

Trifles



INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF SUSAN GLASPELL

Susan Glaspell was born in 1876 and raised in rural Iowa. Despite the prevailing opinions of her community, she believed in a woman's right to education and pursued her studies, enrolling at Drake University where she excelled in the male-dominated debate competitions. After college, Glaspell worked as a journalist covering murder cases. *Trifles* is based on one case she covered; Glaspell resigned her post after seeing the woman in the case convicted of murdering her abusive husband. Through the Davenport theater group of which she was a part, Glaspell met and fell in love with the already-married George Cook. The pair moved to New York City where they joined America's first avant-garde movement alongside other artists and activists. The pair also founded the theater group the Provincetown Players on Cape Cod, and Glaspell, despite her lack of professional training, acted in several plays. She also wrote *Trifles* during this time (1916). The Provincetown Players first performed the play. Her work that followed was considered similarly groundbreaking. *Inheritors* (1921) is arguably America's first modern historical drama, and *The Verge* (1921) is among the earliest expressionist art in America. Later, the pair left behind their theater company because it had become "too successful" for the company's original innovative vision and moved to Delphi, Greece. After Cook's death in 1924, Glaspell moved back to Cape Cod and struggled with alcoholism and depression toward the end of her life. She died of pneumonia on July 27, 1948.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Feminism in the early 20th century focused primarily on practical achievements toward the attainment of legal equality, particularly the fight for women's suffrage and equal employment. This feminist movement is called First-Wave Feminism, and it introduced the issues and goals of feminism into many conversations and social circles for the first time. Political activists campaigned for women's suffrage through marches and protests, but the issues of Feminism extended into the literary and artistic spheres, as well. Susan Glaspell's work addresses larger issues of inequality than the legal agenda proposed by First-Wave Feminism. While a strong Feminist, Glaspell was interested in addressing the complexities of inequality prevalent in the home as well as the public sphere.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Susan Glaspell is often grouped with New York City's avant-

garde movement of the 1910s, America's first example of avant-garde thinking and artistic creation. The avant-garde movement created work that was particularly innovative or experimental, and that attempted to push the accepted boundaries of various art forms. Other writers in this movement, and friends and colleagues of Susan Glaspell, included Upton Sinclair who wrote *The Jungle* (1906) and *The Brass Check* (1919), Emma Goldman (anarchist writer and political activist), and John Reed (journalist who covered the Bolshevik Revolution in *Ten Days That Shook The World* (1919)). After Susan Glaspell formed the Provincetown Players, she focused primarily on this group to present her work outside of New York City. Members of the Provincetown Players included Eugene O'Neill (*Anna Christie* (1920), *Strange Interlude* (1928), and *Long Day's Journey Into Night* (1941)); Edna St. Vincent Millay (Pulitzer Prize for Poetry (1923)); and Theodore Dreiser (*Sister Carrie* (1900) and *An American Tragedy* (1925)). These writers worked in close proximity with Susan Glaspell, and so the group benefitted from mutual support and inspiration.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** *Trifles*
- **When Written:** 1916
- **Where Written:** New York City
- **When Published:** 1916 (first performance by the Provincetown Players, Massachusetts)
- **Literary Period:** Modernism
- **Genre:** Feminist Drama
- **Setting:** The Wrights' farmhouse, rural United States
- **Climax:** Mrs. Peters and Mrs. Hale discover the evidence that provides Minnie's motive for murdering her husband, John Wright.
- **Antagonist:** The patriarchal society in which the women live.

EXTRA CREDIT

Discovery of Eugene O'Neill. Although highly acclaimed in her time, Glaspell was remembered in the years after her death primarily for having discovered the great playwright Eugene O'Neill while considering scripts of new plays for the Provincetown Players Theater. The Provincetown Players first brought Eugene O'Neill's work to the attention of audiences and critics in 1916.

Reevaluation in the 1970s. In the 1970s, Glaspell's work was rediscovered and embraced by feminist critics, and, since then, her work has grown greatly in popularity and is included in numerous anthologies of American literature.



PLOT SUMMARY

The play opens on the scene of an abandoned farmhouse. The house is in disarray, with various activities interrupted, such as dishes left unwashed and bread prepared but not yet baked. Five people arrive at the house to investigate the scene of a crime, including the county attorney, George Henderson, the local sheriff, Henry Peters, and the neighbor, Lewis Hale, who discovered a murdered man, John Wright, strangled with a rope in his bed. The men are accompanied by two of their wives, Mrs. Peters and Mrs. Hale. Mr. Hale describes for the county attorney the experience of finding John Wright's dead body the previous day. He stopped by his neighbors' house to ask if they'd want to install a party line telephone. He encountered Minnie Wright sitting in her **rocking chair**, and she calmly announced that her husband was dead. Mr. Hale went upstairs to find the body, and left everything in place for the inspection of the attorney and the sheriff. Minnie claimed that she didn't wake up when her husband was strangled in their bed.

Mrs. Wright (Minnie) has been arrested for the crime and is being held until her trial. The men do not look closely around the kitchen for evidence of a motive, but discover Minnie's frozen and broken **canning jars of fruits**. Mrs. Peters and Mrs. Hale know that Minnie was worried her canning jars would explode in the cold weather, and the sheriff jokes that a woman would worry about such things while held for murder. The men criticize Minnie's poor housekeeping, as evidenced by the mess in the kitchen and **a dirty towel**.

The men go upstairs to inspect the bedroom and Mrs. Peters and Mrs. Hale collect items from the kitchen that Minnie requested be brought to her at the jail, including clothes and an apron. The women comment on the strangeness of strangling a man to death when the men had pointed out that there was a gun in the house. The women admire **a quilt** that Minnie was working on, and are wondering if she was going to finish it by "quilting" or "knotting" when the men reenter and, overhearing the women talking, joke about the women's trivial concerns at a time like this. Once again left alone by the men, the women notice that some of the stitching of the quilt is very poor, as if Minnie were nervous or upset.

