The Caged Canary: Symbolism in Susan Glaspell's "Trifles"

Susan Glaspell's 1916 one-act play "Trifles" delves into the complexities of womanhood in the early 20th century, using the investigation of a small-town farmer's murder to explore the life of his accused killer and wife, Mrs. Wright—formerly Minnie Foster, a woman whose personal being is at the heart of the story. Through the lens of this rural murder mystery, Glaspell examines the oppressive dynamics of marriage, the marginalization of women's voices, and the quiet but fierce rebellion that can arise from years of emotional and psychological neglect. Glaspell uses Mrs. Wright, as well as the symbol of her pet canary, to effectively reflect the broader experience of many women in the Midwest during this era, illustrating their struggles. Isolation results from Mrs. Wright's home in a "hollow" land, her farm out of sight of any main roads. This isolation leads to Mrs. Wright's sense of repression, captured in her nonchalant attitude towards her husband's death. Mrs. Wright's identity as Minnie Foster is eclipsed by her role as a housewife, one which many women of that time and place experienced. The play's seemingly simple domestic setting becomes a stage for much larger societal forces that stifle women's independence and personal agency. It offers a powerful critique of the social norms that confine women to the role of a wife, often at the expense of their spirits.

Glaspell's choice to present her play entirely within the home of the Wright family serves as a commanding marker of isolation, reflecting the constrained lives of the female characters and highlighting the social forces that shape their actions and relationships. In the small, dimly lit home, two investigations are conducted. One is led by a trio of men—a lawyer, a sheriff, and a neighboring farmer—who are focused on gathering evidence to prove Mrs. Wright's guilt. The other, an informal investigation, is carried out by two neighboring women, Mrs. Hale and Mrs.

Peters. The women are tasked with collecting Mrs. Wright's personal belongings that she will receive in jail. Though both investigations mainly center around the same person—Mrs. Wright—their approaches and motivations are vastly different. The men, driven by the need to confirm Mrs. Wright's crime, approach the scene with skepticism and judgment. Her lack of emotional response to her husband's death—marked by the absence of screaming, crying, or any visible signs of distress—raises significant suspicion among the investigators, revealing societal expectations about a woman's countenance. The women, however, conduct their investigation empathetically, guided by a shared understanding of the hardships faced by women in their small town. Where the men see a disorganized house, spoiled preserves and dirty towels, the women see a scene. Through their inspection of Mrs. Wright's world, her quilting, canning, and other evidence of aspects of homemaking, they find themselves coming to terms with the events that likely led to Mr. Wright's death. And through the course of their discussions, they discover a secret box in her sewing materials, which contains the key to the story: a dead canary.

The symbol of the dead canary, often a powerful image of restriction, highlights Glaspell's genius. A bird in nature, free to fly wherever it desires, represents ultimate freedom. It exists in a world all its own, creating songs and soaring high. Through caging a once emblematic example of freedom, that natural right is stripped away, leaving the bird a mere shell of its former self. Glaspell's use of this metaphor seamlessly translates to the experience of the 20th-century Western American woman, living in a farming community. Constrained and deprived of any space for themselves, their spirits wither, leading to a slow, internal death. The image of this sort of 20th century womanhood as a dead bird reflects the stifled flight of forced domesticity and the desperate, human, need for more. Within the story, the canary serves as a perfect symbol of Minnie Foster—and by extension, the plight of women of that time and place.

In the story, Minnie Foster's struggle–the death of her spirit–created Mrs. Wright. Her pet canary, said to have been purchased from a traveling merchant, is assumed by Mrs. Hale and Peters, to have been an upbeat and song filled creature. This is not unlike that of Mrs. Wright in her youth. Mrs. Hale describes Minnie Foster as a vibrant girl, who used to love to sing in the town choir, and who "...used to wear pretty clothes and be lively when she was Minnie Foster" (Glaspell, 13). This description of Minnie's past, full of beauty and song, mirrors the canary's earlier existence. But the emphasis on Minnie Foster no longer existing parallels the bird's death, suggesting that Minnie's vitality was extinguished when she became Mrs. Wright. Mrs. Hale even says, "...come to think of it, she was kind of like a bird herself…", completely solidifying the connection between Minnie and the canary, both once full of life and song, now silenced. (Glaspell, 20).

Even the way the bird is discovered—its neck broken and its body carefully wrapped in silk—becomes a powerful symbol of Mrs. Wright's emotional state. When Mrs. Peters reacts to uncovering the bird by "suddenly put[ting] her hand to her nose", her instinctive gesture suggests that the bird has been dead for some time, its lifelessness now saturating the room (Glaspell, 20). This reaction mirrors the suffocating, oppressive atmosphere that pervades the Wright household—one where emotional vitality has been stifled, much like the bird's song. The canary's confinement and eventual death reflect the emotional confinement of Mrs. Wright, whose spirit has been choked by years of isolation. Furthermore, Mrs. Peters' comment, "Seems funny to think of a bird in here", takes on added significance when we recall that Mrs. Hale has already made a connection between Minnie Foster and a bird (Glaspell, 18). This comparison between Minnie and the bird, once free and joyful, now trapped and silenced, deepens the symbolic weight of the canary's death. The bird's fate mirrors that of Mrs. Wright's own, not the

death of her physical body, but of her spirit instead. The canary's death echoes the loss of her former cheerful identity, showcased by her lackadaisical reaction to her husband's gruesome death.

