

An Analysis of Metaphor in Trifles from the Perspective of Feminism

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Abstract: Susan Glaspell's play *Trifles* is set against the backdrop of the 1910s, a period when women's rights were often neglected, and presents a feminist-awakened family murder drama. The play features women as its central characters and uses a female perspective to delicately portray the conflicts between men and women, the oppression of women in a patriarchal society, and their awakening and resistance. It reflects profound social themes and highlights the author's feminist consciousness. This article, from a feminist perspective, analyzes the use of metaphor in *Trifles*, explores its themes and writing techniques, aims to delve deeply into its literary value, and examines the dilemmas faced by women and their aspirations for gender equality through the imagery presented.

1. Introduction

1.1. Susan Glaspell and Her Works

Susan Glaspell was a noted American dramatist and prolific fiction writer who published ten novels and more than forty short-stories. Her main achievement lies in her plays rather than fiction, though she always insisted that she was a playwright by accident and that she was a novelist by profession. *Trifles* is one of her best plays and has been frequently anthologized and used as an example of structure and craftsmanship in texts on dramatic techniques. Director Pamela Gaye Walker adapted *Trifles* into a film in 2008, bringing Glaspell back into the public eye. This is undoubtedly a good fusion of literature and film art, at the same time to expand the reception of Glaspell and improve the influence of his works. In addition, the publication of Glaspell's complete plays in 2010 further affirmed her place in the history of American theatre.[1]

Glaspell's interest in practical issues is very strong, and her keen and in-depth grasp of social reality is truly amazing. Therefore, her works have formed an overall realistic style and lasting rational charm. Of course, the realism in Glaspell's plays goes far beyond mere objective descriptions of facts. By establishing the connection between reality and history, the playwright tries to discover the root of the problem, the contradiction of reality, etc. In other words, playwrights attach great importance to thinking about practical issues in a deeper and broader scope, even at the abstract level. In particular, Glaspell's female identity, the urgent need of spiritual freedom and her unique life experience provide a rich perspective for the understanding of this kind

of social problems.

Most of Glaspell's works are considered to be typical realistic dramas. These plays not only truly describe the political environment of that historical period, but also discuss the deep roots of these problems, which lay the foundation for the realism style of their overall creation. But its overtly political appeal has touched the sensitive nerves of some commentators. However, Glaspell's preference for social reality subjects, as well as that kind of inescapable regional complex, has always been criticized by critics. Some scholars believe that Glaspell too much emphasis on specific regional colors, as if there are still traces of the 19th century well-formed plays. Due to the concern of social reality, the issues discussed in his works are too narrow and lack of universal concern for human existence. In fact, we need to note that whether it is describing the stubborn conservative and strong enterprising people of the Midwest, or restoring the maverick artistic life of Greenwich Village residents, the author is investing in real and full of emotions, which also reflects Glaspell's consistent attention to the relationship between people and the environment. A particular region or environment may create a person's unique thinking habits and behavior, and the rationality of character behavior is based on the typicality of the environment, and Glaspell's creation never deviates from the grasp of this understanding. She does not superficially cater to the tastes of local audiences, but delves into the inner world of the characters in the play, combining the particularity of their real environment to highlight the complexity of their spirits and thoughts.

1.2. Feminist Drama

The feminist movement in the United States first began with the abolition of slavery in the 19th century. When women in the movement found that they were not getting the rights they deserved, they had to fight back. This wave continued into the early 20th century, culminating in women's suffrage in the United States and Britain in the 1920s. The feminist movement has made women's problem become a social issue of great concern. Unequal gender consciousness and double moral standards full of discrimination have naturally become the unavoidable themes of literary creation. Greenwich Village is considered the birthplace of the modern feminist movement, which was distinct from the traditional feminism of the early nineteenth century and from the suffrage movement of the 1920s. It has a more profound core, the pursuit of women more thorough, more comprehensive spiritual liberation. Influenced by feminism, Glaspell began to discuss many issues about women at an early age, including marriage, women's economic rights, social status, gender consciousness and women's self-consciousness.

