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Murder of a Songbird

by Cristina Baica

(English 1102)

Murder seemed like the perfect revenge and escape for a woman who had everything she was and everything she loved taken from her. Every last piece of sanity vanished because of isolation and the bitter transformation from a young lady to a desolate farmhouse wife. In Susan Glaspell's play *Trifles*, Mrs. Wright (also known as Minnie Foster) took justice into her own hands and killed her husband, which was her only choice because women were treated unfairly and divorce was uncommon, her spirit was broken, and it was a guaranteed way toward her freedom. According to John F. Kanthak, a PhD candidate at Northern Illinois University, who specialized in literature, the entire play's discourse can be seen as if Glaspell's character, Minnie Foster, is on trial and by the end, the judge and jury, Mrs. Hale and Mrs. Peters decide and seal her fate (Kanthak 149). As Suzy Clarkson Holstein, author of the article "Silent Justice in a Different Key: Glaspell's *Trifles*" states, Minnie Foster was a "victim who at last retaliated against the source of her pain." How would any other woman react when seeing all that she once was and all that she once loved was being taken from her? What would any woman do if she were confined to a lonely farmhouse to do chores for a man she could no longer stand to love and live with, and could not legally get away from? Glaspell portrayed Minnie Foster as a wife who could take no more, and who had no other choice to free herself. For Minnie, the only way to become free and take her revenge was through murder because divorce was not possible and her spirit was broken.

During the late 1800's, when the play is set, women were not seen as equals when it came to power, making decisions and wealth. According to Gwendolyn L. Lewis, author of "Changes in Women's Role Participation," women assumed a number of different roles whether they chose them or not (139). Lewis stated that women assumed the role of wife, then homemaker, and then mother and at the same time, a worker around the house (Lewis 138-140). During the late nineteenth century, both single and married women were seen as unpaid laborers in the home (Lewis 137). It would be the woman's job to cook, clean, raise the children, prepare meals, and do other jobs around the house (Lewis 139). Glaspell shows this in the play when Mrs. Peters and Mrs. Hale are left in the kitchen to prepare some belongings to take to Mrs. Wright at the jail. Mrs. Peters notices a loaf of bread that was set, and Mrs. Hale notices that all of Mrs. Wright's hard work in preparing the fruit preserves was ruined and all that was left was a bottle, recalling the hard work of preparing her own (Glaspell 1050).

Even with all the hard work a woman would do, it was not uncommon for the hard work to be taken for granted. Glaspell shows this when the County Attorney says, "Dirty towels! Not much of a housekeeper, would you say ladies?" (Glaspell 1049). Mrs. Hale's character then lets the attorney know that working around a farm isn't easy and that there is much work to be done around a farmhouse. Glaspell shows the difference between men and women when Mr. Hale says, "Well, women are used to worrying over trifles" (Glaspell 1049). This also shows that the men do not even give a second thought to the things that a woman or their wife does, thinks about or has concerns over. The dialogue between Glaspell's male and female characters shows that what was seen as important to a woman, was a mere trifle in the eyes of a man, especially when compared to what the men had to worry about and concern themselves with.

The way that the men in the play speak to the women condescendingly about the observations they make concerning Minnie Foster's chores, continues to show how domineering and

high on the hierarchy pyramid the men are perched. The women could only meekly explain the reasons for their fellow woman's lack of housekeeping because of the amount of work that is required to be done around the house. When the women did this, they were accused of defending their own gender because the men did not want to admit or think that Mrs. Hale may have a point and that they shouldn't condemn Minnie for the disarray that was found in the kitchen. Kanthak raises the point that throughout their stay in the kitchen, the men dominated the discussion and decided what was important and what was not, and ultimately decided to go upstairs to the murder scene to look for real evidence (Kanthak 152). This is where, in a way, Glaspell shows that Mrs. Peters is under male control. Unlike Mrs. Hale, she defends the men's probing by saying that it's "no more than their duty" rather than defend Mrs. Wright's poor housekeeping (Glaspell 1050).