The women then find a birdcage without any bird in it. Mrs. Hale expresses strong regrets having not come to visit Minnie more often, acknowledging that John Wright was a hard man and that it must have been very difficult for Minnie to be alone at her house. She recalls Minnie before she married and how cheerfully she sang in the choir. The women then uncover a beautiful red box, and in it, the **dead bird** that was missing from the birdcage, its neck broken.

When the men return, Mrs. Hale hides the box with the body of the bird. Once the men leave again, Mrs. Peters remembers a

boy who killed her childhood pet kitten, and her certainty that she would have hurt him in return if she could have. And yet, Mrs. Peters says, "the law has got to punish crime." Mrs. Hale berates herself for what she sees as her own crime of not visiting her neighbor Minnie, crying out, "who's going to punish that crime?"

The men return, and the sheriff asks if the county attorney wants to take a look at the items Mrs. Peters is bringing to Minnie at the jail. He says that Mrs. Peters doesn't need supervising and assumes the things she's taking aren't harmful. The women hide the box with the body of the bird. The county attorney jokes that at least they discovered the fate of Minnie's quilt project, and Mrs. Hale reminds him that she was planning to finish the quilt by knotting it.



CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Mrs. Peters – The wife of the sheriff. Mrs. Peters is more timid than Mrs. Hale and more aware of the responsibilities the women have to the law and to their husbands when they uncover the truth of Minnie Wright's murder of her husband. However, she is unwilling to expose the uncovered evidence to the men.

Mrs. Hale – The wife of the neighboring farmer. Mrs. Hale is wracked by guilt at not having visited Minnie Wright more often to support her through the difficulties of living with her unkind husband. She leads Mrs. Peters in their decision to conceal the evidence that would undoubtedly convict Minnie Wright of her crime.

Minnie Wright – The wife of the murdered John Wright, and his killer. Mrs. Hale remembers Minnie for her youthful innocence and happiness before she was married (when she was Minnie Foster). Back then, she sang joyfully in the local choir. But in marriage Minnie became timid, sad, and isolated. (It is interesting that even Minnie's name connects her to a sense of smallness and powerlessness: "mini".) Minnie killed her husband by strangling him in retribution for his final cruelty of killing her pet **bird**, the only being that provided happiness and company for her in the loneliness of her home and the patriarchal society that isolated her (and all women).

MINOR CHARACTERS

George Henderson – The county attorney assigned to the case of John Wright's murder. He is a young man with a self-assured attitude, confident that he'll be able to find and present the evidence against Minnie Wright, and certain of her guilt.

Henry Peters – The local sheriff who accompanies George Henderson on his investigation. Although less vocal and bombastic than Henderson, Peters is equally prejudiced

against and judgmental of women.

Lewis Hale – The neighboring farmer who discovered John Wright’s body. He recounts his tale of visiting the Wrights and describes Minnie Wright’s strange attitude as she sat in her **rocking chair** and announced the death of her husband by strangulation.

John Wright – The deceased farmer. Mrs. Hale and Mrs. Peters describe him as a good man because he did not drink and paid his debts, but a hard man. He was not considered good company, and the other women imagine the loneliness of Minnie’s life as his wife.



THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don’t have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.



SOCIAL OPPRESSION OF WOMEN

The play presents a world of strict gender roles, in which the men occupy the sphere of work while the women exist solely in the home. Yet the separation of men’s and women’s spheres is not merely one of a division of labor. Rather, *Trifles* portrays a world, dominated by men, in which social expectations and restrictions have essentially *confined* women to the home and bound them to their husbands, with little control or identity of their own. For instance, the county attorney George Henderson and the sheriff Henry Peters emphasize Minnie Wright’s role as a housekeeper, and feel free to judge her shortcomings in this area. The main characters of the play, Mrs. Hale and Mrs. Peters, are identified solely by their husbands’ last names. Minnie is the only woman in the play to get a first name, but this name only emphasizes how she is transformed by marriage, losing possession of her very self, when she marries and goes from Minnie Foster to Minnie Wright. Minnie’s situation is an extreme one, completely isolated at home and without children, but her isolation is merely a difference of degree from that of other women. Both of the other women in the play can understand Minnie’s situation because it is just an amplification of their own. While the men socialize through their work and in the world, the women are stuck at home by themselves.

But the oppression of women displayed within the play goes even further. The male dominated society does not just lock women into lonely lives and leave them dependent on their husbands. Those very men also fail to recognize their role in oppressing the women. As a result, the men belittle the women, mocking their character, intelligence, and subservience. The men laugh at the women for their emphasis on “**trifles**,” the

small needs of housekeeping and comfort, even when those things are all the men allow the women to have. The men have not only oppressed the women, they also blame the women for enjoying the only things their oppression allows them to have.

At the beginning of the play, the women too seem to accept the gender roles that oppress them as something of a natural world order. However, as the play progresses, Mrs. Hale and Mrs. Peters come to recognize that, as women, they are being oppressed (or perhaps it would be more accurate to say that they come to acknowledge what they already secretly recognized). In Minnie’s **dead bird** – a bird strangled by her husband – they see their own strangled hopes, perhaps even their own strangled lives. And in this joint recognition they find a connection between themselves and with other women, and begin, in their own quiet yet profound way, to rebel.



THE BLINDNESS OF MEN

As described in the theme on the Social Oppression of Women, *Trifles’* use of gender roles establishes the men in the sphere of work and influence and the women in the sphere of the home and trifling concerns. Yet, at the same time, the title of the play highlights the trifling concerns that the men mock, and in doing so emphasizes that the “**trifles**” that the men overlook because they are feminine concerns are in fact crucially important. Ironically, it is these “trifles” that lead the women to uncover true evidence concerning the crime, while the men are unsuccessful in finding a motive during their search of the Wrights’ house.

The importance of the trifles demonstrates the way that the men, in their power and self-importance, completely overlook the importance of women and their domestic activities. It shows how that self-importance causes the men to overlook the very thing they are searching for, and how that arrogant blindness to the lives of women weakens the men in ways they can’t even recognize.



