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**THE CASE OF THE BATTERED WIFE:
SUSAN GLASPELL'S "TRIFLES" AND "A JURY OF HER PEERS"**

By Lillian Schanfield¹

The focal character in Susan Glaspell's 1916 play "Trifles"² and subsequent short story, "A Jury of Her Peers,"³ is a woman under arrest for the bizarre strangulation of her sleeping husband. Although she has often been referred to as disturbed and abused, there has been little speculation about the nature of her mental condition or the types of abusive behaviors that she experienced in her marriage. This paper regards "Trifles" and "A Jury of Her Peers" as a unit because the issue of the abuse of power, the overall characterization, and the gender polarization are identical in both. This paper will suggest that domestic violence discourse may facilitate an understanding of her psychological state, her marriage, and her motivation for homicide. Although it will stop short of labelling her condition the "battered woman syndrome," this approach will suggest that looking at her situation in terms of battery helps, as one character in the story muses, to "see through a thing to something else."⁴

In spite of these works' proto-feminism, earlier criticism has focused on their unusual affiliation with the amateur detective genre. After all, the works had the requisite elements: a murder, a suspect, clues and sleuthing. A simplistic psychological premise for the murder generally seemed to be that the crime was carried out by a wife crazed by rage in retaliation for her husband's strangulation of her pet bird. Glaspell's inconclusive ending left open the possibility that Mrs. Wright, the focal character, may have gotten away with murder. This intriguing

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² Susan Glaspell, *Trifles*, THE NORTON ANTHOLOGY OF LITERATURE BY WOMEN: THE TRADITION IN ENGLISH 1389 (Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar eds., 1985).

³ Susan Glaspell, *A Jury of Her Peers*, LITERATURE: STRUCTURE, SOUND, AND SENSE 377 (Laurence Perrine ed. 1956). Page references will be to the short story "A Jury of Her Peers." The story is almost double the length of the play and, because of the presence of a narrator, it is more directive in terms of the reader's response to the characters. See Leonard Mustazza, *Generic Translation and Thematic Shift in Susan Glaspell's "Trifles" and "A Jury of Her Peers,"* 26 STUDIES IN SHORT FICTION, Winter 1989, at 489, for a comparison between the play and short story.

⁴ Susan Glaspell, *A Jury of Her Peers*, LITERATURE: STRUCTURE, SOUND AND SENSE 377, 386 (Laurence Perrine ed. 1956).

plot twist drew Alfred Hitchcock to the script for his 1950's television series, although he emerged, as usual, after the last commercial message to assure his audience that wily murderers never went unpunished.

More recent critical interest in Glaspell's work has been of a feminist orientation, focusing on issues such as the dynamics of the patriarchal marriage, sexist attitudes, gender polarities, and the need for uniquely female support systems. Even so, the murderer's motive has been subsumed within a vague category of temporary insanity or depression caused by an unhappy marriage to a dour, stingy spouse.

During the entire course of the action, which takes place mid-winter around 1915 in a desolate Iowa prairie farmhouse, the three male characters--the local sheriff, the young district attorney, and a neighbor farmer officiously search the barn and bedroom where Mr. Wright was found in his bed strangled by a rope. They are determined to find clues to a premeditated murder in order to forestall an insanity defense on the part of the wife, who they have already presumed is guilty and who has been carted off to jail. For them it is not a "whodunnit," but without motive or rationale for the wife's act of violence, they would settle for finding some signs of anger--"something to make a story about--a thing that would connect up with this clumsy way of doing it."⁵ The men's activities are periodically interrupted by their patronizing interactions with the two female characters, wives of the sheriff and the farmer, who have been brought along to gather some of the personal belongings of the suspect, Mrs. Wright, the ultimate silenced, invisible woman. She is never seen or heard from and is not even listed among the play's *dramatis personae*. The women discover the very evidence of rage sought by the men by "reading the female text" of their neighbor's life in the domestic areas of the house, specifically the kitchen and the sitting room,⁶ where they find an erratically stitched quilt block, unfinished domestic tasks, a damaged bird cage, and most crucially, a canary whose neck has been broken. These and other everyday "trifles" of women's lives enable them to

⁵ *Id.* at 392.

