



Zsuzsanna Benkő

Feminine Trifles

The Construction of Gender Roles in
Susan Glaspell's *Trifles* and in Modern
English and American Crime Stories

Zsuzsanna Benkő

Feminine Trifles

**The Construction of Gender Roles in Susan
Glaspell's Trifles and in Modern English and
American Crime Stories**

VDM Verlag Dr. Müller

Impressum/Imprint (nur für Deutschland/ only for Germany)

Bibliografische Information der Deutschen Nationalbibliothek: Die Deutsche Nationalbibliothek verzeichnet diese Publikation in der Deutschen Nationalbibliografie; detaillierte bibliografische Daten sind im Internet über <http://dnb.d-nb.de> abrufbar.

Alle in diesem Buch genannten Marken und Produktnamen unterliegen warenzeichen-, marken- oder patentrechtlichem Schutz bzw. sind Warenzeichen oder eingetragene Warenzeichen der jeweiligen Inhaber. Die Wiedergabe von Marken, Produktnamen, Gebrauchsnamen, Handelsnamen, Warenbezeichnungen u.s.w. in diesem Werk berechtigt auch ohne besondere Kennzeichnung nicht zu der Annahme, dass solche Namen im Sinne der Warenzeichen- und Markenschutzgesetzgebung als frei zu betrachten wären und daher von jedermann benutzt werden dürften.

Coverbild: www.purestockx.com

Verlag: VDM Verlag Dr. Müller Aktiengesellschaft & Co. KG
Dudweiler Landstr. 99, 66123 Saarbrücken, Deutschland
Telefon +49 681 9100-698, Telefax +49 681 9100-988, Email: info@vdm-verlag.de

Herstellung in Deutschland:
Schaltungsdienst Lange o.H.G., Berlin
Books on Demand GmbH, Norderstedt
Reha GmbH, Saarbrücken
Amazon Distribution GmbH, Leipzig
ISBN: 978-3-639-10945-0

Imprint (only for USA, GB)

Bibliographic information published by the Deutsche Nationalbibliothek: The Deutsche Nationalbibliothek lists this publication in the Deutsche Nationalbibliografie; detailed bibliographic data are available in the Internet at <http://dnb.d-nb.de>.

Any brand names and product names mentioned in this book are subject to trademark, brand or patent protection and are trademarks or registered trademarks of their respective holders. The use of brand names, product names, common names, trade names, product descriptions etc. even without a particular marking in this works is in no way to be construed to mean that such names may be regarded as unrestricted in respect of trademark and brand protection legislation and could thus be used by anyone.

Cover image: www.purestockx.com

Publisher:
VDM Verlag Dr. Müller Aktiengesellschaft & Co. KG
Dudweiler Landstr. 99, 66123 Saarbrücken, Germany
Phone +49 681 9100-698, Fax +49 681 9100-988, Email: info@vdm-verlag.de

Copyright © 2008 by the author and VDM Verlag Dr. Müller Aktiengesellschaft & Co. KG and licensors

All rights reserved. Saarbrücken 2008

Printed in the U.S.A.
Printed in the U.K. by (see last page)
ISBN: 978-3-639-10945-0

Table of Contents

I. Introduction	3
2. Susan Glaspell, Feminism and <i>Trifles</i>	5
2.1. Inside the 'Female Sphere'	9
2.1.1. Men in 'Womenland'	11
2.1.2. The Text of a Murderer — Perspectives and Perceptions.....	13
2.1.3. Justice Reconsidered	20
3. The Trifles of Female Detectives	25
3.1. 'The Case of the Molehill' : Trifles in Wilkie Collins's <i>The Moonstone</i>	27
3.2. Women Solving Mysteries: Jane, Tuppence and ... Hercule? Feminine Methods, Clues and 'Justices' in the Works of Agatha Christie	30
3.2.1. Feminine Methods – Conversation, Observation and Intuition	31
3.2.2. Feminine Clues – Nail Clippings, Waterlily and Ygdrasil.....	39
3.3.3. Feminine 'Justices' – The Exception Proves the Rule	43
4. Professional Female Detectives on the Screen: Jessica Fletcher, Marjorie Mallard and Mabel West	46
5. Conclusion.....	53
Acknowledgements	55
Bibliography	57

