As for so many early twentieth-century women writers, modernism for Susan Glaspell (1876–1948) was at once a blessing and a curse. It stimulated her best work, and then scorned her aesthetic. It incorporated her theatrical innovations, and proceeded to ignore their creator. It made her reputation, but only to repudiate it. In order to understand these seeming paradoxes, that slippery term, “modernism,” or, more accurately, “modernisms,” must be defined in its gendered American historical context before we turn to Susan Glaspell herself.

Much of the exuberance of American nineteenth-century literary culture arose from the belief that art and life are indivisible. As Ralph Waldo Emerson, who greatly influenced Glaspell, concludes in “The Poet” (1842), “The poets are thus liberating gods … They are free, and they make free” (236). Although Emerson addressed his exhortations to “men,” women, too, believed that their writings would and should affect the lives of their compatriots. One of the major goals of the so-called domestic and sentimental novelists of mid-century was to evoke feeling or “sentiment” in their readers, but feeling was the means to an end, not the end itself. In her “Concluding Remarks” to her best-selling *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (1852), Harriet Beecher Stowe admonished her readers, “There is one thing that every individual can do, – they can see to it that *they feel right*” (624), and then act upon that feeling to end slavery. When Abraham Lincoln addressed Stowe in 1863 as “the little lady who made this big war,” his condescending comment did acknowledge that Stowe’s art moved her readers to profound change in American life. Over sixty years later, Susan Glaspell, in her second novel *The Visioning* (1911), similarly hoped to move her compatriots to support socialist reforms as propounded by the Emersonian male protagonist and the newly converted heroine. The literary tide changed, however, and *The Visioning* did not express the current hopes of the people, but separated Glaspell from them, in the artistic avant-garde.¹

In the early years of the Provincetown Players, from the group’s founding
in 1915 through the United States’ entry into the First World War in 1917, Glaspell and her fellow artists operated under the premise that art and life were inextricably linked. In *The Road to the Temple* (1927), her memoir of her husband George Cram Cook, a founder and the moving spirit of the Provincetown Players, Glaspell quotes a letter from him to her: “One thing we’re in need of is the freedom to deal with life in literature as frankly as Aristophanes. We need a public like his, which has the habit of thinking and talking frankly of life. We need the sympathy of such a public, the fundamental oneness with the public, which Aristophanes had” (250). Cook wanted the Provincetown Players to provide the venue for a specifically American drama in a synergistic relation with the American people. The structure, dialogue, and staging could exhibit various degrees of “making it new,” but the art of Provincetown would remain connected with life. The prewar works of the Provincetown Players represent an early form of modernism, what Andreas Huyssen calls “the historical avant-garde’s insistence on the cultural transformation of everyday life” (*After the Great Divide*, 7) through thematic and technical breaks from the past. For women writers, however, this break from the past also meant dividing themselves from the rich literary tradition of their foremothers, the popular women novelists of the nineteenth century (See Clark, *Sentimental Modernism*). In plays such as *Trifles* (1916), *The People* (1917), *The Outside* (1917), and *Woman’s Honor* (1918), Glaspell’s women protagonists resist this new cultural imperative in their attempt to bring the best parts of the past forward while attempting to create new forms in the present that will, in turn, benefit the future.

In the aftermath of the First World War, modernism became associated with largely conservative male artists and essayists, the New Critics, who, paradoxically, wanted to define a modernist tradition based on once startling, but now codified techniques, not further innovation. The canon valorized Ezra Pound, not H.D.; Ernest Hemingway, not Gertrude Stein; and, of course, Eugene O’Neill, not Susan Glaspell, one of American literature’s greatest but least-known writers. *Bernice* (1919), *Inheritors* (1921), and *The Verge* (1921), Glaspell’s last plays of the Provincetown years, were written in the immediate aftermath of World War I and demonstrate her resistance to late modernism’s calcification into a new set of constricting conventions and its disparagement of the life of the people and mass culture. Glaspell’s disillusionment and despair were cautiously manifested a decade later in her last produced play, the Pulitzer-Prize-winning *Alison’s House* (1930), in which a woman poet’s legacy, safely sanitized and defused by the passage of decades, is inherited by a young male poet.
Glaspell’s Provincetown plays, however, are modernism at its best: fresh, innovative, inclusive, and challenging. Her first and best-known play *Trifles* (1916) epitomizes early modernism’s attitude toward the past and its art. As is characteristic of all of Glaspell’s work, *Trifles* advocates rejecting what is bad from the past, that which is outmodedly constricting, while preserving what is good, that which transmits hints for originality and progress. As is also typical of Glaspell, *Trifles* expresses women’s fears as well as hopes for modern times and modernist art.