According to Showalter's historical division of feminism, "the stage of femininity can start from the appearance of male pen names in 1840 to the death of Eliot in 1880." [2] The stage of feminism starts from 1880 to 1920 or the year when women get the right to vote. It was not until the next stage, in 1920 or after women first gained the right to vote, that feminism began to enter into self-conscious reflection. As early as in *Trifles*, Glaspell discussed the problem of female self-consciousness through the two characters of Mrs. Hale and Mrs. Peters. It can be seen that the author's thinking about female self-consciousness is obviously relatively advanced. It was only four years after *Trifles* that women won the right to vote for the first time. In later plays, Glaspell made more in-depth and detailed thinking on the pursuit of the value of women's self-existence, and turned it into a stronger resistance and breakthrough.

1.3. *Trifles*

Trifles is a masterpiece of Glaspell's theatrical reputation, and it is also the most famous of all his plays and the one that has received the most attention from critics. At that time, the play was not only very radical in ideology, but also tried to innovate in creative methods, even with some

experimental. The one-act play is short but profound, dealing with an intriguing murder case over the course of more than half an hour.

The story is based on a real murder that Glaspell covered while working as a reporter in Des Moines. Farmer John Wright was strangled to death in his bedroom bed while he slept, but his wife, Mrs Wright, who was sleeping next to him, said she knew nothing about it. She was later sent to the town jail as a suspect to await trial. At this time, five people enter Wright's house, including the farmers, Mr. And Mrs. Hale, the sheriff, Mr. And Mrs. Peters, and the country attorney Henderson, in order to gather evidence that could prove the motive for the murder. The story of *Trifles* begins with death, using it as a conduit for the hidden truth, and borrowing a lot of plot lines from detective novels. The final symbolic ending still leaves people looking forward to, and the whole play is designed to firmly grasp the audience's desire to explore the unknown. The brilliant point is that the author never gives the answer to the right and wrong, leaving all the speculation and judgment to the viewers.

The discussion of marriage problem was first seen in *Trifles*. The author believes that the tragic marriage forces Mrs. Wright to submit to the established family role, resulting in the loss of economic power and social status. While childless marriage makes women suffer from emotional loneliness, it is also a great test for the relationship between the sexes. The most prominent feature of Glaspell's female drama is that two gender relations are often involved in the discussion of gender consciousness. Glaspell not only notices the difference in gender consciousness between men and women, but also pays special attention to the relationship between women. First of all, Glaspell believes that women are generally isolated from each other because they do not have enough social activities, and the possibility of individual resistance to male hegemony is slim. Therefore, in Glaspell's plays, there is usually a "female alliance". Women gain support by sharing a common life experience, understanding each other. Women have unique experiences that men cannot understand and intervene in. Like Mrs. Hale and Mrs. Peters in *Trifles*. Mrs. Peters gratefully said that she was glad Mrs. Hale was with her, otherwise she would have been bored, showing the extreme fear of women when left alone. Glaspell discusses the problem of female self-consciousness through the two characters of Mrs. Hale and Mrs. Peters. It can be seen that the author's thinking about female self-consciousness is obviously relatively advanced. It was only four years after *Trifles* that women won the right to vote for the first time. In later plays, Glaspell made more in-depth and detailed thinking on the pursuit of the value of women's self-existence, and turned it into a stronger resistance and breakthrough.

