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The Women Characters of "Trifles"

In Susan Glaspell's one act short drama "Trifles", an investigation is being conducted into the strangling of a middle-aged man, with his wife Mrs. Wright as the primary suspect to the crime. Three men and two women are present in the proceedings: a county attorney; the sheriff and his wife Mrs. Peters; and a neighbor farmer and his wife Mrs. Hale. Throughout the play, the men are condescending toward their female counterparts and regularly discount or discard their observations about the scene and personal concerns they voice. As they gad about the property searching for clues, the audience remains with Mrs. Peters and Mrs. Hale in the kitchen and, in piecewise fashion, a successful reconstruction of the events leading up to the murder occurs. It is presumed that the two women are barely more than strangers to one another; and although they have very different relationships with the accused—one being the wife of a lawman and the other being a longtime but distant acquaintance—they quickly but cautiously build a mutual understanding of Mrs. Wright's plight and, in the final moments of the play, agree to protect her by removing condemning evidence. By the end, a significant piece to Mrs. Wright's fate is determined within a matter of minutes by two people she barely knows, and who barely know each other. This effectively produces a great deal of suspense and intrigue for the viewer.

The character Mrs. Hale is, even within her first lines, quietly asserting her suspicions about how and why the murder happened. Knowing Mrs. Wright in her youth and having a confident understanding of her person, coupled with a well harbored wariness for her husband, Mrs. Hale is on the lookout for certain kinds of evidence—almost as if she already knows what must have happened. She also feels guilty for having avoided her neighbor for so many years due to a dislike for the husband and the unwelcoming discomfort of their home. While communicating these sentiments to Mrs. Peters, Mrs. Hale gauges all of her reactions and listens closely for details about the peril of Mrs. Wright:

MRS. HALE (*abruptly moving toward her*). Mrs. Peters?

MRS. PETERS. Yes, Mrs. Hale?

MRS. HALE. Do you think she did it?

MRS. PETERS (*in a frightened voice*). Oh, I don't know.

MRS. HALE. Well, I don't think she did. Asking for an apron and her little shawl.

Worrying about her fruit.

MRS. PETERS (*starts to speak, glances up, where footsteps are heard in the room above; in a low voice*). Mr. Peters says it looks bad for her... (813-14)

The conversation leads to further information where Mrs. Peters tells that “what was needed for the case was a motive; something to show anger, or—sudden feeling” (814). As their discussions continue, Mrs. Hale carefully shares her observations about the kitchen and the house, and then searches for agreement in Mrs. Peters; she gingerly “rocks the boat” by tampering with the crime scene and then appraises her for any amount of protestation. When Mrs. Hale pulls the nervous stitching out of Mrs. Wright's quilt, Mrs. Peters initially questions her actions but does not interfere. This and similar events segue into the two of them finding evidence which would establish the motive. In a fit of conflict, Mrs. Peters attempts to hide the evidence but does not succeed. However, her action serves as the necessary concession for Mrs. Hale to hide it herself and accomplish what she had set out to do all along: come to the aid of Mrs. Wright.

Mrs. Peters is a different character in that she has a single day's association with Mrs. Wright, meeting her only after she arrived in jail. The audience learns that Mrs. Peters is a kind hearted and well natured woman, but believes very strongly about the law, upholding justice, and respecting men's business. She has accompanied her husband—the sheriff—to pick up a few requested items, such as fresh clothes and an apron. But upon witnessing the telling features of the house and conversing with Mrs. Hale she becomes increasingly concerned with Mrs. Wright's fate. When the two women discover the dead canary they soon understand it to be the incitement for the murder. Mrs. Peters begins to relate to the situation and says, “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” (818). After sharing this painful memory, Mrs. Hale responds and appeals to her further:

MRS. HALE. If there'd been years and years of nothing, then a bird to sing to you, it would be awful—still, after the bird was still.

MRS. PETERS. I know what stillness is. When we homesteaded in Dakota, and my first baby died—after he was two years old, and me with no other then— (818)

Shortly before trying and then failing to hide the canary, Mrs. Peters professes the greatness of her conflict by saying, “I know what stillness is. (*Pulling herself back.*) The law has got to punish crime, Mrs. Hale” 818. She may not have been able to hide the evidence, but she was still the one who ultimately granted aid to Mrs. Wright by overcoming her conflict long enough to make the physical attempt. This allowed Mrs. Hale to complete the task for her.

Before the discovery of the dead canary, many hints are provided about the character of the victim, Mrs. Wright's husband. In the beginning, Mrs. Hale's husband—when discussing a proposition regarding the installation of a telephone—shares that “I spoke to Wright about it once before and he put me off, saying folks talked too much anyway, and all he asked for was peace and quiet” (810). Later in the play, Mrs. Hale mentions, “I don't think a place'd be any cheerfuller for John Wright's being in it” (812). She also offers a brief explanation of what it was like to be in his presence: “But he was a hard man, Mrs. Peters. Just to pass the time of day with him—(*shivers*). Like a raw wind that gets to the bone” (816). These comments serve to reinforce two ideas with the viewer: 1) Mrs. Wright is indeed guilty of strangling her husband; and 2) when the audience considers the number of years and extent of the poor woman's binding in marriage, it becomes more difficult to maintain the opinion that the husband did not deserve such a terrible outcome.

By identifying elements of their own lives in the unhappiness found in their surroundings, and through the particular failings of their male companions to effect the law, Mrs. Peters and Mrs. Hale successfully effort to shield Mrs. Wright from receiving punishment for her actions. Her husband was both cruel and suffocating, and many elements of her life became recognizable to Mrs. Peters and Mrs. Hale. The mounting trust and understanding between these two women is impacted by the very limited amount time they have to understand the situation and one another, and then take the correct, necessary action. This provides a great amount of suspense to the story, which becomes partially resolved when the audience learns only that the real motive will never be found.