⁶ See Annette Kolodny, *A Map for Rereading: Gender and the Interpretation of Literary Texts*, (1980), *THE NEW FEMINIST CRITICISM: ESSAYS ON WOMEN, LITERATURE AND THEORY* 46, 56 (Elaine Showalter ed. 1985); and Judith Fetterly, *Reading about Reading: "A Jury of Her Peers," "The Murders in the Rue Morgue," and "The Yellow Wallpaper," GENDER AND READING: ESSAYS ON READERS, TEXTS, AND CONTEXTS* 147, 148 (Elizabeth A. Flynn and Patrocino P. Schweickart 1986).

solve the mystery while simultaneously reconstructing the dismal record of their neighbor's life. Ironically, had they seen the items, the male sleuths would only have dismissed their relevance ("Nothing here but kitchen things,"⁷ smirks the sheriff). The record of Mrs. Wright's life, so invisible to the men in the story, is illustrative of the experiences of many battered women.

One conceptualization of the nature of domestic violence places battery in the larger context of a symbolic wheel called "The Power and Control Circle," the spokes of which radiate outward from a hub, creating segments that constitute nine of the most controlling and abusive tactics reported by battered women.⁸ Often inter-related, these tactics include not only physical and sexual abuse, but also emotional, economic, verbal abuse and isolation as methods of control and domination.

Thinking of battery in terms of these power strategies facilitates recognition of certain abusive behaviors that would otherwise go unidentified as battery, especially if looked at discretely. For example, economic control, which typically involves requiring a woman to ask her spouse for any money she spends, keeping her ignorant about income, and thus dependent and financially helpless, would not normally be construed as battery. These activities, however, take on a different hue when coupled with isolating tactics, which include excessive possessiveness, control of all social contacts and severe limitation of her involvement with the world outside the home. The same synergy is true for other behaviors: verbal abuse (humiliation such as disparagement and name calling), threats to hurt her or others, intimidation (looks or gestures such as upraised fists, smashing objects or abusing pets), and emotional abuse, which has an extremely broad scope.

Due to the difficulty of measuring or quantifying emotional bruises, dealing with non-physical aspects of battering is problematic. Such abuse is typically categorized by specialists with adjectives such as "non-physical," "indirect," "mental," and "psychological," but these categories do little to clarify this gray zone for experts such as psychologists, social workers, and attorneys who rely on tangible proof. Some researchers, however, have developed classifications of

⁷ Glaspell, *supra* note 4, at 381.

⁸ See generally, Ellen Pence, *Power Control Wheel, The Domestic Abuse Intervention Project in Duluth, MN, 1987.*

"subtypes of violence."⁹ The complexity of emotional battery can lead to paradoxical questions like "Can there be a nonviolent assault? or "What is meant by 'minor violence'?"¹⁰

That Mr. Wright was a physical batterer is not unlikely. A particular kind of volatility resulted in the birdcage door ripped off its hinges and the bird's neck twisted and broken. In light of this, we may ask whether there is evidence of Mr. Wright's violent temper and an inclination to harm or kill his wife. Furthermore, Glaspell is insistent on our identifying Mrs. Wright as a "songbird" herself. "No, Wright wouldn't like the bird--a thing that sang. She used to sing. He killed that, too,"¹¹ muses Mrs. Hale, underscoring the analogy between the murdered-bird and the victim-wife. And if Mrs. Wright had ever sported bruises, they would never have been seen by anyone because of her isolation. Indeed, studies show that physical battering often comes as a surprise to people who know the victims because shamefully they often tend to hide the evidence of the violence.