Susan Glaspell uses "trifles" as the name of the play, ironically, to find out the motive of the murder, to uncover the mystery of the strange method of murder is women who only care about trivial matters. Meanwhile, evidence of the crime was found in the kitchen, which the men had excluded from the search. The men focused only on what they considered "important" clues, such as the condition of the crime scene, what the suspect Mrs. Wright was doing and her expression, and Mrs. Wright's reaction to Mr. Hale's visit. Search only what they think are "critical" areas, such as barns and bedrooms. In the end, nothing. Unlike the men, the women first pay attention to the details of Mrs. Wright's life such as the frozen pickle jar in the kitchen, the messy bread basket, and the dirty cupboard, from which they infer the misery of Mrs. Wright's married life condition and depressive state. Men focus on the "big things", while women focus on the little things that men call "trivial matters". The end result is ironic. Men who focus on "big things" get nothing. Women who focus on "trifles" find evidence of crime with their intuition. At the same time, they are aware of their current situation which is the foil, the accessory of men. They have nothing to say, no independence to speak of, no freedom to find. It is an indisputable fact that women are in a subordinate position in social activities. So, the women choose to hide the evidence and help Mrs. Wright get away with it.

2. The Use of Metaphor in *Trifles*

In Glaspell's dramatic world, her rich metaphorical world can never be ignored. It not only adds romance to her plays, but also makes her works break away from the simple realism category and show obvious modernist characteristics.

2.1. The "Absent" Protagonist

The absence or silence of the heroine can be said to be a major feature of Glaspell's plays. The hostess is absent in *Trifles*, but this "silent" state is precisely the achievement of the uniqueness of the structure of Glaspell's play and the depth of thought. The absence of the protagonist makes the narrative structure of this kind of drama generally adopt the form of retrospection.[3] Based on the result of a certain fact, the memory of the hero is collaged into a complete character image through the recollections of related characters.

For example, Mrs. Wright, the heroine in *Trifles*, is detained in a local prison awaiting trial at the beginning of the story, and is excluded from the whole evidence collection process from beginning to end. The playwright devised a perfect "trial absence" for the heroine. She tries to use the author's authority or control over the characters to symbolize the deprivation of women's right to speak by the male hegemony in reality, and presents the traditional female living state of forbearance and helplessness. However, this seeming "marginalization" of women does not weaken the influence of the heroine in the play, and everyone's words and deeds point to one person, that is, Mrs. Wright, the reality of not being present but making her everywhere. The playwright is deeply aware that the absence of the hero will inevitably arouse the audience's desire to explore the fate of the character. In this way, the "invisible" Mrs. Wright has become the focus of the well-deserved "void" on the stage, and its leading role is more prominent.

In *Trifles*, the role of the absence of the protagonist is to establish a "fictional authority" for traditional women through the stage. This structure avoids the subjective self-talk and personal monologue of the parties, and provides an objective language background and a relatively equal dialogue space for "other narration".[3] The women's league, represented by Mrs. Hale and Mrs. Peters, and the men's league, represented by Hale, the farmer, the country lawyer, and the sheriff, were naturally formed. In reality, it is difficult for male and female characters to form an equal dialogue relationship at the same time. The female characters in the play generally do not take the initiative to initiate the topic, and always passively answer the questions of the male characters, and the answer is very brief. In a one-act play of about half an hour, about five minutes after the opening, the female characters are almost silent. Only when the country lawyer asked Mrs. Peters to come over and warm herself, she said hesitantly, "I'm not——cold." Other than that, it's all men talking about what happened. In other words, when the male figure is present, the female voice is recessive, even silent. In order to achieve a state of balance, the playwright later arranges for the departure of the male characters. When the men go upstairs or elsewhere to investigate, the center of the stage, "kitchen", becomes the real "territory" of the two wives. At this time, they could communicate privately and speak freely. Their speech status change from silence to gradually increase, and finally occupy the main position of the stage. It can be said that the playwright gives women a right to speak through the stage, and makes explicit the "implicit" words that they can only talk about in private. On the contrary, the continuous intervention of male discourse has become "interspersed text". The playwright makes use of the intersection of the presence and absence of male characters on the stage, and realizes a special dialogue effect through the juxtaposition of light and dark two kinds of discourse.