Table of Contents

I. Introduction	3
2. Susan Glaspell, Feminism and <i>Trifles</i>	5
2.1. Inside the 'Female Sphere'	9
2.1.1. Men in 'Womenland'	11
2.1.2. The Text of a Murderer — Perspectives and Perceptions.....	13
2.1.3. Justice Reconsidered	20
3. The Trifles of Female Detectives	25
3.1. 'The Case of the Molehill' : Trifles in Wilkie Collins's <i>The Moonstone</i>	27
3.2. Women Solving Mysteries: Jane, Tuppence and ... Hercule? Feminine Methods, Clues and 'Justices' in the Works of Agatha Christie	30
3.2.1. Feminine Methods – Conversation, Observation and Intuition	31
3.2.2. Feminine Clues – Nail Clippings, Waterlily and Ygdrasil.....	39
3.3.3. Feminine 'Justices' – The Exception Proves the Rule	43
4. Professional Female Detectives on the Screen: Jessica Fletcher, Marjorie Mallard and Mabel West	46
5. Conclusion.....	53
Acknowledgements	55
Bibliography	57

I. Introduction

In my work, by examining Susan Glaspell's *Trifles*, Wilkie Collins's *The Moonstone*, the crime stories of Agatha Christie, and 21st century adaptations of Miss Marple, it can be seen, that women and the concept of trifles are linked in (detective) literature. I am going to illustrate that in these crime stories female and effeminized characters are associated with definite personal characteristics, attitudes and behaviour, because of gendered stereotypes and culturally ascribed roles. The presence of the "female sphere" determines the perception and the concept of justice as well, and it sheds light on stereotypical differences between the sexes. How women and men interpret actual situations is influenced by their learned behavioural patterns that subscribe to their stereotypical roles defined by their social realities, which inherently generates presumptions and the imposition of pre-existing patterns on the other gender. In the works explored female and effeminized characters encounter and get entangled in such systems of subliminal presuppositions of behaviour, mental capacity, and perception based on gender, which, especially in detective fiction have a cardinal importance. Crime stories offer opportunity to observe gender confrontation in the issues of identifying and interpreting clues, and the questions of justice and morality. In my analysis I am going to illustrate the stereotypical gender differences that are comprehensively presented in these works, and discuss the evolution of the concept of the female detective triggered by the changes in stereotypical gender roles.

Susan Glaspell — Feminism and *Trifles*

The broader political and ideological environment of the 1900s, and the socialist-feminist communities that she frequented had enormous effect on the works of Susan Glaspell (1876–1948). She wrote her famous one-act play *Trifles* in 1916.¹ Besides experiencing the traditional role of being a wife Glaspell also met radical ideas through her husband George Cram Cook and her friend Eugene O'Neill, with whom they founded their own theatre company, the Provincetown Players. Because the community was deeply concerned with socialism and feminism, and Glaspell was also a founding member of a radical group of women activists (Heterodoxy Club²), this atmosphere rather unavoidably encouraged her to write about “female characters who desired to free themselves from the stereotypical roles into which they had been cast” (Evans). Her most famous play, *Trifles* was performed by her own company, the Provincetown Players, in which she herself played the role of Mrs Hale.³

The attention of the artists of the turn of the century generally concentrated on the mystical, on psychology and on several mental disorders, there are many paintings and writings concerning the dark side of the human mind, especially that of women (for example Charlotte Perkins Gilman's short story *The Yellow Wallpaper* depicting growing madness; or the paintings of Gustav Klimt and Aubrey Beardsley about devouring women like Salome.) This is the era of the frequent presentation of femme fatale and various murder stories in works of art, literature and theatre, as “theatre loves a good murder story: violence, passion and purpose. ... Therefore it is not surprising that contemporary dramatists should turn to murder — to murder by women — as sources for plays.” (Ben-Zvi 141). Glaspell's play *Trifles* besides joining to this mainstream phenomenon of presenting murder stories definitely has a gender-based social conflict in its centre, because “women who kill evoke fear because

¹ Glaspell later re-wrote *Trifles* as a short story, *Jury of Her Peers*. In my analysis I work with the play.