The nineteenth-century domestic novel advocated what has become known as the cult of domesticity: the idea that woman’s sphere was limited to the home, but that within this sphere she was empowered to create a haven of morality, order, comfort, and sympathy. When joined with the pioneer myth, this tale envisions a frontier woman heroically creating such a domestic refuge in the wilderness. In the bleak, cold, and disordered kitchen of *Trifles*, Glaspell tries to ascertain why this myth was such a failure that it drove a farm wife, Minnie Wright, to behavior that was its antithesis, the murder of her husband when he was supposedly safe in his bed. Indeed, Glaspell is questioning the value of the sentimental domestic novel as Minnie Wright transforms it first into a modernist revenge tragedy for herself and her husband, and then into a potentially feminist detective story for the two local women, Mrs. Hale and Mrs. Peters, who are confronted with the crime scene.

When the County Attorney arrives at the Wright farm to investigate, he
reads Minnie’s kitchen as would the scornful male reader of the sentimental novel: he is willing to give it a hasty perusal, and then dismiss it as a failed exemplar of a trivial genre. He remarks that Mrs. Wright was “not much of a housekeeper” (38) and that “I shouldn’t say she had the homemaking instinct” (39): Minnie Wright not only lacks the technique to create a scene of domestic bliss, but also what the County Attorney would regard as the essential womanliness or “instinct.” Despite its failure as the sentimental mise-en-scène, the County Attorney is unwilling to change it. His immediate concern on entering the room is maintaining the past: “has anything been moved? Are things just as you left them yesterday?” (36).

Speaking for Glaspell, who played the part in the original production, Mrs. Hale comments on the unfairness of “trying to get [Minnie’s] own house to turn against her” (40). This injustice stems from the fact that, to Glaspell, Minnie Wright is not responsible for the failure of her life to conform to that of the sentimental novel, for she has had authorship wrested away from her by her husband. Minnie’s maiden name is “Foster,” indicative of the nurturing domesticity which she was capable of producing. Minnie, however, married John Wright, who now “writes” the script for her life according to what he considers “right.” John transforms the domestic sphere into a woman’s prison, solitary confinement at that. He will not allow Minnie money to dress decently enough to attend church and its women’s association. Not yet satisfied that his control over Minnie’s life’s plot is total, he destroys the domestic sphere as he damages the bird cage. Further, he apparently believes that he breaks Minnie’s spirit as he breaks her pet canary’s neck since, as many critics have noted, the unmarried Minnie has sung beautifully in the context of the communal art of the choir.

Through the image of caged bird as imprisoned woman artist, Glaspell is also challenging the sexism of many male modernists, particularly one of their great influences and avatars, Friedrich Nietzsche, avidly read by Glaspell and her husband. In Beyond Good and Evil, Nietzsche writes: “Men have so far treated women like birds who had strayed to them from some height: as something more refined and vulnerable, wilder, stranger, sweeter, and more soulful — but as something one has to lock up lest it fly away” (166). Nietzsche is happy to become the modern artist as superman while imprisoning women in their traditional role of moral and spiritual exemplars who are too delicate, and too valuable as property, for flight into modernity. John Wright similarly preempts the future for Minnie. When an aspect of modernity arrives that could relieve Minnie’s mental, if not physical, isolation, the telephone, John refuses to have it installed. Like the County Attorney, he resists change. Minnie can neither have the benefits of
the old “plot” for women, nor reap the advantages of modernity because she has been denied “author”ity.

Because John will not allow her the authority over the domestic sphere which society has falsely promised in return for relinquishing her public agency, Minnie is compelled to write a plot with which she has no essential affinity, a modernist revenge tragedy. Because she is cut off from the communal art of domesticity, and indeed any community, her new art is an isolated one, much as the woman modernist is separated from the tradition and support of her nineteenth-century predecessors. The scene she creates before the murder is quintessentially modernist. In the kitchen, where we expect cosiness, we are shocked not only by dirty towels, exploded jars of jam, and a crumb-covered table, but within a beautiful box is the corpse of the broken bird, modernist juxtaposition at its delicate but jarring best.

Minnie can no longer participate in the women’s communal art of singing in the choir, so she has tried another usually communal art, quilting, which she is forced to do alone. As with the singing bird in its cage, Minnie at first tried to invoke a traditional plot by making a log cabin quilt, but in her increasing agitation before the murder, she can no longer conform to the measured stitches necessary for that form. As Mrs. Hale later notes of the sewing, “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!” (Trifles, 41), a typical reaction when comparing modernist art to the traditional art of the past. A few lines later, Mrs. Hale also terms the sewing “queer,” which is Glaspell’s word throughout her works for avant-garde art, that which points the way to the future, but appears grotesque in its isolation when viewed from the vantage point of the crowded past.