In placing the behavior of Mr. Wright within the "Power and Control Wheel," the story provides evidence of Mr. Wright's economic domination and his physical and emotional isolation of his wife. Although he is not a poor man, Mr. Wright's miserliness permeates the grim farmhouse and is symbolized most poignantly by the broken stove, a source of nurturance and warmth for farm families. When the visiting ladies enter the house, they are gripped by its austerity. Mrs. Wright's clothes, which they reluctantly handle, are shabby. The black skirt, for example, "bore the marks of much making over,"¹² and Mrs. Hale connects the loss of pride in her appearance with her isolation. "Wright was close! I think maybe that's why she kept so much to herself . . . you don't enjoy things when you feel shabby."¹³ Ironically, Mrs. Wright has requested an apron to wear in prison over her everyday clothing. The women react to the cold, spartan surroundings in careful understatements that define things by what they are not but ought to be: the fire was not "much to brag of";¹⁴ "the stark coldness

⁹ See L. Kevin Hamberger and Jeffrey M. Lohr, *Proximal Causes of Spouse Abuse: A Theoretical Analysis for Cognitive-Behavioral Interventions*, TREATING MEN WHO BATTER: THEORY, PRACTICE, AND PROGRAMS, (P. Lynn Cesar and L. Kevin Hamberger eds. 1989).

¹⁰ ANGELA BROWNE, WHEN BATTERED WOMEN KILL 13 (1987).

¹¹ Glaspell, *supra* note 4, a 390

¹² *Id.* at 384.

¹³ *Id.*

¹⁴ *Id.* at 385.

of that shut-up room was not a thing to linger in."¹⁵ "I don't think a place would be any the cheerfuller for John Wright's bein' in it."¹⁶ The coldness of the house is associated with Mr. Wright's withholding personality. Mrs. Hale sums him up with a simile drawn from the harsh physical environment: "A hard man. . . like a raw wind that gets to the bone."¹⁷

Mrs. Hale reminisces about Minnie Foster, regressing to the suspect's maiden name. She remembers her as a lively girl with pretty clothes, wearing a "white dress with blue ribbons,"¹⁸ and a member of the church choir. We can infer that Minnie was once a gregarious, lively young woman, well taken care of by her family and accustomed to town living. How did twenty years of marriage reduce her to a depressed, shabby, hermit-like Minnie Wright? Her dilapidated rocker seems to symbolize her: "a dingy red, with wooden rungs up the back, and the middle rung was gone, and the chair sagged to one side."¹⁹ "[It] didn't look in the least like Minnie Foster,"²⁰ thinks Mrs. Hale. Like many self-descriptions by battered women, the chair reflects a sense of hopelessness--irreparable, damaged, worn out. Perhaps out of feelings of guilt for her own complicity in the tragedy, Mrs. Hale has difficulty sitting down in the chair, thereby putting herself in Mrs. Wright's place.

The various isolating behaviors experienced by Mrs. Wright are similar to those reported by battered women who often describe the downward path from what had earlier been perceived as a romantic kind of possessiveness to the ultimate condition of being a possession.²¹ Mr. Wright had succeeded apparently in isolating his wife from everything that fed her spirit. The narrator of "A Jury of Her Peers" insistently underscores the remoteness of the Wright farmhouse--"It looked very lonesome . . . it was down in a hollow," adding gratuitously, "the poplar trees around it were lonesome-looking trees."²² Later, Mrs. Hale echoes the narrator's exact words: "down in a hollow and you don't see the road," and identifies with the feelings of the isolated woman: "I dunno what it is, but it's a lonesome place and

¹⁵ *Id.*

¹⁶ *Id.* at 382.

¹⁷ *Id.* at 388.

¹⁸ *Id.* at 391.

¹⁹ *Id.* at 379.

²⁰ *Id.*

²¹ See Browne, *supra* note 10, at 43.

²² Glaspell, *supra* note 4, at 377.

always was."²³ Mr. Wright's systematic physical isolation of his wife is made clear from the outset of the story by his refusal to participate in a telephone party line, ironically the reason for Mr. Hale's stopping by for a chat. Mr. Wright's resistance may have been due to his cheapness. Also a telephone, especially a party line, would have meant additional noise, anathema to a man described as having a passion for peace and quiet. Most significantly, a telephone would have given his wife access to the outside world.