² Glaspell co-founded Heterodoxy, a group of radical women activists who forged an early feminist ideology and were prominent in the feminist movement of New York in the years 1910-1920. (Smith).

³ Susan Glaspell (1876-1948) was an American dramatist, theatre owner and producer, and novelist. On her father's side she was one of the descendants of the first settlers, and from this ancestry she inherited the experience of independence, idealism and practicality of the pioneers. After university she worked as a reporter in *Des Moines Daily Magazine*, and wrote short stories to women's magazines about the everyday Midwestern life, with its special natural regional atmosphere. She married fellow novelist George Cram Cook, and they were among the founding members of the Provincetown Players theatre group in 1915, and they wrote plays for the theatre themselves, thus giving a forum and voice for Glaspell's ideas and introducing her to new people such as Eugene O'Neill. Glaspell wrote several one-act and full-length plays for the theatre, and her play “Trifles” was first performed by the Provincetown Players in 1916, later rewritten as a short story “Jury of Her Peers” and published in 1917. After the death of her husband she continued to work as a writer, and for her play “Alison's House” she won the Pulitzer Prize for Drama in 1931. She died in 1948. (Lautner 1108., Maillakais, Evans)

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 behaviour must be aberrant, or crazed of it is to be explicable. And explicable it must be; her crime cannot be seen as societally-driven if the cultural stereotypes are to remain unchallenged.” (Ben-Zvi 141). Because Glaspell was deeply influenced by feminist ideas, the motif of the female murderer in her interpretation became interwoven with social issues concerning the status and boundaries of women in a patriarchal society. Thus one of the main themes of *Trifles* is the problematization of social boundaries, not only on the level of the female characters of the play, but also on the level of the female writer, since “... often the murderer, like the feminist [who writes the story] in her own way test society’s established boundaries.... [So *Trifles*] does more than rework the tale of murder, it reveals in the telling the lineaments of the society that spawned the crime.” (Ben-Zvi 142). Treating social boundaries as something that can be crossed leads to the questioning of the traditionally strict and unmoveable borderlines of law and justice. The social and the juridical boundaries of women thus overlap in a case of murder: “the process by which juridical attitudes toward, and prosecution of, women are shaped by societal concepts of female behaviour, the same concepts that may have motivated the act of murder.” (Ben-Zvi 144).

Susan Glaspell in her biography of her husband George Cram Cook offers a brief comment on the genesis of her play, *Trifles*. She tells that they needed a play for the Provincetown Players and her husband urged her to write one. She claimed it was based on an actual murder case she covered as a reporter of the *Des Moines Daily News*. She never provided names though, the only clue was her remark that she “never forgot going into the kitchen of a woman locked up in town” (Ben-Zvi 142). It was Linda Ben-Zvi in the 1980s, who discovered the murder case that Glaspell used as a source: the murder of a sixty-year-old farmer named John Hossack on December 2, 1900, in Indianola, Iowa. According to Ben-Zvi “Glaspell was an active participant in the case, ... she was actually a primary contributor to the shaping of public opinion about the woman being tried” (Ben-Zvi 144). However there was nothing unique about such a case in the Iowa of 1900, Glaspell filed twenty-six stories on the Hossack case “mixing fact, rumor and commentary” (Ben-Zvi 145).⁴ She was deeply influenced by the case, collected every piece of information, listened to the trial, and she was probably at the farmhouse to gather material, so no wonder that in her play *Trifles* several

⁴ Susan Glaspell reported the Hossack case from 2 December, 1900 to 13 April, 1901. (Ben-Zvi 143).

events are the same, or similar to the events of the murder case.⁵ For example the wife sleeping beside her husband while he was being killed, and that she showed no emotion when arrested and declined making any statement concerning her guilt or innocence. There are also correspondences for the rocking chair and the quilting: three pencil drawings were published in the *Des Moines Daily News* one showing Mrs. Hossack sitting in a rocking chair her head bent down, and the way Mrs. Hossack described the evening as being usual and that she "...was patching and darning..." (Ben-Zvi 149). One main thing is different though: we do not know the fate of Mrs. Wright in the play, but we know about the trial of Mrs Hossack.⁶ Margaret Hossack has been found guilty.