GENDER ALLEGIANCE VS. LEGAL DUTY

Mrs. Hale and Mrs. Peters are torn between their loyalty to another woman – a loyalty born of their shared experience of social oppression – and their duty to obey the law and present the evidence they uncover. The men in the play stress the importance of legal duty, particularly reminding the sheriff’s wife Mrs. Peters, that she is, for all intents and purposes, “married to the law.” Responsibility to the law is thereby equated to responsibility to one’s husband.

The men are strongly driven by their legal duties, and this equates their power as men with the power of the law. But, of course, the men’s allegiance to the law, which they see as a moral duty, is also self-serving. It is the male dominated law that helps to make the men feel and see themselves as important,

which gives the men such power over their wives. The gender roles in this play are powerful *because* men control institutions like the legal system. Men will be the ones who rule on Minnie Wright's court case, and ultimately decide her fate.

So it is that when Mrs. Hale and Mrs. Peters hide the evidence that would condemn Minnie, their act of rebellion opposes both the power of the law and the power of their husbands. It's important to note that this rebellion is neither natural nor easy for the women. They are timid and fearful when they enter the Wrights' house, and it's clear that the gender restrictions of their society have prevented them from almost ever making independent decisions from their husbands. When the women discuss their dislike of the way the men invade, inspect, and judge Minnie's domain, the home, but then remind themselves that the men are only doing what they're supposed to do, it is as if they are playing out the way that their sense of what's right is at war with their awareness of duty, both legal and marital. Yet, ultimately, these two women elect to side with Minnie, to protect her in whatever way they can, and hide **the dead bird**. Their sense of solidarity with a fellow oppressed woman outweighs the legal duty their husbands insist on.



JUSTICE

Trifles might be described as a kind of murder mystery. Yet a murder mystery usually ends with the criminal being brought to justice, and instead in

this murder mystery it is the idea of justice itself that is complicated. In discovering **the dead bird**, Mrs. Hale and Mrs. Peters find evidence that serves as a motive for Minnie's killing of her husband but also, from their viewpoint, somewhat justifies Minnie Wright's act of murder. They understand that Minnie's act was not just a murder, but an escape. That her husband's cruel of strangling her pet bird was not the sole reason she murdered him, but rather that the act was the culmination of the social oppression and socially sanctioned loneliness that has essentially strangled Minnie herself. And they see this because they themselves have faced the same prejudice and mistreatment, as when Mrs. Hale says, "we all go through the same things—it's all just a different kind of the same thing."

Mrs. Hale also accuses herself of the crime of not having supported her neighbor, asking, "who's going to punish that?" In this moment when Mrs. Hale turns the blame on herself, the play also highlights all of the men who *aren't* blaming themselves, and how many of the men's crimes of varying magnitude will go not only unpunished but unnoticed by the male-controlled powers that be. Mrs. Hale and Mrs. Peters hide the evidence of Minnie's act because the legal system cannot fairly punish, account for, or even comprehend the vast array of crimes that have been committed against women in general and Minnie in particular.



SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.



TRIFLES

The title of the play refers to the concerns of the women in the play, which the men consider to be only "trifles." This includes such things as the **canning jars of fruit** that Minnie Wright is concerned about despite being held for murder, as well as **the quilt** and other items that Minnie asks to have brought to her at the jail. Trifles symbolize the importance of the topics and items that concern the women in the story, as these concerns provide the women with the insight to understand the motive of Minnie's crime. The men, who arrogantly assume that women's interests are "trifling" and unimportant, are blind to the importance of these items in the investigation of John Wright's murder and to the importance of women's concerns and situations in general.



CANNING JARS OF FRUIT

The canning jars of fruit represent Minnie's extreme concern over her role as wife and her household responsibilities. This concern is the product of the pressure society has placed on her as a woman and a wife, teaching her to fear the judgment of men if she does not adequately fulfill her expected role. This fear is clearly justified as the men rebuke her housekeeping abilities while also laughing at the other women's concern over **trifles**. The women are judged for both too much concern and too little concern about housekeeping. Minnie is worried that the canning jars will break and her hard work will be ruined, and in their inspection of the house Mrs. Hale and Mrs. Peters discover that this has indeed happened. Their decision to lie to Minnie and say that the jars have not broken establishes the canning jars as a symbol of Minnie's situation, her pain, and her nearly certain sentence. The canning jars are broken as Minnie feared, and this symbolizes the inevitability of her conviction. The women's decision to lie to Minnie is also the first clear example of these women's connection with another woman-in-need to the point of working against the concerns or preferences of their husbands. By the end of the play, Mrs. Hale and Mrs. Peters actively attempt to protect Minnie by concealing the evidence against her. Their instinct to protect her against the men who have judged her is first shown in their agreement to lie to her about her canning jars.



THE DIRTY TOWEL

This is one of many out-of-place objects in Minnie's kitchen that cause George Henderson to accuse

her of being a poor housekeeper. The disarray of Minnie's kitchen demonstrates a distressed mind and that Minnie's act of killing her husband was more emotional and dramatic than her demeanor indicates. In addition, the mess in the kitchen symbolizes the ways in which the men in this play expect women to fulfill certain gender roles. Minnie, not John, is held responsible for the state of the house and is seen as unfit for her role of wife, as a result. It is precisely this sort of judgment, and the fact that the men are so comfortable in judging women, that isolates Minnie in the first place.



THE QUILT

Mrs. Hale and Mrs. Peters decide to bring the quilt to Minnie in jail, another one of the **trifles** that the men believe only concern women. The quilt and Minnie's decision to finish it in one of two styles—quilting or knotting—is developed as a metaphor for her innocence or her guilt. The act of knotting a quilt is linked to the act of killing a man with a rope around his neck. The play ends with George Henderson asking the women how Minnie was going to finish the quilt. Mrs. Hale's certainty that she was going to "knot it" symbolizes the women's certainty that Minnie killed her husband. Meanwhile, the men, blinded by their arrogant inability to see the women's interest as anything but trifles, don't catch this significance at all and still think Mrs. Hale is talking about a quilt.