The long-term process of "silencing" makes women suffer from "aphasia". In communication, women are more accustomed to using silence rather than vocal language to express themselves. In a

broader sense, silence is not just a symbol of the general existence of traditional women. Silence is not only a survival strategy that the oppressed are forced to choose in order to adapt to the patriarchal society, but also a unique way for them to resist male oppression. For example, the county attorney in the play, who wants to see what the women are carrying for the suspect, "The lawyer goes to the table, picks up the apron, laughs. " say, "Oh, I guess they're not very dangerous things the ladies have picked out. " "Moves a few things about, disturbing the quilt pieces which cover the box. Steps back." [4] Here, men's contempt for women's judgment, after silence has become a tactic of resistance, is instead used by the women's alliance, making it possible to cover up evidence under close male surveillance and help Mrs. Wright get off. So Mrs. Wright, who here ostensibly lost her right to a defense, is in fact granted a privilege of silence. In order to prevent Mrs. Wright's argument from falling into the misunderstanding and distortion of male discourse, the playwright obviously takes advantage of the author's authority and intentionally protects the authenticity of female discourse. In this way, men lose the object to "scribble", and it is difficult to realize the hegemony of their discourse. However, the silence that women use as a form of resistance has not become a barrier to communication between women. From *Trifle*, we find that even when the voice is threatened or "silent", the female characters can accurately convey each other's feelings. All this lies in the existence of a tacit understanding between them that goes beyond language. In the play, Mrs. Hale and Mrs. Peters often use body language or eyes to convey certain messages. For example, when the men start talking about Mrs. Wright's kitchen, the author mentions twice before and after the stage cue that "the two women moved closer together." This shows that the two women have reached a certain agreement and forged a stronger alliance. When the county attorney mentions the evidence related to the motive, "the women looked at each other quickly...", showing that the women were anxious that the evidence might be discovered by lawyers.

Furthermore, the "blank page" left by the absent heroine provides people with a variety of imagination possibilities, which reflects the unique self-writing style and rich creativity of women. Sometimes a woman's blankness and silence "is a defining act, a dangerous and risky rejection of purity," it "signifies a self-expression, because she declares herself by not writing what people want her to write." It also embodies a kind of survival wisdom of women when they resist male authority. In a sense, in a world filled with all kinds of sounds, the sound language may be pale, and the silent silence but hidden a greater language tension, a stronger desire to express. The playwright is well aware of this.

A one-act play is usually regarded as a small drama with no act, in which the whole event is completed in an independent act and the plot is relatively compact. Because of the limitation of performance time, it has high requirements for the rigor and concentration of the play, so it has its uniqueness. It is precisely because of these characteristics of the one-act play itself, it can not depict a complete life story like the multi-act play, the playwright can only reflect a part of life, one side, so the "absence" is caused by the limited space of the one-act play to some extent. "Absence" in addition to the role of attracting the audience, but also increase the mystery of the story plot. Plots relating to death always arouse people's curiosity. The deceased, the suspect, the cause of death, the motive for killing... This series of questions always make people think and guess. In *Trifles*, the audience knows the identity of the victim and the suspect from the beginning, but they do not know the motive for the murder, so the story begins with the clue of finding the evidence, and the absence of the suspect, Minnie Wright, adds more mystery to the plot.

2.2. Metaphor on Space

Space is a very important factor in Glaspell's plays. The metaphor of gender space for men and women has already been mentioned. Men have a much wider range of movement than women, and

they move around the room at will. The women, however, never set foot "upstairs" and can only "look up". Some scholars have compared the spatial codes of "up" and "down", "outside" and "inside" representing men and women respectively, and further explained that "In English, 'above' has the extended meaning of 'authority' and 'rule', 'outside' means 'broad and free', which belong to the superior space, while 'below' and 'inside' have the meaning of 'humble and inferior' and 'constraint and imprisonment' respectively, which are inferior space... The male and female in the biological sense form a corresponding relationship with the superior space and the inferior space under the careful arrangement of the author. The unbalanced occupation of the stage space by the male and female characters vividly presents the invasion of the male and the female in real life."