The men in the story are easy on their neighbor. In their eyes he is a "good man," and his well known "passion" is collegially interpreted by them as an idiosyncratic kind of masculine taciturnity. Even Mr. Hale, who seems the most sympathetic of the men, is quite non-judgmental in his assessment: what Mrs. Wright might have wanted would not have "made much difference to John."²⁴ This kind of fraternal "forgiveness" reminds us that a major problem in understanding the nature of domestic violence is that battered women's experiences have traditionally been filtered through male police officers, judges or clergy and diluted or slanted to a male perspective. Indeed, this is the reason that battered women often need spokespersons or advocates to tell their stories.²⁵

Unfortunately, Mrs. Wright's childlessness exacerbated her isolation and loneliness. Surprisingly, both women focus on the silence of a childless home more than the nurturing aspect of motherhood. Mrs. Hale sees it in social terms: "Not having children . . . makes a quiet house, and Wright out to work all day, and no company when he did come in."²⁶ Mrs. Peters, who had lost a child, disjointedly draws a parallel between the strangled bird and her dead baby: "I know what stillness is. When we homesteaded in Dakota, and my first baby died--after he was two years old, and me with no other then-- . . ."²⁷ "If there had been years and years of--nothing, then a bird to sing to

²³ *Id.* at 388.

²⁴ *Id.* at 379.

²⁵ See e.g., Shirley Ardener, *Introduction*, PERCEIVING WOMEN, Shirley Ardener ed. 1975), discussing dominant ideology, muted subgroups and language. see generally Linda Ben Zvi, *Susan Glaspell's Contributions to Contemporary Women Playwrights*, FEMININE FOCUS: THE NEW WOMEN PLAYWRIGHTS 47 (Enoch Brater ed. 1989), on voice and language in Glaspell; and LENORE WALKER, THE BATTERED WOMAN 258 (1979).

²⁶ Glaspell, *supra* note 4, at 388.

²⁷ *Id.* at 391.

you, it would be awful--still--after the bird was still."²⁸

Mrs. Wright's loneliness was magnified by her separation from the support provided by female company, and all that that would have signified in this rural community. In farming areas communal activities such as quilting bees and church activities would have provided opportunities for female camaraderie and networking as well as an opportunity to test her reality. Studies of battered women demonstrate that isolation places them at increased risk because of the reduced opportunity for intervention from the community. In contrast to her earlier social lifestyle, the married Mrs. Wright "didn't even belong to the Ladies' Aid."²⁹

The quilting blocks upon which Mrs. Wright was working may represent an attempt to impose order on the meaningless patchwork of her life but also ironically underscore her aloneness. Since quilting is associated with female group activity, when were these squares to have been sewn together and by whom? One woman reminiscing about her grandmother working on a quilt wrote: "Each piece she sewed brought back another memory. 'This was a piece of my first party dress. I danced till the rooster crowed! Here's a piece of your father's first baby bunting, and Aunt Beulah's communion dress."³⁰ One can only wonder what memories were evoked by Mrs. Wright's scraps. Indeed, needlework has the last word in both play and story; Glaspell ends both ironically with technical terminology as the men, trying to trivialize women's concerns, ask mockingly whether the women have figured out whether Mrs. Wright had been intending "to quilt it or just knot it."³¹

Another theory that helps to explain the nature of the abuse and Mrs. Wright's explosion into violence was postulated by Charles Ewing, a psychologist, attorney, and professor of law. According to Ewing, most women who kill their spouses do so in self-defense to prevent the batterers from destroying them psychologically, that is, to avoid their own psychological death.³² Traditional definitions of self-defense are masculine, calling for some form of brutal assault and in the case of homicide defenses, a perceived threat of imminent death or bodily injury at the moment of the killing. This is precisely the reason, according to Ewing, that many women in prison have failed to

²⁸ *Id.*

²⁹ Glaspell, *supra* note 2, at 1393.

³⁰ Juanene Rhodes, *Letter to the Editor*, REMINISCE, Sept. 1992, at 11.

³¹ Glaspell, *supra* note 4, at 389.

