A Question of Women’s Intuition: Murder She Wrote

Who is more right: men or women? For centuries, this has been a great debate. One such topic that has come out of this debate has been the idea of “women’s intuition” and how right it often is. Sometimes, women just have an edge over men. One such play that looks at this topic is *Trifles*. This play centers around the death of Mr. Wright, a farm owner and a ‘keeps-to-himself’ kind of man. When male investigators and their wives go into the home of the deceased farmer, it is the women who come up with the answer to the mystery surrounding his death. Susan Glaspell uses the difference in the female thoughts and actions and the male thoughts and actions to show that female intuition has the upper hand in the play *Trifles*.

The first female Glaspell uses to let the audience see what might have happened in the story is Mrs. Wright herself. When a female drastically changes her habits and attitudes, it is a true sign that something is brewing. This is the first way Glaspell uses female action to get the audience thinking about how or why Mr. Wright died. The story mentions how Mrs. Wright used to be happy and how she used to sing in the choir. But as of late, the story says she neither felt nor did any such thing anymore. Mrs. Hale mentions, “She used to wear pretty clothes and be lively, when she was Minnie Foster, one of the town girls singing in the choir. But that -- oh, that was thirty years ago” (Glaspell). Mrs. Wright, who used to be Minnie Foster, had lost the vivacious life that was once within her. One author suggests why Mrs. Wright exhibits this change in attitude: “[she is] isolated, childless and powerless, denied even a circumscribed maternal power, and … project[s her] suppressed and repressed desire on to [her] [pet], which [her husband] kill[s]” (Stobbs Wright). Although the audience finds out these details little by little as the other women elaborate on Mrs. Wright’s life, readers can see that this existence has been devastating to Mrs. Wright. This gives the readers a clue as to what had been going on in her life with her husband. Something had to make Minnie Wright change her actions like that. Also, when readers first hear
about Mrs. Wright, she is simply rocking in a chair. She knows her husband has died, but she is not frantic at all. She just sits by. Mr. Hale narrates, “She was rockin' back and forth. She had her apron in her hand and was kind of -- pleating it” (Glaspell). She was sitting calmly; this is not a normal reaction, and the audience can tell something is wrong. Overall, Glaspell uses the change in demeanor of Minnie Foster Wright to clue the audience in to what really happened.

Glaspell also uses Mrs. Peters and Mrs. Hale to illustrate women’s intuition and keen sense of observation. One of the first things the women notice in Mrs. Wright’s kitchen is her spoiled fruit. Women of this play’s setting picked and cured their own fruit. This is an arduous and long process: one that a woman will make sure to preserve what she makes from it. Consequently, Mrs. Hale reminisces about how one would feel to lose such work: “She'll feel awful bad after all her hard work in the hot weather. I remember the afternoon I put up my cherries last summer” (Glaspell). Her memory shows the audience that leaving fruit like that would not have been something Mrs. Wright would have just done. A critical essay suggests, “Instead of following a predetermined schedule of inquiry, they begin, almost instinctively, to put themselves into Minnie Wright's place” (Holstein). They are in essence getting inside her head and figuring out what the men of the story will not.

Another set of items the women notice is the bread and the dirty towels that are in the kitchen. This is completely out of character for a woman of Mrs. Wright’s stature and character. The women note that Mrs. Wright was going to put the bread up and they also make a remark about the towel that seems to suggest the cruelty of Mr. John Wright: Mrs. Hale says, “Men's hands aren't always as clean as they might be” in reaction to the men saying how dirty the towels were. She is referring to how Mr. Wright had a hand in hurting his own wife to make Mrs. Wright perhaps go to lengths to kill him. Another sign the women pick up on is the stitching that is out of order. Again, Mrs. Wright as an immaculate quilter, and seeing such a mess in her stitching pushes the women even further toward knowing what happened. Readers can tell the women know something is off when Mrs. Hale brings something about the quilt stitching to Mrs. Peters’ attention: “All the rest of it has been so nice and even. And look at this! It's all over the place! Why, it looks as if she didn't know what she was about!” (Glaspell). Such a little difference in stitching is something the women and not the men notice. The final clue the women notice is
On the other hand, the male gendered characters do not have what it takes to see the clues that are so clear to the women. Glaspell puts the men in positions of power like the sheriff and the county attorney, but she does not give them the power of women’s intuition. One literary critic notes, “The males' dominance is immediately apparent from the play's opening, as the three men barge into the Wright's house confidently ahead of the women” (Grose). It is this irony that Glaspell uses to make the usurp of power so much sweeter when the women figure out the mystery and the men do not catch on. When they see the bread and dirty dish towel, the county attorney remarks, “Here’s a nice mess…Not much of a housekeeper, would you say ladies?” (Glaspell). This shows that they are only looking at surface level physical evidence; they don’t get the reason that there is half eaten bread and dirty towels lying around. One critic even notes, “The men come to the scene of a crime and attempt to look through the eyes of legal investigators” (Holstein). The men cannot bring themselves out of a surface level sense of observation. The men even make fun of the women as they point out clues about the spoiled fruit and the erratic stitching. The sheriff says condescendingly when he hears the women discussing Mrs. Wright’s quilting, “They wonder if she was going to quilt it or just knot it!” (Glaspell). The men are so concerned about making what the women say so insignificant, that they miss what is going on underneath. The women even hide the fact that they found the dead canary with the wrung neck because they know the men will not understand what that had to do with anything. Mrs. Peters speculates, “Getting all stirred up over a little thing like a -- dead canary. As if that could have anything to do with -- with -- wouldn't they laugh!? (Glaspell). The men indeed would laugh because they could not deduce the effect of a dead bird on an abused and locked away wife. After all, “[t]he three men continue to misread the situation and move further away from the truth, the irony of their manner and words to the women intensifying as the reluctant sleuths, Mrs. Hale and Mrs. Peters, perceptively read the clues and piece the story together” (Grose). Although the women hide the bird from the men, the men do
not take the time to inspect any of the small things the women have pulled together, moving further and further away from the truth. These clues that the women see so much in are totally lost on the men in the play here.

Overall, according to *Trifles*, women know best. It is the women who do not hold powerful positions that come up with the answers to the reason behind the death of John Wright. Minnie Wright herself gives away the most basic clues of an abused woman. Readers can initially see something is not quite right by just looking at her situation. It is then the women, Mrs. Hale and Mrs. Peters, who uncover all the small “trifling” things that lead them to understand what happened in the Wright household. The men, the ones in powerful positions, have no clue as to why all the small things mean anything at all to the women. The men even go so far as to make fun of the women for noticing such trivial things. However, it is those trivial things that hold the key to the mystery. Susan Glaspell puts women’s intuition on top in this case solved.

Works Cited