In her kitchen, Minnie leaves us the modernist scene of her break from the past, but she is unable to cope with a future beyond that disruption. Mr. Hale recalls that when he visited the Wright farm and Minnie told him of John’s death, “She had her apron in her hand and was kind of – pleating it” (37). Her apron represents the domestic arts of the past; she can no longer employ it in its prescribed way, so she tries to make the utilitarian garment into fancy pleats. But pleats are simply repeating folds: for every fold forward, there is a fold back, indicative of Minnie’s inability to move boldly forward into the future. Mr. Hale also notes that she is sitting in her rocking chair and “rockin’ back and forth” (37). She oscillates between past and future, and makes no progress; this movement also futilely cancels itself. Although she has been compelled by her circumstances to regain authorship of her life by murdering her husband, she cannot see herself permanently in the role of playwright or heroine. As she talks with Mr. Hale, she moves from the rocking chair at center stage to another chair in
the corner. Like many women artists thrust into modernity, in the words of Mr. Hale, Minnie acted “as if she didn’t know what she was going to do next” (37).

When Mrs. Hale and Mrs. Peters arrive at the scene of Minnie’s modernist break with the past, they also feel compelled to make some decisions about the future, but, in order to do so, they must first evaluate the past. While Minnie may have been thrust into a male version of domesticity, that of a woman’s prison, Mrs. Hale and Mrs. Peters learn that they have acquiesced by refusing to read the past as it was and choosing to read it sometimes as the frontier saga and sometimes as the domestic novel. Mrs. Peters knows that frontier life does not conform to the soothing image of a pioneer family comfortably ensconced in a sturdy log cabin against the background of a noble and inspiring forest for, as she tells Mrs. Hale, “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 –” (44). She also knows that the sentimental novel’s picture of the domestic sphere as a harmonious meeting place for both genders is false; she remembers, “When I was a girl – my kitten – there was a boy took a hatchet, and before my eyes ... If they hadn’t held me back I would have –” (43), presumably done what Minnie Wright did after the death of her canary. As Glaspell’s characteristic and modernistic use of dashes indicates, Mrs. Peters is groping toward knowledge for which the traditional books of the past have given her no words, no script, while the men of the present ridicule women’s hesitant attempts at articulation.

Mrs. Hale also realizes that she has allowed herself to be cozened into the domestic plot. She has thrown herself wholeheartedly into life with her relatively decent husband and her beloved children so that she blinds herself to less comfortable resolutions of the domestic narrative, like that of Minnie Wright. During the course of the play, Mrs. Hale repeatedly begins to understand what Minnie has done and why, and then pulls back from her understanding, much as Minnie has pleated her apron and rocked back and forth. When Mrs. Hale picks up the jaggedly cut loaf of bread, she then “abruptly drops it. In a manner of returning to familiar things” (39). Her preconceptions about domestic life continue to be challenged until Mrs. Hale realizes that if Minnie Wright may have been forced out of domesticity into her “crime,” she herself has chosen to collude in the circumstances that produced it. She cries, “Oh, I wish I’d come over here once in a while! That was a crime! Who’s going to punish that?” (44).

The ending of Trifles epitomizes the modernist woman artist’s dilemma. Mrs. Hale and Mrs. Peters refuse to end what has become a detective story with the traditional male punishment according to traditional male stan-
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dards of justice. They do not reveal to the County Attorney and their husbands the motive that they need to pin the crime on Minnie Wright, but, like Minnie, they are unable to foresee a radically different future. They are distressed that Minnie’s jars of preserves have burst from the cold and are delighted to find one unharmed. They cling to this remnant of preserved traditional domesticity, and so decide to tell Minnie that all her preserves are fine. They want to behave as if her radical act has changed nothing; the past is preserved.³ Tellingly, Mrs. Hale rips out Minnie’s “queer” modernist stitching and replaces it with the neatly repetitive stitches of the past. Yet Mrs. Hale and Mrs. Peters now know that their dream of domesticity is a dangerous illusion, and that they will have to force themselves and Minnie to believe that it is true.

Although Mrs. Wright, Mrs. Hale, and Mrs. Peters appear stalled between the deceptive past and an unknown future, their shared consciousness of their state constitutes Glaspell’s hope that they will eventually move into the future out of an untenable past, as Glaspell herself has subtly and quietly moved her audience from clinging to a fictitious past to raising questions about potential futures. For Glaspell, in Trifles, after a necessary stage of solitary realization and breaking from the past, modernist art must return to communal decisions about the future.

In The People (1917), Glaspell continues to explore the themes of the relationship between art and life, the catalytic role of women in questioning and subverting men’s penal or artistic laws, and the challenge of bringing what remains alive from the past into the future without its incarceration in dead forms. In contrast to the muted questioning of Trifles, Glaspell explicitly examines the relationship of the avant-garde artist to the broader community.