³² See generally Charles Patrick Ewing, BATTERED WOMEN WHO KILL: PSYCHOLOGICAL SELF-DEFENSE AS LEGAL JUSTIFICATION 62 (1987).

meet the test for self-defense.³³ Logically, how can we interpret as self defense a situation in which a woman murders a sleeping husband by setting him on fire (or strangling him with a rope)? Why did she not just leave the home--and leave him alive? The "logic" may lie in the inadequacy of androcentretic language, a problem addressed by calls for *écriture féminine* to express uniquely female experience.³⁴

Ewing focuses on battered women's shattered self-confidence, a belief in the finality of their isolation and an overwhelming feeling of lack of escape. Dichotomizing psychological "life" and physical "life," he argues that the catalyst to violence is the recognition of--at the very moment of the act--the threat to her "self," which is inseparable from her "life."³⁵ "The turning point" effectively comes down to a choice: "She must assert her self or risk losing her self."³⁶ In Glaspell's work, the carefully prepared fruit jars that explode in the unheated kitchen the night Mrs. Wright is arrested may symbolize her emotional explosion. As to whether she actually survived the threat to her psychic self, we may look to the miraculous survival of a single jar as representing some hope for Mrs. Wright's psychological survival. However, within the bounds of the plot Mrs. Hale, who is a reliable voice, comes to see her friend as dead, defining the cause of her figurative death as "lack of life"³⁷ and, shouldering the blame herself: "The fact that she had lived neighbor to that girl for twenty years, and had let her die for lack of life . . . that was a crime!"³⁸

The major support for interpreting Mrs. Wright's behavior as an act of psychological self-preservation is the song bird, its neck twisted and broken. Clearly, aside from its literal role in the story--as company, as music breaking the silence, as something to nurture and love--the canary also represents the essential Minnie Foster, herself a "song bird" which had once sung happily and innocently. Twice Mrs. Hale makes the analogy: "She was kind of like a bird herself -- real sweet and pretty, but kind of timid and -- fluttery."³⁹ The most crucial point of comparison is the fact of its extinction: the man who silenced

³³ See *id.* at 47.

³⁴ See Ben Zvi, *supra* note 25, at 157. See generally Helene Cixous, *The Laugh of the Medusa*, *NEW FRENCH FEMINISMS: AN ANTHOLOGY* 90 (Elaine Marks and Isabel de Courtivron eds., 1980).

³⁵ See Ewing, *supra* note 32, at 62.

³⁶ *Id.* at 65-66.

³⁷ Glaspell, *supra* note 4, at 391.

³⁸ *Id.*

³⁹ *Id.* at 389.

the bird silenced Minnie as well, except that in her case it was a prolonged "inexorable strangulation over the years . . . of spirit."⁴⁰ And what did his act signify? At the moment that Mr. Wright wrung the neck of the bird he was declaring his unmitigated power to destroy the last and only thing his wife loved. The fact he *could* do that confirmed that she was abjectly worthless and completely powerless. Reciprocally, at the moment that she allegedly wrapped the rope around her husband's neck, she was rejecting the equation between herself and the pitiful, dead bird; she was indeed choosing between asserting her "self" and losing her "self."

Ironically it is the sheriff's wife, Mrs. Peters, a woman clearly invested in the patriarchal establishment, who had an analogous experience. Her disconnected description of the experience suggests female rage at her complete disempowerment in the face of male violence: "When I was a 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 . . . [she adds] hurt him."⁴¹ Although probably incorrectly assuming that Mr. Wright was killed in a similar moment of anger (Mrs. Wright was hardly strong enough to strangle a conscious man), the sheriff's wife correctly analogizes their mutual loss of control. However, nobody was around to restrain the isolated Mrs. Wright from going off the deep end. In recounting the memory, the sheriff's wife demonstrates searing insight into Mrs. Wright's terrible isolation as a crucial factor in the murder.

Mrs. Wright fits early paradigms of battered women. These emphasize a battered woman's socialization into traditional roles of marriage and family,⁴² dependency, vulnerability to social embarrassment and, often as a result of battering, low self esteem.⁴³ A common element is the destruction of the last vestiges of self esteem. One study found that--as an ultimate psychological blow--the male batterers tended to attack what their wives felt had been their greatest ability or asset. For example, if a woman had seen herself as a good cook, she was repeatedly told that what she prepared was garbage.⁴⁴

⁴⁰ Annette Kolodny, *A Map for Rereading: Gender and the Interpretation of Literary Texts*, *The New Feminist Criticism: Essays on Women, Literature and Theory* 46, 57 (Elaine Showalter ed., 1985).