THE DEAD BIRD


The strangled songbird that Mrs. Hale and Mrs. Peters discover explains the motivation behind Minnie Wright's crime, but also symbolizes John Wright's abusive treatment of his wife. Minnie is linked to the bird through Mrs. Hale's memory of her as a young unmarried woman who liked to sing. Like the dead bird, Minnie was once bright and filled with life, but this energy and vitality was strangled out of her by life with John Wright, by her married life caught in a patriarchal society living with a hard man (a fact the other women understand because they experience the same thing, though to a lesser extent). The bird also symbolizes Minnie's need for companionship in her childless home, and the death of the bird showed that John not only didn't acknowledge this need but actually removed her remaining source of happiness in a cruel and brutal way.

Trifles Quotes

“Well, women are used to worrying over trifles.”

Related Characters: Lewis Hale (speaker), Mrs. Peters, Mrs. Hale, Minnie Wright

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols:  

Page Number: 9

Explanation and Analysis

George Henderson, the county attorney, accompanies Mr. Hale and Mr. Peters, and their wives, to the home of a man who was recently killed. The murdered man's wife, Mrs. Wright, has been taken into custody, and the men search the home for any evidence. They find that Mrs. Wright's hard labor of canning fruit has been ruined, as the jars have frozen and exploded in the cold weather. The women's sympathy for Mrs. Wright's ruined project draws scorn from the men. Mr. Hale dismisses their concern by stating that women "are used to worrying over trifles." This statement reveals both the attitudes of the men toward women and the social position women hold in this play.

First, the men all think of women, and the concerns of women, as inferior to men and the concerns of men ("trifles" as compared to presumably important issues). Second, the domain of women is the domestic sphere. Men fill the roles of investigators and intellectuals, while women are not expected to understand or help with the search for evidence against Mrs. Wright. Because the women have been delegated lesser roles and responsibilities, the men see "women's things" (anything related to the household) as trifles. This perspective ultimately causes these men to overlook the very evidence they need, because they immediately discount the importance of women's things and concerns. As a whole, the play shows the error in this thinking. Women's concerns, emotional abuse, and social oppression are at the heart of this story, and are not trivial at all.



“I'd hate to have men coming into my kitchen, snooping around and criticizing.” “Of course it's no more than their duty.”


Related Characters: Mrs. Peters, Lewis Hale (speaker), George Henderson, Henry Peters



QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Baker's Plays edition of *Trifles* published in 1951.

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 11



Explanation and Analysis

The men go upstairs to examine the bedroom where Mr. Wright was killed, and Mrs. Hale and Mrs. Peters are left in the kitchen. The kitchen is in a state of disarray, and the men had unfavorably commented on Mrs. Wright's housekeeping—George Henderson had picked up a dirty towel and pointed out the disorganization of the kitchen. Mrs. Hale is upset by this, and comments so to Mrs. Peters. She sees the work Mrs. Wright has put into running a farming household, because she has works hard every day herself. The men, of course, cannot appreciate this in the same way. Mrs. Hale is more explicitly critical of the men than Mrs. Peters, who often provides excuses for their behavior.

Although the women are oppressed by the strict gender roles of this setting, they cannot fully reject the roles they have been conditioned to expect. In this passage, Mrs. Hale thinks of the kitchen as belonging to Mrs. Wright and not to her husband. The kitchen is a woman's space and responsibility. Mrs. Peters, for her part, sees the men's work and duties as something she cannot question. Ultimately, the play shows the evolution of these characters when they deliberately conceal evidence in order to protect Mrs. Wright from the men. Mrs. Hale and Mrs. Peters's allegiance to another woman is an act of rebellion against the social order, something that is a challenge for both of them.

“They say it was such a—funny way to kill a man, rigging it all up like that.”
 “That’s just what Mr. Hale said. There was a gun in the house. He says that’s what he can’t understand.”

Related Characters: Mrs. Hale, Mrs. Peters (speaker), Minnie Wright, Lewis Hale, John Wright

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 13

Explanation and Analysis

Mrs. Hale and Mrs. Peters discuss the murder of John

Wright while alone in the kitchen. What is notable about this murder is the means used to kill Mr. Wright, who was strangled by a rope around the neck. This brutal method was used even though a gun—which would certainly have been quicker and more effective—was available in the house. This passage is an example of foreshadowing, as the women discuss the method of murder early in the play, emphasizing that this question will be key in understanding of the mystery of Mr. Wright's death. The men state that they're concerned with finding evidence that reveals a motive for killing John Wright, and for killing him in this unexpected way.

This passage also subtly shows the gender roles for men and women expected by this society. The women rely on any information provided by their husbands, and they believe in and trust this information (as they have no other choice). Mrs. Hale quotes her husband with the understanding that this adds authority to her words. This difference in power--men control information--is examined throughout this play. Later on, however, Mrs. Hale and Mrs. Peters withhold the information they have--the evidence they uncover gives them power and control over the situation. This is a rare experience for these woman, who are used to accepting their husbands' words as unquestionable facts.

“Mr. Henderson said coming out that what was needed for the case was a motive; something to show anger, or—sudden feeling.”

Related Characters: Mrs. Peters (speaker), George Henderson, Minnie Wright, John Wright

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 13

Explanation and Analysis

Here Mrs. Hale and Mrs. Peters foreshadow the discovery of evidence showing a motive for Mr. Wright's killing. A motive is assumed to be evidence of "anger" or "sudden feeling," which supposes that Mr. Wright was killed out of passion rather than through a cold-blooded plot. George Henderson may be indicating that he already suspects Mrs. Wright, assuming that a woman might have cause to be angry at her husband, but not assuming that a woman would kill with planning and forethought. Women are pigeonholed as creatures of instinct and emotion, rather than rational beings.