Like Trifles, The People opens on a scene of disorder, in this case that of a messy and disorganized radical publication called The People, loosely and satirically modeled on The Masses, the leftist publication of Glaspell’s Greenwich Village and Provincetown years. Like the domestic novel, radical art is not prospering. The magazine is about to fold, ostensibly for lack of funds, but in reality because of the fatigue and disillusionment of its editor, the ironically named Edward Wills, who has lost his will to persevere, and dispiritedly comments, “we don’t change anything” (47). The publication’s impotence, and its imminent demise, arise from a number of problems. Despite the communal aspirations of its title, as Ed Wills bitterly notes, “Everybody is plugging for his own thing. Nobody caring enough about the thing as a whole” (40), or, indeed, for “the people.” Despite the fact that no work appears to be in progress, representatives of the people are repeatedly refused a hearing and summarily ushered out of the office.
In the case of editor Ed Wills, however, lies the crux of the people’s and *The People*’s dilemma: the avant-garde artist should inspire the people, and in that sense, lead them into a better future, but the avant-garde artist may consider himself “avant,” too far ahead of the people to understand them or affect them. Worse yet, he may translate “avant” not as signifying a forerunner, but as indicating natural superiority. Only four of the twelve characters in the play have conventional names; the other eight have appellations such as The Woman from Idaho, The Earnest Approach, and The Man from the Cape. Glaspell is borrowing from modernist theatre, that of expressionism, to suggest representative types rather than individuals. The danger, though, for modernist artists including Ed Wills, is that these types will appear somewhat dehumanized and easily manipulable rather than symbolically significant. Ed Wills wants to be the modernist god-like creator but despondently states: “The People . . . Oh, I got so tired looking at them—on farms, in towns, in cities. They’re like toys that you wind up and they’ll run awhile. They don’t want to be expressed” (48).

Two women, reminiscent of the farm wives in *Trifles*, believe Ed’s despair and his condescending attitude toward the people. Oscar Tripp, the associate editor, points to a woman like Minnie Wright, an absence who becomes a presence, in this case for the staff of *The People* and for the audience: “Just last night I heard of a woman in Bronxville who keeps *The People* under her bed so her husband won’t know she’s reading it” (42). She is also like Mrs. Hale and Mrs. Peters in that she is as yet unwilling to confront her husband and the patriarchal order, but, potentially like Minnie Wright, her weapon is poised where he is supposedly safest, in the domestic haven of his bed. While he remains asleep, she is awakened, but not yet ready to arise.

Another awakening representative of the people, The Woman from Idaho, played by Glaspell in the original production, makes her actual presence felt in the office. In her native state, she earned a living as a seamstress, but she was actually more interested in earning her death since she was saving for the respectable and conventional goal of buying her own tombstone. The words that would be carved in stone, however, failed in comparison with the words she found in a copy of *The People* that she serendipitously encountered. The local storekeeper asked her to take it out of the store because of the cover: “if some folks in this town see it, they’ll think I’m not all I should be” (54). The storekeeper responds to modern art by removing it in the interest of his reputation for conformity.

In contrast, The Woman from Idaho is so moved by the magazine’s contents that she uses her tombstone money, that of death and stasis, for a trip to move to New York, life and mobility. She reminds Ed that modern
art should not be focused solely on the future where it would become isolated and deracinated like Ed and his magazine. Instead, she shows him how his words of the present in *The People* led her to connect to the living past of Lincoln’s words that Ed quoted, not to the dead past of tombstones, and then to forge a bond with the future in her trip to New York and her reinspiration of Ed. She exhorts, “Let life become what it may become! – so beautiful that everything that is back of us is worth everything it cost” (58). Living words and inspirational forms create an endless chain, which Ed recognizes when he affirms, “This paper can’t stop!” (58).

Although Glaspell has apparently provided us with a happy ending, with Ed restored to his true art and The Woman from Idaho resurrected into a new life, the fact remains that the male character is the artist while the woman is the muse. This paradigm is characteristic of much of Glaspell’s work, particularly her late novels, but we cannot be sure that the woman is getting the lesser role. If we regard The Woman from Idaho and her later spiritual sisters, not as muses, but as Jamesian artists-in-life, Glaspell’s intent becomes clearer. For Glaspell, art should never be separate from life; in fact, life is an art, so that the women who work in this medium, rather than paint or pen, may be those who most fully express themselves and inspire others.

Mrs. Patrick and Allie Mayo of *The Outside* may be regarded as two aspiring, but temporarily stymied, female modernist artists-in-life. Once again, Glaspell’s play opens on a scene of abandonment and discomfort, in this case a defunct life-saving station near the end of Cape Cod where Mrs. Patrick, formerly a summer resident, now lives permanently with her servant Allie Mayo. The male characters are life-savers, but they are engaged in the hopeless project of resuscitating the corpse of a drowned man. Although their project should be moving and uplifting, for them, it is just another job: “Work – tryin’ to put life in the dead” (48), to which they are inured by “Force of habit, I guess” (48), and led by precisely followed, mechanical routine: “Lucky I was not sooner or later as I walk by from my watch” (48). The ironically named life-savers can be seen as male artists trying to revive a dead form of male art, despite the futility of their uninspiring “work” and “habit.”