The question arises whether Minnie Wright would have been found guilty on the same premises? As the main evidence against Mrs. Hossack was her emotionless behaviour and her not crying on the trial, as it might have been demanded of a 'nice wife' or a 'proper female', what would one expected in the case of Minnie Wright who showed the same attitude? As Ben-Zvi remarks about Mrs. Hossack's trial, "the jury may not have been convinced that she was guilty of murder, but she certainly was guilty of questionable female behaviour.... [and] to have found such a woman innocent or to have explored the question of justifiable homicide would have been unthinkable..." (Ben-Zvi 152). Where is justice then? John Hossack, just as John Wright in the play, has been a 'pillar of the society', whose interest had to be protected — thus the idea of a 'justifiable homicide' had been out of question. An honourable member of the society could not be investigated like this, thereby the power relations of his family, his mental (and physical) abuse and the additional

⁵ The murder case is described as the following: "The case at first glance seemed simple. Some time after midnight on December 2, 199, John Hossack, a well-to-do farmer, was struck twice on the head with an axe, while he slept in bed. Margaret Hossack, his wife of thirty-three years — who was sleeping beside him — reported that a strange sound, "like two pieces of wood striking" awakened her, she jumped out of bed, went into the adjoining sitting room, saw a light shining on the wall, and heard the door to the front porch slowly closing. Only ten did she hear her husband's groans. Assembling the five of her nine children who still lived at home, she lit a lamp, re-entered the bedroom and discovered Hossack bleeding profusely, the walls and the bed sheets splattered, brain matter oozing from a five inch gash, his head crushed. One of his sons claimed that the mortally injured man was still able to speak. When he said to his father, "Well, pa, you are badly hurt," Hossack replied, "No, I'm not hurt, but I'm not feeling well." It was assumed that prowlers must have committed the crime, but when a search of the farmhouse failed to reveal any missing items, a coroner's inquest was called. Its findings were inconclusive. However, after discovering the presumed murder weapon smeared with blood under the family corn crib, and listening to reports and innuendos from neighbours, who hinted at a history of marital and family trouble, the Sheriff arrested Mrs Hossack "as a matter of precaution" (Ben-Zvi 144)

⁶ Her trial began on 1 April 1901 and the verdict of the jury found Margaret Hossack guilty as charged and sentenced her to life imprisonment at hard labour. (It is interesting that the crucial point was when it turned out that Margaret Hossack had been pregnant and given birth to a child before their marriage. This provided the jury with the impression that she was a woman who could not be trusted.) Glaspell reported the outcome but made no comment on the finding. Immediately after the trial she resigned and returned home to Davenport to begin writing fiction, so she may have never heard the final disposition of the Hossack case. A new trial was held in 1903, where the jury was unable to reach a verdict and finally Mrs Hossack was ordered released and was allowed to return to her home, her guilt or innocence still in question (Ben-Zvi 142-151.)

circumstances could not be argued. No one addressed the central issue of the motive of the murder. Where is truth then? Consequently, were Mrs. Peters and Mrs. Hale in the play right to conceal the evidences and try to avoid a trial? As at those times women were not accorded the opportunity to speak in the court, they would not be able to present their different reading of the case. Who would stand by Minnie Wright then?

The Hossack case is the 'dark past' where women were not given the chance to form the events — now Glaspell turns the situation upside down: she re-writes the story from the point of view of the (previously concealed) motive of the wife, and now women have the opportunity to shape the events.

So far we have seen that the main source of Susan Glaspell's play had been an actual murder case she had covered as a reporter, and that she was deeply influenced by socialism and feminism. The source is thus given, the main influences are given, the question is how Susan Glaspell presents them in her play. In the following chapters we are going to see the concept of the 'female sphere' in details, and how Glaspell included it and other culturally learned, stereotypical gender differences in her play, finally whether her female characters behave according to these socially constructed roles.