Glaspell also emphasizes the connection between space and the mental state of the protagonist, as well as the concepts of "isolation" and "limitation" in space. In *Trifles*, the kitchen is often presented as a typical living space for traditional women. Its clutter speaks to the protagonist's heavy housework and unstable mental state.

2.3. Metaphor on Objects

As for metaphors on objects, there are too many to mention. Every detail in *Trifles* is a clue to the truth. Mrs. Wright's kitchen is a world of feminine symbols that men will never understand, towels criticized by the village lawyer, jam cracked by freezing, needlework out of shape, canary in a cage, and even the pattern of "quilt" have their own special significance. In the names of the characters, Glaspell also has a design. For example, scholars have noted that in *Trifles*, the surname "Wright" sounds like "right" in English, which is actually a satire on what is supposed to be true.

The image of the bird and its cage is an important metaphor that reinforces the theme of *Trifles*. By using the traditional literary metaphor of the bird, song as the voice of the soul, Mrs. Hale and Mrs. Peters argue that John Wright not only killed Mrs. Wright's canary, but completely killed her spirit. Mrs. Hale describes Minnie (Mrs. Wright) before her marriage this way: "she was kind of a bird herself —real sweet and pretty, but kind of timid and— fluttery".[4] Mrs. Hale and Mrs. Peters find the bird's cage in the closet, and they realize the significance of the clue when they find the canary whose neck broken by John in Mrs. Wright's delicate little box. The bird is the embodiment of Mrs. Wright. She is caught in the trap of marriage and abused by her husband, like a bird in a cage. Mr. John strangling the canary is a metaphor for strangling Mrs. Wright.

The broken birdcage symbolizes Mrs. Wright's broken marriage.[5] On the one hand, it illustrates her unhappy marriage, on the other hand, it also symbolizes in the form of tragedy that she breaks away from the binding role of "Mrs. Right" and obtains spiritual freedom. Years of repression and abuse made her choose the path of revenge. As John had strangled the bird and her spirit, she strangled him with the rope and the knot she used in her needlework. As a village woman, her knowledge and ability are extremely limited, so the way she chooses to get freedom is also extreme, the price she pays for this is also very painful. The metaphor of the bird and the cage also applies to nineteenth-century American society. In a male-dominated society, the social roles that women "choose" are actually imposed on them by men. The cage in which they are confined is a male-dominated society, and they are the birds in the cage. Some people sleepily settle down, content with the role of "angel in the home". There are those who yearn for unfettered freedom but find it hard to find.

Another important metaphor in *Trifles* is the quilt. American women do a traditional chore, by combining small pieces of cloth of various colors and patterns, and sewing them with specific stitches to make sheets with beautiful patterns. Sometimes whole families of women or good women get together to sew, in what is called a "quilting bee". Sewing is often seen as women's responsibility, is one of the activities that best reflects the role of women in society. Thus, the quilt

in the story symbolizes Mrs. Wright's life — the hard work she had to put together her little life. It can be imagined that she spent so many years trying to put together some of the useless corners of the fabric into a neat and elegant quilt. She's been trying to create a better life, but it's not working.

Mrs. Wright is supposed to be good at sewing the quilts, so when Mrs. Hale notices that Mrs. Wright's delicate stitching was suddenly confused and not up to par, she realizes that something was wrong: "it looks as if she didn't know what she was about!" When Mr. Wright break the canary's neck, he destroys the last bit of comfort Mrs. Wright had. She is angry, confused, and her mind is no longer on the needlework at hand. Mrs. Hale and Mrs. Peters, facing the quilt in front of them, are very confused, wondering whether Mrs. Wright "was going to quilt it or just knot it". This is a highly punny statement. Because of the intense internal conflict, Mrs. Wright has to make a choice— she could either continue sewing the quilt or tie the thread. The former means that she will remain closed to her family and endure abuse, while in the latter case, "knot it" means "not it", meaning that she rejects the present state of life and takes steps to change reality.[6] When Mrs. Hale and Mrs. Peters understand Mrs. Wright's situation in the family and understand the injustice of social law and morality to her, they have more understanding and emotional resonance with her. In reply to the county attorney's question about the stitching of the quilting, Mrs. Hale replied: "We call it— knot it, Mr. Henderson." The image of the knot conveys the tying of a rope around the husband's neck. Mrs. Hale and Mrs. Peters have discovered the murderer, but they won't talk about it. Mrs. Hale's puns imply mixed feelings, including both the rejection of the two men's macho approach to the investigation of the case, and the awareness of the situation of women triggered by anger and silent resistance to gender oppression.