Allie Mayo lost her husband to the sea twenty years ago and Mrs. Patrick recently lost hers to another woman, so that their current abode does not suggest conventional domesticity, any more than did the kitchen in *Trifles*. Tony, a local Portuguese-American, remarks, “A woman – she makes things pretty. This not like a place where a woman live. On the floor there is nothing – on the wall there is nothing. Things ... – do not hang on other things” (*The Outside*, 49). Despite the triteness of his view of
woman’s traditional art, making “things pretty,” his description accurately describes the isolated state of the women as expressed in their medium, the room in which they live. The past is gone, but there is “nothing” to replace it. There is no continuity between past, present, and future: “Things do not hang on other things.” Indeed, Mrs. Patrick does not spend much time in her house, preferring to watch the sand as it attempts to bury the contorted vines that struggle to grow beyond the forest. Just as she wants to bury the potential of the future, Mrs. Patrick explicitly rejects the past in its entirety when she says to the men, “This isn’t the life-saving station any more. Just because it used to be – I don’t see why you should think – This is my house! And – I want my house to myself!” (49).

While one could read Mrs. Patrick’s denunciation of the life-savers as a bold feminist statement, reclaiming her physical and spiritual space, and as a rejection of the conventional art of the past, the way “it used to be,” Glaspell, through the voice of Allie Mayo, the part she played in the original production, suggests that the woman artist should neither be isolated from other human beings nor disconnected from the past, though this alienation may be a necessary stage of recovery on the way to the future, much like Minnie Wright’s rocking in Trifles. Halfway through the play, Allie’s first word is “Wait”; she says it to Mrs. Patrick as if suggesting that she must pause and reassess before plunging into the future.

Through Allie, Glaspell uses the metaphor of the vines that reach out beyond the town and the forest to “the outside” of sand and water to suggest the role that she foresees for Mrs. Patrick and for women artists. These “strange little things that reach out farthest,” a metaphor for modernist avant-garde art, do not merely point to the future, “avant,” but guard, or “garde” the best part of the past: “And hold the sand for things behind them. They save a wood that guards a town ... where their children live” (53). As The Woman from Idaho renounced her tombstone, so Allie Mayo wants Mrs. Patrick to reject her burial of her potential: “Don’t bury the only thing that will grow. Let it grow” (52).

With the help of her new community with Allie Mayo, the last lines of the play show Mrs. Patrick rising to the challenge of the woman artist-in-life, “(feeling her way into the wonder of life) Meeting the Outside! (It grows in her as CURTAIN lowers slowly)” (55). Glaspell’s stage directions, “feeling,” “grows,” and “slowly,” suggest that modernity must evolve gradually from a communal past, like the growth of a cluster of plants. While one might regard the women’s devotion to the strange twisted vines as about as unappealing as the corpse-care of the “life-savers,” the vines only look odd until we remember their connection to the past and their role of conserving its life in order to bring it into the future, in much the way
Glaspell hopes that her audience will evaluate her seemingly strange female modernist art with its hesitantly articulate and unconventional women.

In her next three major plays, *Woman’s Honor*, *Bernice*, and *Inheritors*, Glaspell presents the idea of life as we live it as a fiction developed by males, and challenges it through a variety of dramatic heroines, artists-in-life. In *Woman’s Honor* (1918), Glaspell makes two modernistic breaks with the past. First, she reveals the title concept as a euphemism for the sacrifices by women that men need to maintain their self-affirming fictions of themselves and the society that they have created. Secondly, as in *The People*, Glaspell eschews the device of individual names for the use of expressionistic representative types: The Shielded One, The Motherly One, The Scornful One, The Silly One, The Mercenary One, and The Cheated One. As the names indicate, these women are not autonomous beings, but exist only in relation to others, men who diminish them while paying lip service to the concept of a woman’s honor. By the end of the play, however, the women have turned their lack of individual names into communal strength as they band together and reject the traditional male plot for/against them, along with the men. Instead of saving accused murderer Gordon Wallace, for whom they were initially willing to sacrifice their “honor” by providing an alibi, the women become interested in saving their sisters “through Gordon Wallace” (155): they are now the subjects and he is the tool. The last line of the play indicates that the women have become such powerful communal artists-in-life that the now “feminized” Gordon Wallace succumbs to their script. As he “staggers back to LAWYER’S arms,” he moans, “Oh, hell. I’ll plead guilty” (156). The women of *Woman’s Honor* examine the past, reject parts of it, but retain enough female solidarity from the nineteenth-century separation of spheres to build together a bridge into the future: this is Glaspell’s goal for the female avant-garde artist, her vision of modernism.

