

Anna VanSeveren

Dr. Egan-Ryan

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“Married to the Law:” Minnie Wright’s True Nature and the Marriage System in Glaspell’s
“Trifles”

How long can an individual stay trapped in an unjust system until they snap and force their way out of it? Many pieces of literature in the early 20th century explored this question, and Susan Glaspell’s play “Trifles” is one such example. Glaspell highlights the inequalities of marriage and the patriarchal ideas that are entrenched in the system. She does this through one of the main characters, Minnie Wright, who kills her husband after he kills her bird. Minnie Wright, while portrayed by the men in the play as a heinous murderer, is actually a lonely, isolated housewife whose actions are the product of the patriarchal, abusive, and entrapping environment she lives in. Her true nature is shown and her environment is exposed through conversations between Mrs. Peters and Mrs. Hale, comments made by the men, and the comparison between her and her bird. In part then, “Trifles” is a commentary on the binding nature of marriage in which women lose their freedoms. Glaspell explores the idea that in order for women to combat the abuses they face in marriage, they have to take extreme measures, resulting in questions about the justice of the marriage system itself.

Through the interactions between Mrs. Peters and Mrs. Hale, Minnie Wright’s true situation is revealed, one of isolation and restriction. Interestingly, Mrs. Peters and Mrs. Hale only have meaningful conversation when the men are out of the room. During one of these instances, Mrs. Hale reflects on who Minnie used to be, saying, “She used to wear pretty clothes

and be lively, when she was Minnie Foster, one of the town girls singing in the choir” (Glaspell 756). The time Mrs. Hale is referring to is before Minnie was married, before she became Mrs. Wright. Saying that she “used” to wear nice clothes gives the impression that once she got married, Minnie did not, or could not, wear the same clothes she used to; Minnie is restricted in marriage in this way. Additionally, Minnie’s temperament, according to Mrs. Hale, has also changed since her marriage. She used to “be lively,” giving the image of someone full of life and happiness. Along the same theme, Minnie used to sing in the choir, a symbol of freedom and self-expression. Ever since her marriage, then, Minnie has changed for the worse; she is now someone who is not lively and has no outlet for self-expression. Marriage is a system that is supposed to bring two people together in love and happiness, but that does not seem to be the case for Minnie, especially when one takes into account Mr. Wright’s temperament. Mrs. Hale comments, “But [Mr. Wright] was a hard man, Mrs. Peters...Like a raw wind that gets to the bone” (758). A “raw wind” is something that people shield themselves from; it is something that is harsh and unrelenting, and comparing Mr. Wright to this force of nature sheds light on what he was like before he died. The fact that the wind “gets to the bone” alludes to the idea that men try to change who women are deep down to fit their patriarchal mold. Looking further into the conversations between Mrs. Hale and Mrs. Peters, one can begin to understand how lonely and unequal marriage is for Minnie and women in general.

Mrs. Hale and Mrs. Peters also discuss life for married women, further shedding light on Minnie’s loneliness. Mrs. Hale says, “I know how things can be – for women...We live close together and we live far apart. We all go through the same things – it’s all just a different kind of the same thing” (760). While this quote works to bring a community of women together in solidarity as these two women empathize with Minnie, it also speaks to Minnie’s isolation. When

women are together, they are “close together,” as evidenced by Mrs. Hale and Mrs. Peters’ physical positions at the beginning of the play. However, women also “live far apart,” unable to help each other or ease each other’s suffering throughout their marriages, resulting in loneliness. Mr. Wright, or men in general, cannot relate to Minnie’s, or women’s, sufferings because he is the one putting her through the suffering. Therefore, when women are not together, they do not have anyone who understands them. They are kept in isolation but still know they all face “a different kind of the same thing,” which refers to the abuse from their husbands. Mrs. Peters and Mrs. Hale can understand Minnie’s struggles because they, too, have been through something similar. This empathy allows the two women to view Minnie as a whole person and see her isolation and loneliness for the tragedy it is. The conversations between Mrs. Hale and Mrs. Peters brings up questions about the system of marriage and whether or not it can be a just system when it works to keep women unhappy and lonely. Even further questions get brought up when looking at the comments made by the men in the play.

The men play a much different role in the play than the women do, one that emphasizes women’s role in a patriarchal society and further pushes them into an isolating environment. As evidenced by the previous quotes from Mrs. Hale and Mrs. Peters, the women look at Minnie’s circumstances when trying to understand her crime; the men only look at what is physically visible to them, refusing to see beyond their preconceived notions. For example, when the county attorney is looking through the Wright’s kitchen, he says, “And yet, for all their worries, what would we do without the ladies?” And in reference to Minnie’s mess, “Not much of a housekeeper, would you say, ladies?” (754). This quote is filled with a condescending and patronizing tone as the attorney refuses to see beyond the mess in the kitchen and Minnie’s apparent poor housekeeping abilities. The first part of this quote contains a backhanded insult,

saying that women have many “worries,” suggesting that they are too emotional or sensitive. Painting Minnie as “not much of a housekeeper” pushes her further into patriarchal roles because this is all the attorney sees her as. She is a housekeeper and a wife, and her complexities such as deep emotions are deemed as bad or unattractive. The environment Minnie, Mrs. Peters, and Mrs. Hale are exposed to is one in which they will not amount to anything beyond what men deem acceptable; they instead have to follow the rules and fit in the boxes men create for them.