⁴¹ Glaspell, *supra* note 4, at 390.

⁴² See e.g., Walker *supra* note 25, at 129; and Ewing, *supra* note 32, at 17-18.

⁴³ See Walker, *supra* note 25, at 32-33.

⁴⁴ See Pat Hoffman, *Psychological Abuse of Women by Spouses and Live-in*

Mrs. Wright's one talent that we know of, her voice, was assuredly stifled in this environment of enforced silence.

The theory of learned helplessness has been invoked to explain apparently passive or stoical acceptance of abuse.⁴⁵ Battered women universally believe that no one can help resolve their predicament, and, in fact, a "shrinking world" affects their ability to act,⁴⁶ especially the growing inability to function outside the oppressive environment.⁴⁷ An understandable difficulty in sympathizing with battered women is why they stay in or return to abusive relationships. Aside from the fact that such emphasis tends to focus on women for their own victimization, with prolonged social isolation and psychological devastation, the condition of learned helplessness, according to Walker, "is similar to severe psychological depression."⁴⁸ In this context, then, a more meaningful question is why a battered woman *cannot* leave her situation rather than why she *chooses* to stay.⁴⁹

Reciprocally, Mr. Wright's personality fits the profile of a batterer. One project lists seventeen signs to look for, concluding that someone with three or more would have a "strong potential for physical violence."⁵⁰ The signs include unrealistic expectations of partners' meeting all their needs, rigid sex roles, isolating behaviors, cruelty to animals, the breaking or striking of objects, explosiveness and moodiness. Additionally, "quick involvement" (in engagement or marriage) may reflect the limited choices among marriage prospects in early twentieth century rural communities. Add to this "jealousy," if one accepts a suggestion that Mr. Wright was jealous of the canary salesman who had "left behind a noisy reminder of himself."⁵¹

Lovers, WOMEN & THERAPY 3.1 Spring 1984, at 37, 39.

⁴⁵ See generally, Walker, *supra* note 25, at chapter 2.

⁴⁶ See ELLEN PENCE, IN OUR BEST INTEREST: A PROCESS FOR PERSONAL AND SOCIAL CHANGE 67 (Minnesota Program Development, Inc., 1987).

⁴⁷ See Walker, *supra* note 24, at 174.

⁴⁸ *Id.*

⁴⁹ See Michele Bograd, *Feminist Perspectives on Wife Abuse: An Introduction*, FEMINIST PERSPECTIVES ON WIFE ABUSE 11,21 (Kersti Yllo and Michele Bograd eds., 1988).

⁵⁰ The Project for Victims of Family Violence, Fayetteville, AK. See also DANIEL JAY SONKIN, ET AL., THE MALE BATTERER: A TREATMENT APPROACH (1985).

⁵¹ Beverly A. Smith, *Women's Work -- Trifles? The Skills and Insights of Playwright Susan Glaspell*, 5 INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF WOMEN'S STUDIES 172, 181 (March-April 1982). Smith, focusing on psychological aspects of wife battering, is the only scholar who has used the word "battered" in the context of the Glaspell play.

Some theorists suggest an analogy between battery and terrorism,⁵² in particular hostage and prisoner of war situations involving solitary confinement. Pursuing the analogy leads to consideration of the processes of traumatic bonding that develop between victims and violators.⁵³ Significantly, the definition of psychological torture used by Amnesty International to understand the experience of prisoners of war and hostages includes isolation, threats, degradation and occasional or random indulgences (as four of the eight areas of abuse).⁵⁴

In the 1990's, an expert witness like Walker might argue that Mrs. Wright exhibited the "Battered Woman Syndrome." In 1915 a plea of temporary insanity would have been likely, especially in light of Mrs. Wright's state of mind the morning after the murder. She clearly seemed unable to determine the difference between right and wrong or to comprehend the nature and quality of her acts. She was obviously in a state of shock, speaking in a dissociated ("quiet and dull") voice, apparently oblivious to the cold, and laughing inappropriately. "[S]he was rockin' back and forth. She had her apron in her hand and was kind of--pleating it." ". . . she looked queer . . . as if she didn't know what she was going to do next. And kind of done up . . . she didn't pay much attention [to the cold]."⁵⁵ The cause of her husband's death, she explained in an affectless tone, was that "he died of a rope around his neck."⁵⁶ This removal of the human agent from the action is in keeping with accounts of battered women who have killed their abusers; for example, one woman who set fire to the house remembers wondering how the fire "could have started."⁵⁷ According to Walker, women who kill often experience a selective psychogenic amnesia. She claims that it is *because* these women have been denying and fearing their own anger that they dissociate themselves from it.⁵⁸