The idea of motive is an important one in a murder trial. There may be other evidence against Mrs. Wright, but an understanding of her motive would strengthen the case against her. Because the reader/audience understands this from early on in the play, it is clear that the stakes are high when Mrs. Hale and Mrs. Peters uncover just this sort of evidence.

This passage relies on a literal understanding of the word "justice": justice brought about through the legal system, in which wrong-doers are punished and innocents are set free. The legal system requires evidence of the crime and the identity of the perpetrator, such as a motive for killing. This play questions whether this is the best interpretation of justice, however. Is there always evidence for crimes that have been committed? Is the legal system capable of punishing all types of wrong-doing? This play provides counter-examples.

“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.”

Related Characters: Mrs. Hale (speaker), John Wright, Mrs. Peters

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 16

Explanation and Analysis

Mrs. Hale is critical of John Wright's character, which begins to shift the reader's opinion of the couple at the heart of this play. One has been killed and the other accused of murder. Yet, what is the true crime? One of John Wright's "crimes" was his coldness and harshness to his wife. Mrs. Hale cannot imagine being married to this man, and even imagining passing the time of day with him makes her shiver. This statement shows that John Wright was not kind, and he must have been very difficult to live with. What did Minnie Wright experience while cooped up in her isolated house with him? The metaphorical language of this passage emotionally conveys John Wright's unkindness and shares the sensation of being around him with the reader or audience. To be near him was like being in a "raw wind that gets to the bone." We can understand and relate to this unpleasant sensation, and Mrs. Hale's comment subtly turns the reader or audience against John Wright.


This comment also shows another important shift, as Mrs.

Hale starts to identify with Minnie Wright and relate to her experiences as a suffering wife. Mrs. Hale is already aligning herself with the other woman, and entering an emotional state in which she will want to defend Minnie against the cruel treatment of men. Her sympathy is the initial source of her willingness to lie to protect Minnie. She sees that John Wright is not wholly innocent, but his personality and abuses are not the concern of the legal system.

“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.”

Related Characters: Mrs. Peters (speaker)

Related Themes: 

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 19

Explanation and Analysis



When faced with the evidence that Mr. Wright killed Minnie's pet bird, Mrs. Peters explains a traumatic childhood memory of a boy who killed her pet cat. Mrs. Peters shares this experience in common with Minnie Wright, and by describing this experience, she empathizes with the suffering and pain Minnie would have felt. But Mrs. Peters also acknowledges her reactionary feelings of anger and violence. Having been hurt, she wanted to lash out in return. This shows both Mrs. Peters and the reader/audience that Minnie's reaction is natural, or at least understandable. It is clear that Mrs. Peters acknowledges the similarities between their situations as she "catches herself, looks upstairs where steps are heard, falters weakly." She is confronting the truth that she could easily have been in Minnie's shoes, with something to hide from the men searching her home.

Mrs. Peters is much more traditional and obedient than Mrs. Hale at the beginning of the play. Mrs. Hale makes several disparaging comments about the men, while Mrs. Peters refuses to criticize them. Therefore, it seems harder for Mrs. Peters to sympathize with Minnie Wright and consider protecting her even at the risk of defying her husband. Yet this is the moment when her perspective shifts. She sees herself aligned with and loyal to Minnie, rather than to the men, as both have been hurt by men in

the past.

“Oh, I wish I’d come over here once in a while! That was a crime! That was a crime! Who’s going to punish that?”

Related Characters: Mrs. Hale (speaker), Minnie Wright

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 19



Explanation and Analysis

Mrs. Hale’s sympathy for Minnie Wright shifts into personal guilt as she comes to understand how much the other woman must have suffered alone at her house without the support of friends. She knows that if Minnie Wright had had the support of other women—to complain to, to talk with, to help her feel that she wasn’t suffering alone at the hands of her husband—she might not currently be a murder suspect. Mrs. Hale could not have solved the larger problem of inequality between the genders, nor the specific problem of Mrs. Wright suffering at the hands of her husband, but she could have emotionally supported Minnie Wright.

Mrs. Hale refers to her own actions as a “crime,” and the term is repeated for emphasis in this passage. The legal system, crime, and evidence are repeatedly discussed in *Trifles*, although they are mostly used by the male characters to refer, in a limited way, to the murder of Mr. Wright and the prosecution of his murderer. Mrs. Hale shifts the definition of crime here, however. She sees her oversight as a crime, and she sees Minnie’s isolation as a crime. This reveals that many things in the world could be considered crimes that are beyond the regulation of the legal system. One reason for this is that men dominate the legal system. Only men will decide Minnie Wright’s fate through a trial, and consideration of crimes such as Minnie’s isolation won’t occur to these men or be relevant in Minnie’s case. Justice, in Mrs. Hale’s eyes, should be more broadly applied.

“We all go through the same things—it’s all just a different kind of the same thing.”

Related Characters: Mrs. Hale (speaker), Mrs. Peters, Minnie Wright

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 20

Explanation and Analysis

Mrs. Hale points out that all women have suffered isolation, mistreatment, and unhappiness because of the structure of a society that treats them as inferior to men. She speaks here in the first person plural, which includes herself and Mrs. Peters in a group with Minnie Wright. The context further implies that she uses “we” to refer to *all* women. She acknowledges that there are differences in the way women are treated from town to town and household to household, but these treatments are fundamentally the same thing. These “same things” are the products of oppression. In one case, a woman may be physically abused. In another case, a woman may be refused a job over a male candidate. In a third case, a woman may give up on friendship because her husband expects her to prioritize caring for his household over everything else. These are all “different kinds of the same thing” because they have the same cause: social oppression of a single group of people—women.

This sentence is a key turning point in the play, because it solidifies Mrs. Hale and Mrs. Peters’s “us” versus “them” thinking. These two women see their identities as women as being more important than their identities as citizens or wives. They know that women everywhere are experiencing the same mistreatment and suffering, and this outweighs their timidity and motivates them to protect Minnie Wright.

“No, Mrs. Peters doesn’t need supervising. For that matter, a sheriff’s wife is married to the law.”