2.1. Inside the “Female Sphere”

Susan Glaspell's play focuses on the themes of social boundaries, gender-based differences of perception and the question of truth versus justice. It also erases highly problematic questions about the appreciation of female (emotional) intelligence, the lack of respect and mistreatment of women, as well as those aspects of marriage concerning physical and emotional isolation and dependence.

In order to deal ‘neutrally’ with generalised concepts, such as social boundaries or gender based differences, one needs to determine the nature of the ‘building blocks’ of the analysis: I would like to emphasise that in my work paper I use stereotypes and stereotypical images to present a generalised scene of the 1900s, with hierarchically ordered spheres. These spheres are gender-based and “separate” according to Linda K. Kerber⁷: there is a world for women, an inner, small, airy ‘bubble’ of domesticity, where women are “engaged in nurturant activities, focused on children, and family dependents” (Kerber 161), and there is another world of men, containing the rest (including the power to control the women’s sphere). Among other presuppositions, the metaphor of spheres, which describes women’s part in culture, even has “...a psychological foundation ...[that describes] bounded, interior spaces vs. outer spaces corresponding to the male and female principles in body construction” (Kerber 162)⁸. Thereby, — in this sense — separation and the concept of ‘the proper sphere’ of women seems well-founded, with additional ‘proofs’ from the long-lasting, subordinating traditions of the (Western and Eastern) cultures: “the separation of spheres was not limited to a single generation or a single civilization” (Kerber 171), there has always been a distinction between private and public, where “male space tends to fuse with public space, while what is left, is women’s space” (Kerber 188). Consequently women’s ‘proper sphere’ was regarded to be the private sphere, their home, separated (sometimes even physically) from the public sphere, and this “separation was generally associated with subordination, deteriorating status and the victimization of women by men” (Kerber 166). As a result of this subordination there emerged the image of stereotypical women, who was, amongst others, (but rather most importantly) obedient, since “the cardinal virtues associated with women was domesticity, piety, purity and submissiveness” (Kerber 163).

⁷ Linda K. Kerber in her essay „Separate Spheres, Female Words, Women’s Place: The Rhetoric of Women’s History”, written in 1988, explains how the concept of „female sphere” is presented in feminist writings from the 1850s to the 1980s.

⁸ Kerber refers to feminist discourses in the 1960s. Ibid.

To summarize, hypothetically there is a gender-based and hierarchically structured world of spheres where the 'female sphere' is separated and subordinate. Consequently females have to be submissive, humbly stay in their proper sphere (domesticity), and manage only their inferior affairs, everything in connection with the domestic realm, which —from the 'male point of view' — are insignificant, trifling. At this point let me turn to Susan Glaspell's play, *Trifles*.

2.1.1. Men in “Womenland”

We are going to see how the concept of separate spheres works in the play of Susan Glaspell, and how it is presented textually. In *Trifles* the Sheriff, the County Attorney, Mr Hale, Mrs. Hale and Mrs. Peters appear on the scene of the murder of John Wright. We learn that Minnie Wright, the wife, has been arrested, and while the men are searching for evidence against her, the women are left alone in the kitchen to gather some things that Mrs. Wright has asked to be taken into the prison for her. When they are gathering these items, the ladies unintentionally find clues for the motive of the murder in the kitchen.