But Glaspell was not writing from the vantage point of the 1990's. More likely she meant to describe the bottom of a gradual descent into madness like that of Gilman's incarcerated and infantilized wife in "The Yellow Wallpaper."⁵⁹ Why else is the motif of insanity

⁵² See Bograd, *supra* note 49, at 18.

⁵³ See Ewing, *supra* note 31, at 73.

⁵⁴ See Walker, *supra* note 25, at .

⁵⁵ Glaspell, *supra* note 2, at 1390.

⁵⁶ *Id.*

⁵⁷ Browne, *supra* note 10, at 142.

⁵⁸ See Walker, *supra* note 25, at 40.

⁵⁹ Charlotte Perkins Gilman, *The Yellow Wallpaper* (1892).

introduced early in the story, if not as foreshadowing, when we learn that the sheriff had been called out of town because of a "man who went crazy"?⁶⁰ "I might have known she needed help!" Mrs. Hale cries out, and the sheriff's wife adds euphemistically, "A person gets discouraged--and loses heart."⁶¹ In a study of women who killed their batterers, Angela Browne found that the violence was precipitated by some unusual or extreme action by the man ("a contrast phenomenon,"⁶² something "beyond the range"⁶³), perhaps directed at the children.⁶⁴ In Mrs. Wright's mind her bird conceivably replaced the "child" she never had and for whose death she wreaks vengeance upon its destroyer.⁶⁵ Ironically, it is once again the less empathetic of the two women who recalls the trauma of losing a child.

The quality of Mrs. Wright's isolation has suggested a frontier "kind" of psychosis to various commentators.⁶⁶ Indeed the story has been treated as "pioneer literature,"⁶⁷ and Mrs. Wright's mental state has been called "a kind of classic 'cabin fever.'"⁶⁸ In this context one scholar even cited stories about mid-nineteenth century North Dakota homesteaders, "Women could be heard screaming all night long in the jail before the first spring thaw. Their husbands had brought them into town in wagons from the sod huts where they had spent the terrible Dakota winter; they were on their way to the insane asylum in Jamestown."⁶⁹ It is certainly easy enough to read the Iowa landscape as

⁶⁰ Glaspell, *supra* note 4, at 378.

⁶¹ *Id.* at 386.

⁶² Browne, *supra* note 10, at 128-29.

⁶³ *Id.* at 129.

⁶⁴ *See id.*

⁶⁵ Several women in Walker's study shot their husbands rather than let them abuse their children. *See e.g.*, LENORE E. WALKER, *THE BATTERED WOMEN SYNDROME* 41 (1984).

⁶⁶ *See* Susan H. Armitage, *Women's Literature and the American Frontiers: A New Perspective on the Frontier Myth*, *WOMEN, WOMEN WRITERS, AND THE WEST* 3 (L. L. Lee and Merrill Lewis eds., 1979).

⁶⁷ *See e.g.*, Victoria Aarons, *A Community of Women: Surviving Marriage in the Wilderness*, 22 *RENDEZVOUS: IDAHO STATE UNIVERSITY JOURNAL OF ARTS AND LETTERS* 3 (Spring 1986); Armitage, *supra* note 66; Elaine Hedges, *Small Things Reconsidered [sic]: Susan Glaspell's "A Jury of Her Peers,"* 12.1 *WOMEN'S STUDIES* 89 (1986); Jeannie McKnight, *American Dream, Nightmare Underside*, *WOMEN, WOMEN WRITERS, AND THE WEST* (L. L. Lee and Merrill Lewis eds., 1979).

⁶⁸ McKnight, *supra* note 70, at 27.