Related Characters: George Henderson (speaker), Mrs. Peters, Henry Peters

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 21

Explanation and Analysis

Mrs. Hale and Mrs. Peters have selected some clothes and other items to take to Minnie Wright at the jail, and Mr. Peters asks if George Henderson would like to check through these items before they are delivered to Minnie. Henderson scoffs at the necessity of this, dismissing it for two reasons. First, he doesn’t believe that the women could be a threat simply because they are women. Henderson sees Mrs. Hale and Mrs. Peters as unintelligent and subservient. It is clear that he is not suspicious of them,


which means he does not believe them to be capable of outwitting their husbands or concealing evidence.

Second, Henderson states that Mrs. Peters in particular is above suspicion because she is married to the sheriff. A woman, of course, follows the thinking and ideals of her husband, and, as the wife of the sheriff, Mrs. Peters must be particularly law-abiding. This quote works to emphasize what is at stake for Mrs. Peters in her deception. She is deliberately acting illegally and concealing evidence, even though her husband (who, society dictates, should direct her in all things) is committed to upholding the law. Mrs. Peters has chosen loyalty to Minnie Wright over loyalty to her husband and to the law. Not only are the representatives of the law (sheriff, attorney) all male, but so will be the jury that tries Minnie Wright. The women are uniting and simultaneously thwarting both men and the law.

“Well, Henry, at least we found out that she was not going to quilt it. She was going to—what is it you call it, ladies?”
“We call it—knot it, Mr. Henderson.”

Related Characters: George Henderson, Mrs. Hale (speaker), Minnie Wright

Related Themes: 

Related Symbols: 

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Explanation and Analysis

During this loaded resolution to the play, Mrs. Hale and Mrs. Peters have concealed the dead bird that shows Minnie's Wright's motive for killing her husband. The quilt, too, shows evidence of her emotional distress in its poor stitching. The women have already discussed whether Minnie was planning to sew the quilt or knot the quilt to complete it. These two techniques take on metaphorical resonance because to "knot it" sounds like the tying of ropes, and Mr. Wright was strangled with a rope. In a subtle way, the women are revealing the truth of what happened and their knowledge of it by saying Minnie Wright was planning to "knot it." In other words, they know she killed her husband with a rope around his neck.

Notably, this question and answer are only metaphorical in the minds of the women, and George Henderson asks the question in complete naïveté. He is again mocking the women for their concern with something as trivial as the making of a quilt when there is a murder mystery to be solved. Yet it is ironic that the women have solved the mystery by paying attention to such "trifles." The question Henderson asks is exactly the right one, and he asks it of the people with the most information, but he asks it with what the reader can imagine to be a mocking and sarcastic tone. He doesn't care about Minnie Wright's quilting process--but he should. The men have the answer to the murder mystery at their fingertips, but overlook it because women's concerns seem unimportant to them.



SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

TRIFLES

The play opens on the scene of John and Minnie Wright's abandoned farmhouse. The kitchen is in disarray with unwashed dishes, a loaf of uncooked bread, and **a dirty towel** on the table. The county attorney George Henderson arrives at the house accompanied by the local sheriff Henry Peters and the neighboring farmer Lewis Hale. The wives of two of the men, Mrs. Peters and Mrs. Hale, both of whom appear disturbed and fearful, follow the men inside.

The sheriff asks Lewis Hale to describe the scene he discovered at the farmhouse the previous day. Before Mr. Hale begins, Mr. Peters reassures the attorney that nothing has been moved in the house since he saw it last, despite having sent one of his men ahead to prepare a fire. He explains that he couldn't have kept one of his men there the previous day to monitor the house because they were too busy. Mr. Peters knew George Henderson would arrive the next day for them to go over the house for evidence.

Mr. Hale tells the story of arriving at the Wrights' home the previous day. He had been hoping to convince John Wright to invest in a party line telephone with him, and thought maybe it would help to ask him in front of his wife, though he acknowledges that John paid little attention to what his wife wanted. Mr. Hale arrived at the house and found Minnie Wright sitting there in her **rocking chair**. He describes her as looking out of sorts. Mr. Hale asked to see John and Minnie told him that he couldn't because John was dead. When Mr. Hale asked what he died of, Minnie said that he died of a rope around his neck.

Mr. Hale describes calling one of his men, going upstairs and finding John Wright's body. His first instinct, he says, was to remove the rope, but his companion cautioned him to not touch anything and to preserve any evidence. Before leaving, he questioned Minnie Wright about who killed her husband. She said that despite having been sleeping in the bed with him where he was killed, she didn't wake up when it happened. The county attorney asks what Minnie did when Mr. Hale sent for the coroner to question her and Mr. Hale says she stayed quiet. But when he mentioned that he'd originally come to ask about putting in a telephone, Minnie laughed and then looked fearful.

The play establishes its themes in its opening moments. The play examines the relationships between husbands and wives, particularly a marriage that ended in murder. The setting, a messy kitchen, reflects this. The women stand together, highlighting both the way they have been pushed together by their male-dominated society but also, possibly, their loyalty to each other over their husbands, a topic explored in the play.



Lewis Hale's account establishes the dynamic between men and women in the world of the play. The men are concerned with the business of finding evidence, and George Henderson is established as the man in charge in the investigation. Mr. Hale's account shows the value placed on the word of a man. His testimony will not be questioned.



The irony of the request that brought Mr. Hale to the Wrights' house is revealed later in the play. Minnie Wright was starved for company, for the voice of any other living thing. Mr. Hale hoped to install a telephone, an object that could keep her in touch with others and combat loneliness. But he was too late, an example of situational irony. The way that John was murdered—strangled by a rope—becomes critical later in the play as the characters search for a motive for murder.



Mr. Hale's account of Minnie's response to her husband's death casts her as suspicious. Her statement that she didn't wake up when her husband was killed seems nearly impossible. Her laughter and her fearful look are also treated as suspicious behavior. The men make various assumptions about women throughout this play. One assumption is that Minnie is guilty and they try to prove this, rather than try to understand her situation and her emotions. The men are looking for facts, not context.