In the play the concept of separate spheres is truly visible, not only in a theoretical, but also in the material sense. In a sense, the private (female) and public (male) duality is materialised in the actual house — the kitchen being the ‘heart of the house’, the private, stereotypically female sphere, where the female characters settle, while the other rooms represent a rather public sphere, which the male characters immediately conquer by going around the house, “snooping around” (1113) in search for clues. In the 21st century, when inviting informal guests, (and invitation evokes emotional reception), no matter how small the room is, people like gathering in the kitchen, for the very reason that it recalls the archetypal images connected to the female sphere: food stands for nurturing, sitting around the table evoke family gatherings, and the ‘female energy’, that permeates the space, liberates people from social restrictions, so they can freely speak about their emotions. The ‘women’s world’ is much smaller than the ‘men’s world’ in terms of both physical and mental expansion, and both group, the female and the male, keep the ‘rules’ of these separate spheres, they stay in their own territory: — so the ladies, as ‘well-behaved submissive creatures’ sit in the kitchen and chat about ‘insignificant’ things, while the men go round surveying the whole house and its surroundings. The conventional dichotomy of the powerful (men) and the subordinate (women) is also at work, since the Sheriff, the County Attorney and Mr. Hale behave absolutely confident, being in a ‘superior position’, thus feel at home in the house, while the women act frightened and confused. Since this is a crime scene that needs to be investigated, a male prerogative, the male characters act confidently, as their stereotypical gender roles require, showing that they are in control of the situation. These roles are also texts encoded in our minds through socialization, which cultural constructs we take for granted as biological ‘truths’, — nevertheless such biological ‘truths’ are also cultural constructs, learned patterns. Consequently, acting superior and important, the men make a general inspection of the

kitchen (in fact just look around) where the County Attorney is sure they will not find any significant pieces of evidence — for the men, the kitchen, being the subordinate women's domain, is just a storehouse of unimportant things. They are "... convinced that there was nothing important here – nothing that would point to any motive" (1112), because there is "nothing here but kitchen things" (1112). They express their opinion in a half sentence: by declaring that they do not consider "kitchen things" important, they express their view about the kitchen and its 'owner', Minnie Wright, and consequently all women in general. For the men kitchens, and what they imply, the female sphere, have nothing to do with serious matters. So they go upstairs to examine the very room in which John Wright's body has been found strangled. Meanwhile Mrs. Peters and Mrs. Hale are left alone in the kitchen, at their 'proper place'. Thus establishing the 'suitable' places for women and men in the given space, let us turn to the characters' interpretation of their own surroundings.

2.1.2. The Text of a Murderer — Different Perspectives, Different Perceptions

Susan Glaspell's play provides an illustrative example "just how gender-inflected our ability [is when it comes to reading] texts, one another, or the world at large" (Kolodny 587), how dissimilar perspectives women and men have, and how differently they perceive the same things, which is also culture-based and learned. First of all on a 'material level', they behave and act differently, as if being in two different worlds with different norms to live by both mentally and physically. In *Trifles* the gender difference is further emphasised by the stereotypical behaviour of the characters: the three men are the 'active males' — they go up, and down, go out and come back several times, 'going round their territory' in every dimension. They are energetic, they deliberately want to find clues, they are loud, dominant and self-confident from beginning to end, in spite of the fact that they cannot find anything — they represent everything that is considered to be masculine. On the other hand there is a feminine world, where Mrs. Hale and Mrs. Peters are the typical representatives of the oppressed women of a male-governed society, they are the 'passive females' — they stay in the house (mostly in the kitchen), moving only a few steps around, they are confused, shy and they are just talking silently. They have no intention to find pieces of evidence whatsoever, and even when they find something at first they are reluctant to accept its importance.

However, within the given situation, the main stress is on the "crucial importance of the sex of the interpreter" (Kolodny 460) as the "female meaning" proves to be inaccessible to "male interpretation" (Kolodny fn. 25). In spite of the fact that "men control the public authority to read (or interpret) the world, ... the male characters are incapable of adequately "reading" even the women's closest to them, because what is significant to one sex, is no so to the other" (Kolodny 588). Upon entering the kitchen of Minnie Wright, a supposed murderer, Mrs. Hale and Mrs. Peters are naturally frightened and confused, nevertheless they instantly feel and 'read' the meaning of the disorder in the kitchen both physically and mentally, where — though there are ample signs that something went terribly wrong there — the men have only noticed the mess. In interpreting a given situation, (stereotypically), men and women have different strategies, which "are learned, historically determined, and thereby necessarily gender-inflected" (Kolodny 456). Though, from a male perspective, the kitchen is just a messy room, it conveys 'worlds of meanings' to the female observer— there are many