⁶⁹ Hedges, *supra* note 70, at 100 (quoting Abigail McCarthy's autobiography, *PRIVATE FACES, PUBLIC FACES* 11 (1972)).

symbolic, to see Mrs. Wright as one of those "figurative immigrant[s]"⁷⁰ in Glaspell's work, living isolated lives "on the prairies, or the plains, or even in the remote countrysides of the more settled New England or eastern locales . . . in a constant struggle with loneliness and hardship."⁷¹

In accordance with the increasing gender polarization as the story progresses, the women fearfully sense that Mrs. Wright will not get justice in the patriarchal legal system. "Men's hands aren't always as clean as they might be," complains Mrs. Hale,⁷² eyeing the dirty towel roller, her words carrying both literal and figurative meaning. In a kind of potential double jeopardy for Mrs. Wright, the men are energized in their search for a strategized murder because they harbor a suspicion about the potential chivalric reticence of all-male juries (of the time) to convict a helpless, confused little woman (" . . . you know juries when it comes to women."⁷³). Anyway, the sheriff made it "plain that he knew the difference between criminals and non-criminals."⁷⁴

Early on, the sheriff's wife was described as a woman "married to the law"⁷⁵ and "one of us"⁷⁶ ("us" meaning the men). The narrator of the story regularly refers to her as "the sheriff's wife." When she invokes the male principle, "The law is the law,"⁷⁷ Mrs. Hale snaps back, "The law is the law--and a bad stove is a bad stove. How'd you like to cook on this?"⁷⁸ This seemingly illogical retort makes perfect sense--when one considers what a bad stove would have meant to a woman of the time: failure, anxiety, frustration, shame--"what it would mean, year after year, to have that stove to wrestle with."⁷⁹ The symbols of women's existence may be insignificant trifles to the men ("Can you beat the women! . . . Well, women are used to worrying over trifles"⁸⁰). But the very trifles of her life support life itself -- canned food, baked bread, mended clothes, quilts for warmth, towels for cleanliness. As it was for Ibsen's Nora, indulging in patriarchal legal

⁷⁰ Aarons, *supra* note 70, at 3.

⁷¹ *Id.*

⁷² Glaspell, *supra* note 4, at 382.

⁷³ *Id.* at 392.

⁷⁴ *Id.* at 377.

⁷⁵ *Id.*

⁷⁶ *Id.* at 383.

⁷⁷ *Id.* at 385.

⁷⁸ *Id.*

⁷⁹ *Id.* at 386.

⁸⁰ *Id.* at 382.

abstractions is a meaningless luxury in the face of female nurturance of life, and Ibsen, like Glaspell comes down on the side of a female scale of moral values.⁸¹

Instead of separating themselves from their neighbor's experience--her life safely different from their own--these two women take justice into their own hands, in effect appointing themselves "a jury of her peers."⁸² In an outburst, Mrs. Hale asks an unanswered question: "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! If it weren't--why do you and I understand? Why do we know--what we know this minute?"⁸³ Replacing the uncontrolled stitching in the quilt block with her own is perhaps a belated attempt at communion. But seen from a legal point of view, she is tampering with evidence, and in hiding the dead bird, the two women are guilty of concealing evidence.

Why would two women, who initially mistrust each other, break the law, risking everything, after one brief encounter? Because, like Lear out on the heath, they suddenly "see feelingly"--that their lives are more like this woman's than they might have imagined, and that she has been abused enough within a male-dominated system. Grasping the nature of spousal abuse that goes beyond blackened eyes or broken ribs to embrace a myriad of abusive behaviors helps to clarify the motivation behind the strange *quid pro quo* murder. Understood intuitively by the two female characters--"their eyes met--something flashed to life, passed between them"⁸⁴--it serves to heighten their compassion and to throw light on their own lives. They "see through a thing to something else."⁸⁵

⁸¹ See CAROL GILLIGAN, *IN A DIFFERENT VOICE* (1982).

⁸² Glaspell's choice of title for the story version.

⁸³ Glaspell, *supra* note 4, at 391.

⁸⁴ *Id.* at 386.

⁸⁵ *Id.*