After these powerful one-act dramas, Glaspell’s first three-act play, *Bernice* (1919), seems somewhat anticlimactic in theme and in technique. The title character never appears on stage, but her family and friends gather as she lies dead in a room offstage. Bernice has died of natural causes, but she has made her devoted maid Abbie, played by Glaspell in the original production, promise to tell Bernice’s husband Craig that she killed herself, presumably over his infidelities, in order to give Craig a sense of self-worth. Bernice’s dear friend Margaret, a labor organizer, is at first devastated by the supposed suicide, and then by her later knowledge of Bernice’s deception. In the last lines of the play, however, Margaret realizes that Craig has changed for the better and that Bernice was exemplary: “Oh, in all the world – since first life moved – has there been any beauty like the
beauty of perceiving love? ... No. Not for words” (230). Bernice, as artist-in-life, moves others by moving beyond the medium of words from life into death back into a metamorphosed life.

The problem is, obviously, that in order to achieve this reformed scenario, Bernice must die, another apparently self-sacrificial woman derived from the nineteenth-century domestic plot. Glaspell, however, is suggesting that Bernice, like the women in Trifles, is perpetually stymied in achieving cosy domesticity through the poor material provided by a patriarchal society: her baby dies, her father withdraws from life and authority, her husband philanders and writes trash. It is no wonder that Bernice’s doctor diagnoses her ultimately fatal illness as “ulcers in the stomach” (180). Through the “fiction” of her suicide, Bernice is actually telling the truth: her life has killed her, gradually and inexorably, but on her deathbed she decides to use her death to rewrite the script and make some meaningful changes, to anticipate some satisfaction in the little time she has left after a lifetime of frustration, much as does Milly Theale in Henry James’ The Wings of the Dove.

Through Bernice’s friend Margaret, Glaspell reiterates her belief in the artist’s mission. Margaret points out that the people “continue to look to writers” (Bernice, 202) to get “a little farther than others can get ... at least the edge of the shadow” (202), a shadow that Bernice approaches on her deathbed. Once again the writer is the avant-gardiste, the one on the outside, who provides inspiration for the people, as Bernice moves her friends and family. Margaret excoriates the cowardice of American writers’ refusal to enter the shadow as she confronts Craig.

What is it the matter with you – with all you American writers – ‘most all of you. A well-put-up light – but it doesn’t penetrate anything. It never makes the fog part. Just shows itself off – a well-put-up light [Growing angry.] It would be better if we didn’t have you at all! Can’t you see that it would? Lights which – only light themselves keep us from having light – from knowing what the darkness is. (199)

The darkness of Minnie Wright in Trifles, The Woman from Idaho in her tombstone phase in The People, Mrs. Patrick in The Outside, and the women in Woman’s Honor must be confronted, not avoided, in order to “penetrate the fog” and reach the light on the other side of a better future. In Bernice, Glaspell engages the miasmic darkness of women’s fatal frustrations in the hope that her audience, still alive, can reach the light on the other side.

Glaspell’s plays until 1918 are largely representative of the avant-garde version of modernism, what Huyssten calls the “insistence on the cultural
transformation of everyday life” (After the Great Divide, 7). From 1918, though, her plays manifest another aspect of modernism, what Matei Calinescu terms “its outright rejection of bourgeois modernity” (Five Faces of Modernity, 42) and “its ideals of rationality, utility, progress” (10). In that most repressed play, Bernice, the muted hostility toward bourgeois modernity is demonstrated mainly through the satirical portrait of Bernice’s ultra-conventional, hyper-organizing sister-in-law Laura, but it becomes a major theme of Glaspell’s last two Provincetown plays, Inheritors (1921) and The Verge (1921). The change lies in Glaspell’s perception that the cataclysm of World War I did not erase the stultifying aspects of the past and nurture its best parts into the future, but instead reinforced the repressive, xenophobic, and biased elements of society, as epitomized in the Espionage Act of 1917 and the Sedition Act of 1918.

On the Fourth of July 1879, Inheritors’ Silas Morton decides to commemorate the best aspects of the past, such as independence and a pioneering spirit, and to make reparations for the worst, the crimes against Native Americans, by contributing a valuable hill on his property for the founding of a college, a place where young men and women could find “All the things men have found out, the wisest and finest things men have thought since first they began to think” (111). By time-present, when Silas’ granddaughter Madeline is a student at Morton College, the college appears to be a place which promotes the worst men have thought and done: it supplies strike-breakers to local industries and is, indeed, a steady supporter of the military-industrial complex, modernity at its worst. The college is also helping to deport some students from India who would be punished for their views in their native land and, ironically, in this self-proclaimed bastion of democracy as well.