Ideally, a woman in the late 1800's would be passive, submissive, domestic and modest ("The American Woman of the Early Nineteenth Century"). Minnie Foster seemed to portray qualities of being passive, submissive, and modest, but, from the disarray of the kitchen, she might not have been quite so domestic, meaning she lacked some of the qualities a man would have wanted in a woman during that era. From Mrs. Hale's description of Minnie Foster before and after marrying John Wright, it seemed that she was subdued into a more modest, submissive and passive life under Mr. Wright's strong hold. Glaspell depicts Mrs. Hale remembering Minnie Foster as having "used to wear pretty clothes and be lively, when she was Minnie Foster, one of the town girls singing in the choir" (Glaspell 1050). All of that had changed when she married and became Mrs. Wright. There was no more singing, there were no more pretty dresses, and she became isolated in a farmhouse. She also was not allowed to have anything of her own, anything that she might love, or like. Glaspell leads the reader to think this when the dead canary is found in an old tin, and Mrs. Hale and Mrs. Peters begin to speculate as to what it could mean.

On the other hand, Mrs. Peters has all the qualities of the ideal woman, but then becomes less submissive and passive. Glaspell shows Mrs. Peters' ideal woman qualities when she defends the men's condescending comments about the trifles in the kitchen and having more important things to worry about, by saying "Of course they've got awful important things on their minds" (Glaspell 1051). By the end of the play though, she is not as submissive and passive as she once was. Mrs. Peters seems to try the limits, and even answers back to the comment that she is "married to the law," and she doesn't necessarily think of it literally (Glaspell 1055). Glaspell shows Mrs. Peter's complete transformation when Mrs. Peters tries to quickly hide the tin with the dead canary. Glaspell seems to be showing a shift in power from the men to the women in discovering a motive. This gives the women an upper hand on making the final decision to tell or not to tell the men Mrs. Wright's motive.

Because married life in the late nineteenth century was sometimes brutal and overpowering for a woman, separation was desired, but often denied and unattainable. While spousal murder was not extremely common, according to Roderick Phillips, a former Associate Professor of History at Brock University, it was the most effective way of terminating an unbearable marriage (Phillips 306). Phillips mentions that this type of murder was not very common because the convictions and prosecutions against the perpetrator were very harsh, and often the murderer would be found out (307). It was hard to hide the body of a dead spouse, and when a person would go missing, especially in a somewhat close-knit community, questions and investigations would soon follow (307). This is seen in Minnie Foster's case, because, first of all, she would not be able to remove her husband's body from the bed, and bury or hide him anywhere. Also, a fellow neighbor, who had stopped by to ask a simple question, but instead found Minnie in a strange state, discovered the murder fairly quickly. Glaspell made it hard not to be suspicious of Mrs. Wright's strange reaction to her husband being dead. It was even more suspicious because she didn't hear anything and she was sleeping beside him when he was murdered. Mrs. Wright had told Mr. Hale that she didn't hear who had killed her husband because she was sleeping "on the outside" and then she said, "I sleep sound"

when asked about not hearing anything (Glaspell 1048). Even with all of this suspicion, the men still needed to find a motive in order to be able to fully convict Minnie Foster of the murder.

Although being tried for murder, according to Holstein, Minnie Foster had served justice, and was only punishing a crime that was committed by her husband (Bendel-Simso 296). She was acting somewhat irrationally, but not without justification. From the way Glaspell depicted Minnie Foster before her marriage, and the kind of man that John Wright was, it was not surprising that his murder occurred in the way that it did. Both Mrs. Hale and Mrs. Peters begin to piece together Minnie Foster's life while gathering items to take back to her at the jail, and as they do so, they begin to uncover her motive. Mrs. Hale begins to describe Mr. Wright as being "...good; he didn't drink, and kept his word as well as most, I guess and paid his debts. 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" (Glaspell 1053). The way Glaspell describes John Wright in Mrs. Hale's dialogue is not very heart warming. Yes, he was a fairly decent man, but being a "hard" man seems to be a fairly negative quality among the rest. Glaspell shows Mr. Wright as a cold and loveless husband who was hard, unwavering and uncompromising in his ways. Mr. Wright's lack of care for his wife was also made quite clear when Mr. Hale initially went to the Wright household to see if Mr. Wright would like to go with him on a "party telephone" (Glaspell 1047). The last time he had spoken to Mr. Wright about the idea, Mr. Wright was not very convinced about the idea. He decided to try going a second time to speak to his wife, but then said that he "didn't know as what his wife wanted made much difference to John—." This shows that Mrs. Wright was not only isolated from society, but also from her own husband. She had no one to care for her or her wants and needs, yet she needed to tend to those of her husband.