Ultimately, Glaspell's widespread use of metaphor stems from his questioning of the validity of the so-called "authoritative language". As a result, she needs to seek more effective ways of expression outside the language, or outside the male discourse system. Based on the connection of women's emotions and life experiences beyond language, and the characteristics of their understanding of things, Glaspell left a page full of codes for women. But some male critics took issue with Glaspell's trivial language style and what they called vulgar and overtly obvious metaphors. But we have to admit that this is what distinguishes female writers from male writers. Glaspell's bold breakthrough in language and expression techniques cannot be simply regarded as her "failure". On the contrary, only when researchers really understand the dramatic experiment can they understand its meaningful meaning. The attempts of playwrights to be ahead of their time are naturally not easily accepted by critics who hold traditional standards. The so-called "flaw" has a deeper meaning if it is understood from the perspective of women.

3. Conclusions

Feminists in the 1970s encountered Glaspell as a "prophet" when they studied her. From the perspective of the social and historical environment of the United States in the early 20th century, the clear feminist thought embodies in her works is very valuable. She has a very clear understanding of the living state and spiritual predicament of women at that time, and expresses it deeply and uniquely through her works. Her famous play *Trifles* is more often described by critics as a landmark work of early feminism. Simone de Beauvoir mentioned in *The Second Sex*, "One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman." [7] Most of the protagonists in Glaspell's plays are "new women" with independent thinking and rebellious spirit. Through the different life paths and spiritual world of such women, the author tries to explore the awakening of women's self-consciousness and the way out of self-liberation. It can be said that Glaspell is the pioneer of American female drama at the beginning of the century, and has a great influence on the writing of some female playwrights in the United States later. The study of Glaspell's drama will become a

very important link in the process of finding the writing tradition of American female playwrights, and will also contribute to the perfection of the modern and contemporary American drama history. From the perspective of its influence on European drama, especially on British drama, his works also have considerable significance for the study of contemporary European drama. Therefore, the entire history of American drama, and even the history of American literature, cannot ignore this unique landscape.

Trifles embodies the characteristics of modernism. The modernist literature ushered in two upsurges in its development in the 1920s, 1950s and 1960s. A large-scale literary movement was formed against the Western literary tradition and against the classical model. Due to the complexity of the concept of "modernism" and what it refers to, no universally accepted definition of modernism has been reached, but some consensus has been reached. There are many factions in modernist literature, and each of them has published its own literary propositions, but they all show a basic and outstanding common point, that is, anti-tradition. At that time, the play was not only very radical in ideology, but also tried to innovate in creative methods, even with some experimental. In general, the 19th century was dominated by the cult of domestic life, and the female domain was confined to the home, in which women were given the right to create a moral, orderly and comfortable paradise. In terms of feminism, *Trifles* is Susan Glaspell's most representative modernist work. The text uses fragmented language, dashes and expressionist imagery in many places, which can be understood as the representative of the mental state of the characters. Susan Glaspell not only broke with the past, but also separated herself from the rich cultural traditions of her predecessors.

Over the past 20 years, *Trifles* has become a model for women's studies in the United States and around the world. It embodies the artistic characteristics of feminism, modernism and symbolic images. From the perspective of its influence on European drama, especially on British drama, Glaspell's works also have considerable significance for the study of contemporary European drama.

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