George Henderson asks Mr. Peters if there's anything in the kitchen that could point out any motive for killing John Wright, but the sheriff dismisses the scene as being unimportant, as being only kitchen things. The county attorney discovers that the mess comes from Minnie's **canning jars of fruit**, which have exploded. Mrs. Peters says that she knew Minnie was worried about this happening when it turned cold, and her husband laughs over a woman worrying about fruit when she's held for murder. Mr. Hale says "women are used to worrying over **trifles**."

George Henderson, looking over the mess in the kitchen and noticing in particular **the dirty towel**, says Minnie seems to be a poor housekeeper. Mrs. Hale stiffly points out that there's a lot of work to be done to keep a farmhouse running. The attorney accuses Mrs. Hale of being loyal to her own sex, or at least to her friend. But Mrs. Hale explains that she has rarely seen Minnie Wright over the last few years. She explains that she was busy, and that the Wrights' home never seemed very cheerful to her. When the attorney questions her further, she backs off of saying anything negative about John Wright.

Mr. Peters asks George Henderson if his wife can collect a few items to bring to Minnie Wright in jail and the attorney says yes, but that he'd like to see what she's taking. The men go upstairs. Mrs. Hale is upset over the men coming into Minnie's space and accusing her of being a poor housekeeper. Mrs. Peters, though, notes that the men are only doing their duty. Mrs. Peters discovers the bread Minnie Wright had left out, but had not baked. Mrs. Hale is sympathetic for Minnie's hard work on her **canning jars of fruit** having gone to waste.

The women collect some clothes for Minnie. Mrs. Hale recognizes in the clothing that Minnie had very little money for herself and that her husband, therefore, must have been particularly tight with money. She wonders if this is why Minnie kept to herself so much and didn't join in other women's activities. She remembers the lively girl Minnie used to be when she wore pretty clothes. Mrs. Peters says that Minnie also requested to have an apron brought to her, and thinks this is a funny thing to want.

The men repeatedly dismiss things as beneath their notice if they are things such as the canning jars of fruit that are, in their opinions, women's concerns. The men never recognize that they have forced the women to be concerned about these things, by not allowing them to be concerned about anything else. The men's dismissal reflects a larger mindset of devaluing women and their opinions and interests in general. Ironically, this dismissal ultimately causes the men to overlook the very evidence they seek.



Mrs. Hale's support of Minnie is an early example of the empathy the women feel for each other, which results in loyalty. Mrs. Hale knows how difficult it is to run a farmhouse, but Mr. Henderson does not. Further, while Henderson dismisses women's things as unimportant, he still feels the right and the need to judge women in their performance. Mrs. Hale sees the injustice of this (likely having experienced it herself), and so she defends Minnie against Mr. Henderson's judgment. The women are united by their common experiences and loyal to each other because the men do not even try to understand their situation.



Mrs. Hale and Mrs. Peters have slightly differing perspectives on the way the men treatment them. Mrs. Hale is more critical of the men's judgment of Minnie, whereas Mrs. Peters, as she does several other times in the play, tries to explain or dismiss the men's behavior as them doing their duty. She conforms more strongly than Mrs. Hale to the expected gender roles, and accepts more fully the idea that the men's duty is of primary importance — that the men themselves are more important than women.



The details of Minnie Wright's house reveal much about her relationship with her husband, as well as the way her marriage restricted her joy, her possessions, and isolated her. The men are blind to, and completely uncaring about, all of this contextual understanding. The apron Minnie's wants shows that she is unable to let go of her assigned responsibilities as a woman, despite the situation.



Abruptly, Mrs. Hale asks Mrs. Peters if she thinks that Minnie killed her husband. Mrs. Hale says she doesn't think that she did. Mrs. Peters whispers that her husband said that it doesn't look good for Minnie. The women acknowledge the strangeness of killing a man in the way that John Wright was murdered, strangled in his sleep. Mrs. Peters says that George Henderson said the men are looking primarily for evidence that would show a motive for killing John.

The women discover **a quilt** that Minnie Wright was in the process of making. The men reenter and, overhearing Mrs. Peters and Mrs. Hale discussing the quilt, laugh at the women for wondering about whether Minnie was planning to quilt or knot her piece to complete it. The men go out to the barn. Mrs. Hale resents that the men would laugh at them for passing the time while they wait, but Mrs. Peters attempts to excuse them, saying they must have a lot on their minds. Mrs. Hale notices that the quilt is very poorly sewn at the end, and she starts pulling out stitches to correct them. It seems to the women that Minnie must have been nervous or upset.

Mrs. Peters looks for paper or string to package up the clothes they're taking to the jail and discovers an empty birdcage in a cupboard. Mrs. Hale doesn't know whether Minnie had a bird, but remembers that she used to sing very beautifully. They wonder what happened to the bird from the empty cage. Mrs. Hale wonders if the cat got it, but Mrs. Peters knows that Minnie didn't have a cat because she doesn't like them. The women notice that the cage is broken, the door pulled roughly apart.

Mrs. Hale expresses her frustration with herself for not visiting Minnie more often in her lonely home. She says she stayed away because she didn't like the place, not because she was too busy to make the trip. Mrs. Peters attempts to console her. Mrs. Hale asks her if she knew Mr. Wright, and while the pair acknowledge him to have been a good man who didn't drink and who paid his debts, Mrs. Hale says he was a hard man. She isn't surprised that Minnie would have wanted a bird in her lonely house.

Through Mrs. Hale and Mrs. Peters' discussion, the audience or reader is allowed to see the seriousness of Minnie's situation. The discussion of a motive foreshadows the evidence the women will find, as well as establishes the importance of the evidence that they ultimately choose to conceal.



