but this is no business of Wright. No compassion for his wife. "That the broken stove will make

cooking harder for Minnie is further evidence of Wright's disrespect for her work and his disregard for her wellbeing" (Rodriguez, 2002, p. 13). In the same line, the fact that the couple is childless could be easily blamed on the women. This may explain many of John Wright's degrading attitudes.

3. Women: A Metaphor of Nature

3.1 *The Imposed Silence*

The goal of this set of strategies of disrespect, isolation, confinement, and others is to silence women. From a perusal of the play "We can infer that Minnie was once a gregarious, lively young woman, well taken care of by her family and accustomed to town living. How did twenty years of marriage reduce her to a depressed, shabby, hermit-like Minnie Wright?" (Schanfield, 1997, p. 73). These twenty years of marriage, farm life and constant endeavor to adjust herself to the demands of the mainstream culture have made of "Mrs. Wright, the ultimate silenced, invisible woman" (p. 70).

On top of all these, Mrs. Wright is likely to be physically abusing his wife. Schanfield (1997, p. 72) argued that "That Mr. Wright was a physical batterer is not unlikely. A particular kind of volatility resulted in the birdcage door ripped off its hinges and the bird's neck twisted and broken." This violence toward his wife is the very last act of intimidation Mr. Wright carried out. That is fatal to him. His reading of Minnie's silence equates her total weakness, impotence, and submission. This fatal failure causes him to die at the very hands of the one he thinks is weak. The killing of the bird by Mr. Wright reinforces the notion of disrespect to Nature. The life that he enjoys, is the same in both his wife and the bird. He has absolutely no power over them from the biocentric perspective of ecocriticism. Who gives him the authority to take the life of a bird he can never make? This mindset and philosophy of insolence, total unaccountability, self-sufficiency coupled with provocation has characterized the western mainstream culture for centuries. If they do not respect woman life, why would they respect animal life, and less other non-living elements of the ecosystem? Such a culture and philosophy is full of stupidity, non-sense and death. Kill Nature and find out you have committed suicide. John Wright by symbolically killing Minnie Wright and physically destroying the bird, both elements of the ecosystem, has committed suicide. One cannot destroy Nature with impunity. Sonner or later you will pay the bill.

3.2 *Ridiculing the Dominant Culture*

At the periphery there develops a culture of resistance and an alternative to the mainstream culture. The mainstream culture fails to decipher the codes of this culture almost alien to its principles. Orit Kamir (2007, p. 358), commenting on this

culture developed by women, noted that "Through dialogue, applying their own life experiences while closely reviewing the details of her oven, armchair, towel, and preserves, the women piece together Minnie's secluded, lonely, silenced life." Only the people belonging to this alternative culture are able to properly read the signs left by a peer in a given situation. "And that is exactly the function of the objects found in Minnie Wright's kitchen; they are her means of telling her "Sisters in arms" what she has gone through" (Rodriguez, 2002, p. 11). Rodriguez further explained that "people deprived of their freedom have always resorted to alternative means of communication which allow them to "contact" either with the outer world or with those in similar circumstances" (p. 11). To the dismay of the mainstream culture, it is the second-class citizens in the play that discover the evidence of the crime. "External to the official process, the women collect the evidence, analyze it, and reach their own verdict" (Kamir, 2007, p. 359). They proceed step by step. "Finding an empty birdcage and the strangled body of a treasured canary, they recognize the deceased man's dominating brutality that had triggered Minnie's desperate, violent outburst" (p. 358). Schanfield highlighted the irony of the situation. "The women discover the very evidence of rage sought by the men by "reading the female text" of their neighbor's life in the domestic areas of the house" (2007, p. 70).

After discovering the evidence there is a decision to take. The two women conceal the evidence. What motivates their decision is their identifying themselves with Mrs. Wright. Mrs. Peters, the Sheriff's wife recollected that "(in a whisper) When I was a girl – my kitten – there was a boy took a hatchet, and before my eyes – and before I could get there--(Covers her face an instant.). If they hadn't held me back I would have--(catches herself, looks upstairs where steps are heard, falters weakly)--hurt him" (Glaspell, 1916, p. 988). This episode in the life of Mrs. Peters plays a tremendous role of the taking of this decision. Besides John Wright killing the bird, the reader can see that in Mrs. Peters story, a boy also beheaded a cat. So, the men in this mainstream culture are trained to be violent on Nature and its components right from their childhood. Glaspell's evoking this episode is not innocent. It is done on purpose to show the type of society one is dealing with in the play. Compassion and guilt have also their share in concealment of the evidence. Mrs. Hale, after discovering the truth feel guilt of not assisting Mrs. Wright. She said: "I could've come. I stayed away because it weren't cheerful – and that's why I ought to have come" (p. 968). Manuel (2000, p. 63) also added that "The paradox here is that for Mrs. Hale the only crime that nobody is going to pay for is her ignorance of Minnie, her reluctance to overcome her own disgust and provide some consolation for her loneliness." The two women knows the oppression they all are going through in this mainstream culture, so they must stick together. Marina Angel (2003, p. 239) argued that "it is possible to read *Trifles* as a form of trial with the male protagonists representing the prosecution and the women the jury. The counsel for the defense is

noticeable by its absence, and it is this that pushes the women to look further than the facts." The women know that "If Minnie is judged solely on the facts of the case, she will be convicted, and the possibility that she was provoked by her husband killing her canary, and that this caused a loss of control, will most surely hang her" (p. 239). Overall, Mr. Wright reaps what he has sown. Angel (2003, p. 228) asserted that "As literary crimes, there is a satisfying poetic justice murdered: in *Trifles*, John Wright is strangled, just as (the only thing that Minnie's husband could not control)." With Nature or the ecosystem there is always poetic justice.