The reader understands that while the canary represents Minnie Foster/Mrs. Wright, she represents women as a whole. Through Mrs. Wright's character, Glaspell illustrates how many women of the early 20th century were similarly confined, silenced, and oppressed by the rigid expectations of homemaking and marriage. Mrs. Wright's plight is not unique but is, rather, representative of the larger societal condition of women during her era. Glaspell makes it clear that Mrs. Wright is just one of the many through her other female characters, and the camaraderie that they show her. Though Mrs. Hale and Mrs. Peters find the bird, a clear piece of evidence that could incriminate Mrs. Wright, they choose to protect her. Despite their limited knowledge of her, they feel compelled to shield her from judgment. Mrs. Hale states, "I've not seen much of her of late years", when asked if they are friends, and yet she bristles at the flippant remarks the men make, like she cares for her (Glaspell, 11). The women's shared defense of Mrs. Wright's housekeeping skills, as well as the offense they take when spoken down to by their male counterparts, illustrates the commonality of an existence like Mrs. Hales. The empathetic nature of their investigation is also indicative of their collective experience.

However, both the male and female characters in "Trifles" ultimately forsake a fair and impartial investigation, allowing personal biases, assumptions, and emotional influences to shape their conclusions. The men arrive at the scene determined to prove Mrs. Wright's guilt, and their investigation is characterized by dismissiveness and an overt disregard for any empathy or deeper understanding of the circumstances that may have influenced her actions. They focus solely on superficial details—such as the disarray of the house and Mrs. Wright's lack of visible

emotional response to her husband's death—without considering that she could be in shock, or even feeling relief, without being guilty. They also dismiss the women's findings as mere "trifles," undermining the significance of the emotional and domestic clues that the women uncover. On the other hand, the women, though more empathetic and understanding, also partake in tampering with the evidence. They conceal the dead canary, knowing it would directly incriminate Mrs. Wright, choosing instead to protect her out of a shared sense of solidarity, even though this undermines the pursuit of justice. While their motives were rooted in compassion, their actions distorted the truth by prioritizing Mrs. Wright's well-being over a fair, unbiased investigation. In this way, both groups do Mrs. Wright an injustice. The men engage in corruption through their prejudiced, incomplete investigation, while the women do so through their emotional interference. The combined effect is a "null" investigation, where neither side is able to conduct a truly objective inquiry, and the truth remains hidden under layers of personal bias and moral compromise.

This opacity surrounding the events of Mr. Wright's murder also raises several questions for the reader: Did Mrs. Wright really sleep through her husband being garroted right next to her? Could she, a small woman, have killed her farming husband? Did he kill her canary, or could she have done it out of her own disillusionment? The questions the short play raises are numerous, and the reader can only speculate. Glaspell's "Trifles" seems to call for a second act—one in which Mrs. Wright is put on trial and the truth is finally uncovered. It would be an act where her mistreatment—her isolation, repression, and loss of identity—are considered by an impartial jury. One where her guilt is not assumed from the start and where she is given the opportunity to plead her case.

Through Mrs. Wright's character, Glaspell paints a desperate portrait of the troubles faced by many women in the early 20th century, particularly those in isolated, rural communities. The gendered expectations of the time restricted women to roles defined by domesticity, while simultaneously suffocating their voices and ambitions. For Mrs. Wright, the transition from the vibrant Minnie Foster to the repressed Mrs. Wright was a gradual but suffocating process. This process was shaped by a husband who, like the oppressive social forces of the era, seemingly muted her spirit and limited her freedom. The canary—once a symbol of her joy and vitality—becomes a poignant metaphor for the emotional and psychological toll of her isolation. Its death mirrors the death of her former self, silenced and stifled by a combination of social neglect and marital repression.

Glaspell's play is a critique of the ways in which women's lives were rendered invisible and their suffering disregarded, both in their personal relationships and in the eyes of the law. The investigation, flawed on both sides, illustrates the broader societal failure to understand or acknowledge the lived experiences of the 20th-century Midwestern farmer's wife. In the end, both groups—the men and the women—fail to offer Mrs. Wright the fair and impartial investigation she deserves. Through "Trifles", Glaspell offers more than a simple rural murder mystery; she provides a window into the suffocating world of the early 20th-century Western American woman. Mrs. Wright's story is representative of the larger social conditions that marginalized women in rural America. Ultimately, the play reminds us of the importance of truth, justice, and decency, urging us to see the cages around us and encouraging us to break free of them. By shedding light on these oppressive structures, "Trifles" calls for a deeper understanding of the human need for freedom, empathy, and the recognition of one's worth beyond prescribed roles. It challenges us to look beyond surface-level judgments and consider

the deeper, often unseen forces that shape lives, especially the lives of women, whose stories have so often been overlooked.

Works Cited:

Glaspell, Susan. “Trifles” *CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform.* 1916