Despite Inheritors’ bitter denunciation of repressively bourgeois modernity, Glaspell does hold out hope for the future through Madeline’s conversion to the avant-garde. Like The People’s Ed Wills and The Woman from Idaho, the Indian students quote some revolutionary words of Lincoln in their defense. Madeline, until this point a fairly typical tennis-playing coed, is indirectly affected by Lincoln’s words as she impulsively defends the Indian students from police brutality by striking the officers with her tennis racket, and later confronts the police a second time, despite repeated warnings from her quite influential and highly bourgeois relatives. Madeline’s spontaneous acts lead to her more reasoned radicalization as she begins to interpret clues around her and discovers that “We seem here, now, in America, to have forgotten we’re moving. Think it’s just us – just now. Of course, that would make us afraid, and – ridiculous” (151). Madeline refuses to believe in stasis and asserts a chain of inspiration from
her pioneering ancestors through her toward the future: “The wind has come through – wind rich from lives now gone . . . Then – be the most you can be, so life will be more because you were” (156).

As this ending suggests, Inheritors can be read as Glaspell’s scornful modernist counter-propaganda to prevailing bourgeois ideologies, combined with her optimistic avant-garde stance. In The Verge, however, she explores what would become high modernism, characterized by its rigid separation from mass culture (Huyssen, After the Great Divide, viii). Through Claire Archer, the protagonist, Glaspell explores the causes and the tragic consequences of the high modernist’s alienation from the life around her.

Claire Archer’s early life was much like that of Bernice or the women in Trifles in that she was frustrated in her expectation of fulfillment through conventional women’s roles. Her first husband was a “stick-in-the-mud artist” (The Verge, 69), and the current three men in her life, soulmate, lover, and husband, are ultimately as conventional as their names suggest: Tom, Dick, and Harry. Like Bernice, Claire lost her son in infancy. Her daughter Elizabeth is a mindlessly conformist debutante. Amid the disappointments of the quotidian, Claire looked to modernity for reinvigorating transformation. She married her current husband Harry because he was an aviator; Claire hoped that this modern technology would change man’s perspective, “to look from above,” but discovered that “man flew, and returned to earth the man who left it” (69). She also regarded World War I’s destruction of the stifling past as a chance for positive metamorphoses, “But fast as we could – scuttled right back to the trim little thing we’d been shocked out of” (70). Her husband Harry is more correct in his diagnosis than he knows when he wants Claire to see a nerve specialist who “fixed up a lot of people shot to pieces in the war” (65), but for Claire the war itself was not responsible for her incipient madness, but its failed aftermath was.

Claire retreats from the bourgeois world by becoming a high modernist artist in her chosen medium of horticulture. With the help of her servant Anthony, she jealously guards her greenhouse from intruders. In Act 1, in the midst of a snowstorm, Claire diverts all the heat from the house to her greenhouse for her delicate plants and then tries to prevent her family and friends from entering because the temperature drops whenever the door is opened. This is a scene of exclusivity as high comedy, but the mood darkens as the audience begins to perceive how thoroughly Claire cuts herself off from those around her. In one of Glaspell’s ugliest and most confrontational scenes, Claire strikes her daughter Elizabeth and rejects her, saying, “To think that object ever moved my belly and sucked my breast!” (78). Claire refuses to see that her decision to have Elizabeth raised
by her conventional sister Abigail, leaving Claire free for her high modernist pursuits, might be the cause of what she regards as Elizabeth’s repugnant conformity. As she feigns madness in Act II, she rejects mass culture as represented by the phonograph records the others play. In the last act, she strangles Tom Edgeworthy when she discovers that he is not the fellow explorer that she believed him to be, but simply wants to keep her “safe” (99). The conclusion of the play exhibits her final and total alienation as she retreats into madness and sings “Nearer My God to Thee” since she is certainly far from everyone else. Claire has done what is expected of the high modernist artist: she has rejected human society along with mass culture and devoted herself to her art to the point of madness. In her rigid devotion to this role, she is as much a conformist as those around her, and her chosen role is as constrictingly sacrificial as her socially assigned gender role.

What, then, of the results of all this exclusive artistic devotion? Claire produces two works of art, the Edge Vine and Breath of Life. The Edge Vine certainly resembles the bourgeois notion of modern art: “The leaves of this vine are not the form that leaves have been. They are at once repellent and significant” (58). Claire regards the vine as a failure because “It doesn’t want to be – what hasn’t been” (61). Consequently, Claire turns to her remaining experiment, Breath of Life, which “is outside what flowers have been” (63), and, in contrast to the Edge Vine, does not turn back. Breath of Life, however, is not yet complete: it lacks a fragrance which Claire calls “Reminiscence” because “What has gone out should bring fragrance from what it has left” (63, 62). This legacy from the past as represented in human community is what Claire herself lacks. She, like her plants, is a high modernist experiment, and she is also a failure because she has isolated herself from the past and from community. She is as mentally dead as Bernice is physically dead, but, unlike Bernice, she has left nothing for others.