The county attorney is not the only one who exposes patriarchal notions, though. Hale, Mrs. Hale’s husband, explains that “women are used to worrying over trifles” (754). Once again, the tone is patronizing, and Hale speaks as though the other women in the room do not exist. This action further separates the women from the men and makes them feel as though they do not belong. The use of the word “trifles” suggests that women worry over things that have little importance. If the women are concerned with “trifles,” then it could be said that they, too, have little importance beyond a man’s need. These words by the men of the play place women in an environment that traps them, and it is clear that Minnie herself suffered in this kind of isolating and constricting environment from her husband. In a sense then, Mr. Wright restricts Minnie’s freedoms, bringing to light more questions about the marriage system as law. Should a woman really be expected to be controlled by her husband and not fight back? In this play, readers and viewers get to see the ill treatment the women receive on behalf of the men, their husbands. This treatment works to let viewers or readers empathize with the women and begin to wonder whether Minnie is justified in her actions. Another way in which consumers of “Trifles” empathize with Minnie is through the comparison between her and her bird.

The comparison between Minnie and her dead bird works to highlight the loss of Minnie’s freedom while also giving her a motive to kill her husband. Mrs. Hale first makes this

comparison, saying, “[Minnie] – come to think of it, she was kind of like a bird herself – real sweet and pretty, but kind of timid and – fluttery. How – she – did – change” (758). Minnie is being spoken of here in the past tense, as if she were dead; or, at least, she is being spoken of as if this version of her is dead. Birds are representative of all of the characteristics Mrs. Hale mentions: beauty, shyness, and a kind nature. “Fluttery” is an interesting word to describe a person, though. It gives the impression that the old Minnie, before she was married, was in constant motion, always changing and evolving. Now, however, it seems as though that growth has been stunted by her husband, as Mrs. Hale is in awe of how much Minnie has changed since her youth. To Minnie, this bird acts as a companion and a distraction from her loneliness; however, Mr. Wright has killed the bird. A bird usually represents freedom and the ability to live without restriction, but a dead bird represents the death of these freedoms. With Minnie being compared to this bird, it also shows that she has no freedom and is now completely isolated. The bird comparison can further be analyzed to understand more of Minnie’s environmental situation and her justification for killing her husband.

Inherent problems within the marriage system are exposed through the comparison between Minnie and her dead songbird, giving Minnie a justified reason to kill Mr. Wright in order for her to gain her freedom back. Minnie’s abusive situation is shown when Mrs. Peters and Mrs. Hale first find the bird cage. Mrs. Peters says, “Why look at this door. It’s broke. One hinge is pulled apart.” Mrs. Hale replies, “Looks as if someone must have been rough with it” (758). Mr. Wright has already been described as a “hard man,” and this observation only proves that. If the bird is a stand-in for Minnie, given their close comparison, then the cage represents Minnie’s home or living situation. The door is the part of the cage that is broken, “one hinge” being pulled apart. A door can represent exit or entry, but on a larger scale it also represents

freedom and choices, and Mr. Wright has broken that for Minnie. Another interpretation for the broken cage could be the broken or unequal system of marriage Minnie finds herself locked inside of. As Mrs. Peters and Mrs. Hale put together the pieces of what happened, Mrs. Hale says, “No, [Mr.] Wright wouldn’t like the bird – a bird that sang. She used to sing. He killed that, too” (759). Mrs. Hale is suggesting here that Mr. Wright has also killed part of Minnie. Quite literally, Mr. Wright killed Minnie’s only form of companionship, leading to Minnie seeking revenge. However, the murder of Mr. Wright goes deeper than that. If Minnie has very little freedom in her marriage and divorce is not an option for her to get out of it, how else can she gain her freedom back but kill her husband who has caused her nothing but suffering? Yes, it is a drastic measure to take, but Mr. Wright has practically killed Minnie, who she truly is, and the killing of her bird is what made Minnie finally snap and fight back. She is justified in this act because of the inequality of the marriage system at this time. The system is beneficial to men, and only men. Glaspell explains how ridiculous these inequalities are by showing that the only way for women to get out of the patriarchal and entrapping environment of marriage is by killing their husbands.

Minnie Wright is not an unjustified murderer who lost her mind; rather, she is a lonely, isolated woman who was fed up with being held hostage by marriage. Her true nature as a kind, caring woman is shown through interactions between Mrs. Peters and Mrs. Hale, and the patriarchal environment she finds herself in is revealed through comments made by Mr. Hale and the county attorney. The justification for the murder of her husband is then shown through the comparison between Minnie and her dead bird. Like the bird, Minnie’s true self has been killed by her husband due to his “hard” temperament and the restrictions that come with marriage. Without having Minnie speak a single word throughout the play, Glaspell paints a picture of an

abused, lonely woman who wants to be free. This depiction is perhaps representative of how many women felt during this time. They were actually freer as single women than as married women, but the patriarchal norms of the time led them to believe otherwise. With such inequalities, the marriage system Glaspell describes in her play is broken, and in order for Minnie to break free, she has to go to the extreme.

Works Cited

Glaspell, Susan. “Trifles.” *The Norton Anthology of American Literature*, by Robert S. Levine et al., 9th ed., W.W. Norton & Company, 2017, pp. 751–761.