The men's rebuke for the women's focus on the quilt reinforces the ideas established through the previous scene of Mr. Henderson's criticism of Minnie's housekeeping: the men dismiss and laugh at the women, Mrs. Hale is resentful of this, and Mrs. Peters tries to excuse the men for their unkind treatment. Mrs. Hale's act of re-sewing the quilt shows both how Minnie was in some kind of emotional distress and that Mrs. Hale is willing to conceal aspects of Minnie's situation from the men.



The discovery of the birdcage introduces the concepts of imprisonment and isolation into the play. Although the bird is missing, the presence of a cage connects to Minnie's situation, isolated as she was in her husband's house. The women's discussion of the cat foreshadows the grisly fate of the bird, as both assume it met a sudden end – though the evidence suggests it wasn't a cat that killed it.



Mrs. Hale's guilt over not visiting Minnie shows that she understands, to some extent, Minnie's loneliness – even that she knew of Minnie's loneliness before these events – but that she put her own life and husband before trying to help Minnie, before showing loyalty to another woman, and now blames herself for those choices. That John Wright is characterized as “a good man” demonstrates the standards by which society judged a man. These standards did not include or consider kindness to one's wife. And these societal standards are so ingrained that even the two women accept them.



Mrs. Peters did not grow up in the neighborhood and so Mrs. Hale starts to tell her about Minnie as a girl (back when she was Minnie Foster). She says that Minnie Foster was a sweet and timid girl but changed when she married Mr. Wright into a timid and unhappy woman. Mrs. Hale suggests bringing the quilt to Minnie to distract her, and the women look for her sewing materials. As they search, Mrs. Hale notices a fancy red box, opens it, and the women discover the body of **the dead bird**.

The dead bird's neck is twisted and the women realize that someone must have wrung its neck. The men return and Mrs. Hale hides the box containing the dead bird under the quilt. George Henderson asks if they've decided whether Minnie was going to quilt or knot her **quilt**, and Mrs. Peters says they think she was going to knot it. The attorney acknowledges the birdcage and the women quickly say that they think the cat must have got the bird. The men go upstairs again.

Mrs. Peters says that she remembers a kitten she had as a young girl, and that a boy took a hatchet to it before her eyes. She says she would have hurt him if she could. Mrs. Hale says she knows John Wright must have killed **the dead bird**. Mrs. Peters, growing emotional, tries insisting that they don't know who killed John Wright. Mrs. Hale says it must have been awful to have no children, to have a bird to sing and then to have that bird be still. Mrs. Peters is transported into memory again as she recalls knowing what stillness was after her first child died.

Mrs. Peters comes to her senses and reminds Mrs. Hale that, "the law has got to punish crime." Mrs. Hale cries out in response that her failure to visit Minnie and her lack of support for the isolated girl was a crime, and "who's going to punish that?" Mrs. Hale says that she should have known Minnie needed help because all women go through "a different kind of the same thing." Mrs. Hale says they shouldn't tell Minnie that her **canning jars of fruit** broke.

Note how a woman is "transformed" by marriage: she takes on her husband's name. While symbolic, the play suggests that marriage really does transform a woman, just as Minnie's spirit and happiness were crushed by life with Wright. And as someone who essentially belonged to her husband (as her changed name indicated), Minnie was trapped, like the bird in the cage.



The dead bird is the evidence that explains Minnie's motive. Wright killed her bird – her only companion in her loneliness—and she killed him in return. More broadly, though, Mrs. Hale sees instantly that the dead bird is more than mere evidence of motive: it also shows the pattern of emotional abuse Minnie endured at Wright's hands. She instinctively hides the bird from the men (who for their part are still mocking the women for their interest in the quilt), because she knows they will see it only as evidence of motive rather than evidence of abuse, and because in light of what she now knows she feels a stronger loyalty to Minnie than to the men.



Mrs. Peters is changed by the discovery of the dead bird from the timid woman she was into a woman willing to oppose her husband. This change is presented through her story about her kitten, which shows that she too has suffered at the hands of men and identifies with Minnie's pain and rage. The women's comments about children again highlight the roles into which women were forced, and the way that the women's lives are entirely dependent on the domestic sphere.



Despite Mrs. Peter's emotional reflections, she still feels a responsibility to the law. Mrs. Hale, on the other hand, recognizes that the law, administered as it is by men, is inadequate to punish the many crimes associated with gender inequality. She universalizes Minnie's story, she sees it as just an extreme version of what she and all women have experienced. Her desire to protect Minnie, marked by her decision not to tell Minnie about the broken jars, comes from this connection.



The women then overhear the men talking as they come down the stairs. George Henderson is saying that the murder is all perfectly clear except for a motive, a reason for killing John Wright in such a strange way. The attorney says he'll stay at the house longer and go over everything again. Mr. Peters asks if he wants to look over what Mrs. Peters is taking to Minnie in jail, but the attorney says that she's trustworthy because, after all, "a sheriff's wife is married to the law."

The men leave the room momentarily and Mrs. Peters tries to hide the box with **the dead bird** in her too small bag and then Mrs. Hale conceals it in her pocket. The attorney returns and jokingly acknowledges that at least they found out Minnie wasn't going to finish her **quilt** by quilting it. He appeals to the ladies for the correct term for she was going to finish it. She was going to "knot it," Mrs. Hale says, with her hand over her pocket.

The overheard conversation of the men reemphasizes the importance of what the women have found: the one remaining piece of evidence. Mr. Henderson's decision to trust Mrs. Peters is an act of further belittlement: he does not think her capable of deception, and he believes her subject to the will of her husband, and therefore the law. He sees her, essentially, as belonging to her husband. But of course that is exactly the sort of thinking that ultimately led Minnie to murder her husband.



The women conceal the dead bird in their final unified act of defiance against the control of their husbands and the law that is made and regulated by men. The metaphor of the knotted quilt demonstrates the women's certainty that Minnie killed her husband by strangulation, an act suggested by the term "to knot." The men, meanwhile, still see the quilt as just a "trifle" and don't at all get the significance of what the women are saying. The women have rebelled, in a small way, against the men and the male-dominated society in which they live. The men remain blind.





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