Glaspell herself, though, did leave us this cautionary tale about modernity’s dangerous tendencies before her decade-long hiatus from playwriting, in which she continued her experiments in radically innovative novels such as *Fugitive’s Return* (1929). *The Verge* is a fitting conclusion to Glaspell’s Provincetown years since it is technically the most modernist of her work: the language is highly fragmented, with a plethora of Glaspell’s characteristic dashes, and the greenhouse and “thwarted tower” are expressionistic representations of Claire’s mental state.7 In contrast, the Pulitzer Prize that Glaspell won for *Alison’s House* (1930) signifies bourgeois approval of traditional technique and thematic correctness, a conventional epilogue to a radical career.8 Like Bernice, Alison Stanhope is dead before the play
begins. She is a nineteenth-century poet, based on Emily Dickinson, who renounced a married lover for the good name and feelings of her family and devoted the rest of her life to her art. She seems to have learned these lessons from a poet of her past, Ralph Waldo Emerson, two of whose poems are quoted in the play as signposts to Alison’s decision: “Forbearance,” requiring her sacrifice, and “The House,” concerning the enduring quality of art. Since he is generally known as a radical thinker whose watchwords are non-conformity and self-reliance and who advocated living in the present, Emerson, like Alison and Alison’s House, seems camouflaged for the demands of social conformity.

Unlike the avant-garde art earlier espoused by Glaspell, Alison’s poetry seems to leave few positive influences, in art or life. The young male poet who comes to see her house on the last night of the nineteenth century, John Knowles, writes trite un-Dickinsonian verse: “Perhaps I could even write a poem about it – how the river flowed by the sea, as her century flowed – to eternity” (96). Although the characters, male and female, say that “Alison wrote those poems for me,” her family is enmeshed in unhappy marital and extramarital relationships, such as her niece Elsa’s living with a married man and provoking her father’s rejection. Even the nephew whom Alison regarded in infancy as heaven’s angelic messenger is trying to exploit spurious memories of his famous aunt as a bribe to his English instructor for passing his college course. The only positive effect of Alison’s art is that, with the discovery of her love poems, Elsa is reconciled with her father. If Alison’s poetry has changed anything, that change is subtle almost to invisibility.

In a sense, Alison’s House can be regarded as the dutiful exemplar of modernism between the wars when art was supposed to exist, timelessly, for and in itself, with little relationship to the life around it, the type of art praised by the rapidly ascending New Critics. This is the kind of art Alison Stanhope/Emily Dickinson ostensibly wrote, which is why Dickinson was usually the only woman in the old canon of nineteenth-century American literature. By 1930, Glaspell may have felt that any ostensibly timeless or universal quality that her works possessed would be their only claim to notice. She was right, temporarily, as the Pulitzer Prize demonstrated, but wrong in the longer run since most women modernists were erased from the literary canon anyway. We now read Dickinson as a woman both beyond and of her time as we see the American Renaissance in its historical and cultural perspectives. As we similarly revise our view of modernism into modernisms and refuse to valorize its latest and most marmoreal phase, we can now see Glaspell as her own kind of avant-garde modernist, who valued the best of the past, present, and future, and never lost sight of
the relationship between art and humanity, so that of her works "there will be those in the future to say, She wrote them for me" (Alison's House, 153).

NOTES

1 For an analysis of Glaspell's fiction, see my Susan Glaspell's Century of American Women.

2 Due to difficulties of distinguishing contributions, I am not discussing Glaspell's two collaborations with George Cram Cook, Suppressed Desires (1915) and Tickless Time (1918), nor The Comic Artist (1928), her later collaboration with her lover or common-law husband Norman Matson. I am also excluding Glaspell's unpublished Chains of Dew (1922) and her one-act play Close the Book (1917), a slight and farcical precursor to Inheritors.

3 Judith L. Stephens argues that Trifles is typical of Progressive Era plays because it "both challenged and reinforced the dominant gender ideology of the period" ("Gender Ideology," 53). I agree, but think that the challenge is what Mrs. Hale, Mrs. Peters, and Glaspell's audience subliminally and ultimately retain; after viewing the potential for change, the past can no longer be accepted complacently and unquestioningly.


5 When we consider Glaspell's close association with Eugene O'Neill in the Provincetown Players, her use of fog imagery here could be read as an implicit critique of the despair of his plays as symbolized by their now-famous, seemingly never-lifting fogs.

6 Barbara Ozieblo ("Rebellion and Rejection," 71) and Kathleen L. Carroll ("Centering Women Onstage," 197) see Claire as a female Nietzsche, and I would agree since Nietzsche is a precursor of this type of high modernist artist.


8 Carroll sees this as a muting of Glaspell's feminism in particular ("Centering Women Onstage," 191), while I see the repressed feminism as part of Glaspell's strategic repression of her avant-garde beliefs in social transformation because of the high modernist cultural climate.