This type of treatment and isolation was bound to create tension and problems within the Wright household. Often having no contact with society, neighbors, or any other adults, would increase a wife's feeling of helplessness (Lewis 139). According to Lewis, this type of isolation would cause the wife to be more predisposed to becoming irrational and affected by psychological problems. Mrs. Hale herself admits to not being there for Minnie Foster when she was in need of a friend, and that she had stopped visiting and "...stayed away because it weren't cheerful—and that's why I ought to have come. I—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" (Glaspell 1052). The setting in which Glaspell places Minnie Foster shows even more how isolated the Wrights were from society. From the Wright's home, one wouldn't be able to tell if there are other inhabitants in the area. No neighbors were visible for comfort or help when in need, and no outlet was close enough for escape. This would have added to the loneliness Minnie Foster felt beside her uncompassionate husband.

While looking for other things to take to Minnie Foster in jail, Mrs. Peters stumbles across a birdcage in a cupboard. Glaspell uses the birdcage as a memory trigger for Mrs. Hale, who remembered Minnie before being married, when she used to sing and had a pretty voice, "...kind of like a bird herself—" (Glaspell 1053). What was strange about the birdcage though, was that the door of the cage seemed to be broken by force. Glaspell manages to create uneasiness because of the state of the cage and what it could mean. When the dead canary is found as well, Mrs. Peters and Mrs. Hale begin to put Minnie Foster's motive together while also building up her defense. When the women find the bird, their dialogue can only express shock. Mrs. Hale says, "...Mrs. Peters—look at it! Its neck! Look at its neck! It's all—other side to." Mrs. Peters responds, "Somebody—wrung—its—neck" (Glaspell 1053). Both are shocked to find a bird killed in such a manner and also to find that it was wrapped in fabric and placed in a pretty box instead of being thrown out.

Glaspell's characters are not willing to say what they think or feel, but both are thinking and feeling the same thing: that they had found the evidence that their husbands were searching for to establish Minnie Foster's motive for killing her husband. The bird can easily represent Mrs. Wright from Mrs. Hale's description of her being sweet, timid, pretty and fluttery (Glaspell 1053). This

could then be represented as meaning that Mr. Wright had killed Minnie Foster first, before Minnie thought of harming her husband in return. Minnie Foster's life had slowly been taken throughout her marriage. She had her personality stripped from being full of life and happiness, to being lonely and barren. Then, when Minnie had a little piece of joy in her life, a little songbird, to remind her of old times, and the memory of who she once was, that was taken away from her as well.

After Glaspell puts all of the evidence in perspective, she shows Mrs. Peters and Mrs. Hale analyzing what they should do with the power they now wield over Minnie Foster's life. Glaspell uses the strangled canary to arouse Mrs. Peters' memory of an event that had caused her to react irrationally as well, when something dear to her was killed in front of her. Mrs. Peters describes her memory: "When I was a little girl—my kitten—there was a boy took a hatchet, and before my eyes—and before I could get there—...If they hadn't held me back I would have—...hurt him" (Glaspell 1054). Mrs. Peters admits that she may have reacted very similarly in her situation as a little girl if she would have been given the chance to punish the boy that had taken her beloved and cherished kitten from her.

Glaspell comments on how Minnie Foster had been affected by Mr. Wright being overbearing, and Mrs. Hale confirms that Mr. Wright would not have endured the bird, "—a thing that sang," and that Minnie sang also, and, "He killed that too" (Glaspell 1054). Mrs. Hale seems to begin to defend the one guilty for Mr. Wright's murder while Mrs. Peters seems to defend Mr. Wright who was murdered. Then Mrs. Peters is drawn back to her past and remembers how it is to be lonely and experience stillness after the death of something that brought joy, happiness and life. She remembers losing her two-year-old child and feeling that she had lost everything and was left with nothing and "no other" (Glaspell 1054). She begins to feel for Minnie Wright and has been converted to the other side. She is no longer defending the men and their ways, but rebelling herself, and no longer being quite so submissive and enduring of the men's taunting and overbearing attitudes. She has information that they are still searching for and she is holding the key to their case against Minnie Foster. During this moment of revelation, Glaspell seems to be commenting on how although the men may make the women feel inferior at times, the women could very well have the upper hand at times.

