



# Bloom's Literature

## *Trifles*

Based on a murder case that Glaspell covered while a reporter for the *Des Moines Daily News*, *Trifles* subtly examines the differences between male and female perceptions and attitudes when a farm wife is accused of murdering her husband.

In the "gloomy kitchen" of an "abandoned farmhouse," a pair of officials seek evidence against Mrs. Wright for the murder of her husband, who was found dead by his neighbor, Mr. Hale. Mr. and Mrs. Hale accompany to the crime scene the county attorney, the sheriff, and the sheriff's wife (who has come along to get some of Mrs. Wright's personal belongings for her). Mr. Hale recounts finding Mrs. Wright and her dead husband, a rope around his neck. The men are mystified as to what could have motivated Mrs. Wright, but the women notice small things—the unkept house, the chaotic stitching on an otherwise evenly sewn quilt—and believe these provide clues to her mental state and the state of her marriage. To the men, the state of the house is nothing more than evidence of poor housekeeping; they are amused that women worry over mere "trifles."

Mrs. Hale remembers Minnie Foster, before she became Mrs. Wright, as a "sweet and pretty" young woman with a good singing voice, and she remembers Mr. Wright as a "hard man," like "a raw wind that gets to the bone." She regrets that she "stayed away [from the Wrights' home] because it weren't cheerful." She thinks now she might have been a comfort to the isolated and childless Minnie.

The women find an empty birdcage with a broken hinge and then, enshrined in a sewing box, the bird—its neck "wrung." They surmise that Mr. Wright cruelly killed the one thing that gave his wife pleasure and that this was her motivation for breaking his neck with a rope as he slept. When the men, who have been searching the house and grounds, return to the kitchen, they condescend to the women and lament their own failure to find a motive with which to convince a jury of Minnie Wright's guilt. The women conceal the dead bird from their husbands and from the county attorney, perhaps saving Minnie from conviction.

Critics have found the economy of this one-act play masterful: "[J]ust as the women create their instinctive theories out of trifles, so the playwright builds her play out of small gestures (a broken hinge on a birdcage which reflects the broken neck of the bird, the broken neck of the man, but also the broken spirit of the woman, who had bought the cage). The man imprisons the woman, the woman imprisons the bird. And yet they are all imprisoned in a system equally implacable.... It is a play which works by

understatement" (Biggsby 25–26). First produced by the Provincetown Players, *Trifles* is considered—along with the early plays of Eugene O'Neill—among the best that the group offered in its history.

### **Further Information**

Biggsby, C. W. E. *A Critical Introduction to Twentieth Century American Drama: Volume One—1900–1940*. Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1982.



### **Citation Information**

Bryer, Jackson, and Mary Hartig. "Trifles." *Encyclopedia of American Drama, Third Edition*, Facts On File, 2012. *Bloom's Literature*, [online.infobase.com/Auth/Index?aid=100535&itemid=WE54&articleId=7122](https://online.infobase.com/Auth/Index?aid=100535&itemid=WE54&articleId=7122).

Copyright © 2024 Infobase Learning. All Rights Reserved.