Freedom and Marriage in Glaspell’s *Trifles*

Characters in Susan Glaspell’s play *Trifles* separate along gender lines definitively in step with the social distinctions between men and women that were coming under fire by the 1920s. While this was likely a hot issue for audiences when the play was first performed, the developing subtext of gender issues is distanced from the conscious mind of participants through the vehicle of setting, which places events in the rural backcountry of the Midwest. This setting, in the house of one farmer’s wife, Mrs. Minnie Wright, nonetheless provides a spark that strongly kindles the cosmopolitan views recently ushered into mainstream culture by the passage of women’s suffrage into US law in 1919.

The nature of duty is brought into question and juxtaposed with a question of comfort. The heating stove has been lit by the sheriff’s deputy as instructed in an order for which Mr. Peters does not apologize, despite the obvious potential for loss of evidence in the investigation that has brought him to the farm house. Including attorney Henderson, these important men are more concerned with comfort than duty. These men represent a traditional complacency and one-sided concern for the comfort and happiness of the male gender in accepted routines of most contemporary marriages. The marriage of Mr. and Mrs. Wright becomes a vessel encapsulating this and other traditional views of marriage as the scene progresses. Ironically, John Wright is never invoked by any
character as ‘Mr. Wright’—a wry implication that the undertones of this play concern the changing values of married life.

Mrs. Peters and the neighbor Mrs. Hale develop their own conversation and search for evidence of what happened between the Wright couple that is no more. They become concerned with the feelings and emotions of Minnie Wright, to whom they consistently refer using her maiden name of Foster. There is a progression of realizations by the women present as to the state of mind of Minnie Foster leading up to her husband’s death. In contrast, Mr. Hale cannot convince himself that Minnie was scared when he saw her after the killing; the attorney Mr. Henderson twice guides conversation away from guesses as to the emotional state of Mrs. Wright, although the search for motive of any possible killer is his primary objective. The women build consensus that she must have been nervous because her stitching is so disordered. For them, there is a patina of significance over every item in the house that they touch. The women are accustomed to making sense of details and determining motive with very little material evidence. This gift may be due in part to experience they bring with them from their own married lives, which may have required interpretation of their husbands’ suppressed or unexpressed emotions.

In fact, while the attorney and sheriff search for motive in vain, the women in essence try and prove the case that Mr. Henderson believes he will direct in the courtroom. The women prove to be better judges regarding emotional aspects of the case; by extension, they are also more apt to interpret these issues as they play out in disagreements between the values of traditional marriage and burgeoning freedom as equal individuals in the view of society. The women are awakening to their freedom
when they find the broken birdcage and lonely dead bird and take it upon themselves to
decide Minnie Foster’s state of mind as justification for her hanging John Wright. The
death of John Wright is freedom from him for Minnie, and understanding her motive is
freedom for the women searching for her story. The parallel to marital values is that
options for a woman to free herself from an unhappy marriage were not considered
positive under any circumstances. Even in the 1950s, divorce was not considered an
option for most women, to say nothing of the 1920s. Glaspell follows the protocol of her
time and does not make the play a discussion of divorce—which might nonetheless have
presented positive outcomes for Mrs. Wright in the long run against the better judgment
of current social consciousness. Minnie’s killing her husband, however, makes this play
a narrative about women’s freedom to act in opposition to values of their time that limit
them rather than their freedom from marriage or the values themselves. Minnie Foster
may be convicted for murdering her husband if her state of mind is not revealed. Such a
conviction in the 1920s would have been an even greater rarity than a successful divorce.
For audiences of the time, the suppression of divorce as an option puts it into a more
realistic perspective, while lending the play characteristic qualities of tragedy. Such an
interpretation also proves the playwright’s own effort to be an effective act against the
values continuing to limit women’s freedom in her society.

The dead bird is an analogy for Mrs. Wright’s lost freedom. She is now
imprisoned in a jail as the men and women fuss and discuss her life in the small house
somewhat like an informal chorus perpetrating deus ex machina. In some sense, this
social intervention into her home reveals that she is freer now that her marriage is
ended—this cage, like her canary’s, is broken. Mrs. Wright wrung the neck of her
husband just as he had strangled the bird after tearing open the cage. Murder was her action on behalf of justice as she perceived it. While the cage symbolic of her marriage was already broken by her husband, Minnie broke free of his restrictions by killing him. The women’s words and actions lead the audience to uncover with them the lonely truth of an unhappy home and a husband tragically wrong for Minnie Foster. The women holding back their understanding and the evidence they find from the men and the law are following Foster’s example of a woman maintaining her power in a situation which otherwise offers none.