3.3 *The Barrenness of the Setting*

In her dealing with the Western mainstream culture absolute disrespect for women and animal life in particular, and Nature or the ecosystem on a broader scale in *Trifles*, Susan Glaspell's diction and the framing of the setting is all but accidental. First the weather and the location of an isolated farmhouse set the tone and the mood of the play. About the weather the Sheriff says that "It's just about the same. When it dropped below zero last night, I thought I'd better send Frank out this morning to make a fire for us" (Glaspell, 1916, p. 979). This is winter.

Just before winter, trees lose their leaves as they withdraw their sap into the roots, like the hibernation for animals. And there are no farming activities during winter. This implies that Mr. Wright stays home all day. Because of this, he has to endure the singing of the canary. His neighbor Mr. Hale says that what John "asked is peace and quiet" (Glaspell, 1916, p. 980). Unable to bear the singing of the bird, he brutally breaks the cage and wrings the bird's neck. This brutal killing of the bird can be interpreted as a form of disrespect for Nature. He could have simply let the bird fly away. So, it clearly shows that there is an intention to hurt his wife and teach her a lesson. The reader can also see that winter creates more tension between people as they are locked inside.

In addition, the description of the place in the exposition of the play greatly contributes to the outcome of events. Glaspell's choice of words with a strange accuracy shows the negative impact men in the mainstream culture have on Nature in their occupation of space. Words or phrases such as "the now abandoned farmhouse", "a gloomy kitchen", "a faded wallpaper", "an old-fashioned black iron stove", "an old iron sink and sink shelf", "an uncurtained window", "an old wooden rocker", "an unpainted wooden kitchen table", "unwashed pans under the sink" (p. 979) are all symptomatic of the negative energies that operate in this place. To corroborate this viewpoint, Mrs. Hale complains that "It never seemed a very cheerful place" (p. 984). She later explains that "I could've come. I stayed away because it weren't cheerful-and that's why I ought to have come. I – (*looking out left window*) – I've never liked this place. Maybe because it's down in a hollow and you don't see the road. I dunno what it is, but it's a lonesome place and always was" (p.

986). Worse still, "Unfortunately, Mrs. Wright's childlessness exacerbated her isolation and loneliness. Surprisingly, both women focus on the silence of a childless home more than the nurturing aspect of motherhood" (Schanfield, 1997, p. 74). This sterility of the Wrights is an additional proof that the oppressive philosophy of the mainstream culture is sterile, unable to bear fruits, and eventually dies.

4. The Urgent Need for Complementarity and Harmony

The western mainstream culture anthropocentric approach of superiority to Nature has brought humanity to predictable and unnecessary torments. Our desire to dominate other people leads to slavery, imperialism and colonization, wars, the holocaust, and terrorism, just to mention but a few. Our eagerness to exploit Nature for our personal profit, comfort, and pleasure regardless of the consequences has polluted our rivers, seas and oceans, our soils and air. Our extreme desire to make money leads us to change the natural food system of cows from herbivorous to carnivorous so they can grow faster and fatter. This creates mad cow disease in cows that human will eat later. Examples of counter-Nature practices resulting from the western mainstream culture are everywhere. In the light of ecocriticism, there is an urgent need to change our philosophy and mindset as far as Nature is concerned. Jim Warren (2010, p. 206) noted that "It has become more the rule than the exception among cosmetics companies to seek alternatives to testing on animals, the public demand for fur has sharply fallen." The falling of demand for fur implies loss in terms of profit, and this is the very sacrifice we must make. Cheng Xiangzhan (2010, p. 788) recommended that we should adopt a new approach to Nature. "Deep ecological conscience and awareness are spiritual conditions. With this kind of ecological spiritual awareness, we may treat anything in the universe, such as a cat, a flower, or a mountain as another subject instead of an object. "Unless we realize such awareness, the worst and the irreversible is on the way to gladly meet us. "We have to remember that what we do matters, that the world we work in as scholars, teachers, writers, and citizens is the real world, and that the *Earth*—capital E—exercises final authority" (Xiangzhan, 2010, p.772). Nature was here before mankind and it deserves our respect.

Conclusion

This article has examined how the incompetence of men in terms of reading the code of women is symptomatic of their misunderstanding of Nature in the context of *Trifles*. It has demonstrated that the disharmonizing divide between the genders is the consequence of a wrong paradigm underlying the western philosophy toward Nature. The men, in the Western mainstream culture, by imposing silence on their women, killing the animals for the profit, comfort and pleasure are

degrading Nature, which, through a boomerang mechanism, violently hits back. The death of John Wright is an example. This paper has found that the western mainstream culture anthropocentric approach in dealing with Nature is highly suicidal since it creates extreme tension between man and the other elements of the ecosystem, instead of harmony. Glaspell's *Trifles* is not only criticizing the American mainstream culture but also warns against its fatal outcomes, and advocates for change and alternatives.

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