From all the evidence that Glaspell's characters Mrs. Hale and Mrs. Peters had collected, the men would easily have what they would need to sway the jury. The men realize that "...it's all perfectly clear except a reason for doing it. But you know juries when it comes to women. If there was some definite thing. Something to show—something to make a story about—a thing that would connect up with this strange way of doing it—" (Glaspell 1055). The motive, the story, the definite thing that is needed to build the case against Minnie Foster would be the broken birdcage and the canary with its neck wrung. This would build the perfect story of an angry and disturbed wife killing her husband for strangling her bird. This would be the reason for the strange way that John Wright was killed, by being strangled while sleeping in his bed. Normally, killing a man for a bird would not really be seen as an eye for an eye, but rather as an irrational impulse of an insane woman.

On the other hand, the motive could very well work in Minnie Foster's favor, seeing the hardships she has gone through to get to the end point. According to Bendel-Simso, while the men see John Wright's death as the opening piece to their investigation, the women see it as closure to years of mental anguish and abuse and inability to be free and alive (Bendel-Simso 293). Minnie Foster was depicted as being alive, beautiful, cheerful and full of song when she was younger and before she was married to John Wright. After she was married, Mrs. Hale noticed that she had become common, uninterested, lonely and isolated (Glaspell 1053). Mr. Wright had drained the life out of Minnie Foster and created a sorry creature that had a single love, a pet canary. She seemingly would have been happy with just the bird for her source of happiness, but John Wright would not allow even a little bird that his wife cherished and wished to keep for her sake and happiness. Mr. Hale was right in thinking that Mr. Wright wouldn't care much about what his wife thought or

wanted (Glaspell 1047). It is hard not to think that Mr. and Mrs. Wright's marriage was one-sided and that it favored Mr. Wright. The way in which John Wright had changed Minnie Foster into Mrs. Wright drove her to the edge. His actions and lack of sympathy made his wife irrational and unable to cope, and he became the catalyst to his own death. An interpretation of the evidence now against Mr. Wright would show that Glaspell might be trying to justify the murder committed by Minnie's character, by showing it as an escape.

Mrs. Wright was only defending her right to life, freedom and happiness. When she was unable to obtain a tiny piece of happiness for herself without her husband suffocating it or putting an end to it, she had to find another way. As was stated earlier, spousal murder was a measure of great distress and unhappiness within a marriage (Phillips 306). If anything, Mr. Wright was guilty for the murder of Minnie Foster, who he had condemned to a life of unhappiness and the torture and strangulation of her spirit and soul. Mr. Wright had driven his wife to hate and despise him to the point of murder that would finally put an end to her unhappiness. As Bendel-Simso pointed out, Mrs. Wright was only serving justice and had condemned a guilty man to death.

In the end, Mrs. Wright cannot be found guilty because her husband refused to be loving and fair with her, divorce was not offered to her as an option, and she was so disheartened and broken that she could no longer make a rational decision as to other choices she might have had besides murdering her husband. Because she did not feel the love and affection she needed from her husband to make the days seem shorter and less empty, she chose to have another living creature by her side, a singing canary. A bird was the only thing that might have reminded her of a better time, when she was free, colorful, and full of life and song. When her husband would not allow her to have even this tiny living, breathing piece of happiness in her life, Minnie became helpless and irrational and punished the man she came to despise, while freeing herself from her bonds to him (Holstein). Divorce was not an option; she couldn't just walk out and go to request a divorce, especially in a community where the men were those in power and they had no concerns of helping their female counterparts ("The American Woman of the Early Nineteenth Century"). Susan Glaspell's play *Trifles*, is a disturbing yet touching portrayal of a time when some wives were treated so unfairly by their husbands that they were forced to live a life of unhappiness. For Mrs. Wright, this type of life came to an end in an act of revenge and liberation.

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