

## **Unveiling the Feminine Voice in Modern American Drama**

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### **ABSTRACT**

The moment one thinks of successful playwrights in American drama, one spontaneously thinks of Eugene O'Neill, Arthur Miller, etc, whereas women seem to be invisible. Is drama a male bastion? With this question in mind, the presenter started the journey and was stunned to see that not only have many women been writing plays but also received recognition during their time. Unfortunately, they did not get the due attention in the canon of theatrical history. 'Canons' in themselves are highly questionable constructs, historically set by men according to some feminists. This paper unravels the work of two women playwrights, namely, Susan Glaspell and Zona Gale, who have made a significant contribution to modern American drama by establishing a female tradition in American drama. "Women dominate their own experience by imagining it, giving it form, writing about it...They define for themselves and for their readers, a woman as she is and as she dreams" (The Female Imagination, Spacks). By closely examining Glaspell's *Trifles* and Gale's *Miss Lulu Bett*, one may explore how a distinct female voice emanates through these works. In part one, the paper provides a brief background about the conditions in which these women wrote. The second part addresses the themes handled by these dramatists and the third part forms the conclusion.

### **KEYWORDS**

American Drama; Female Voices; Arthur Miller.

The moment one thinks of successful playwrights in American drama, one spontaneously thinks of Eugene O'Neill, Arthur Miller, etc, whereas women seem to be invisible. Is drama a male bastion? With this question in mind, the presenter started the journey and was stunned to see that not only have many women been writing plays but also received recognition during their era. Unfortunately, they haven't got due attention in the canon of theatrical history. 'Canons' are highly questionable constructs, historically set by men according to some feminists. It is something that enshrines Eugene O'Neill

but something that leaves out Susan Glaspell who is supposed to have introduced him. It is a phenomenon that extols the works of Arthur Miller but ignores his contemporary Lillian Hellman. As a student of American literature I didn't study a single play written by a female playwright! Why aren't plays by women included in syllabus?

When one analyses the history of American theatre, one realizes how biases against women playwrights were prevalent in the theatrical world. According to the book, *Plays by Early American Women* by Amelia Kritzer only two women dramatist namely, Mercy Otis

Warren and Cora Mowatt have been mentioned in standard histories of American theatre before 1850.

Moreover, most of the women playwrights of the era like Mercy Otis Warren, Judith Murray, etc published their plays either anonymously or under pseudonyms as theatrical activity was considered immoral and women were apprehensive that their work might be turned down by a male critic. This attitude towards women dramatists is echoed in the preface to one book by Rowson:

*"With lengthened visage and contemptuous smile, sits down to review the literary productions of a woman...catching the author at some that or therefore at once condemns her without a why or wherefore."*  
(Mentoria 2)

Women were particularly affected by the antagonistic attitude towards theatre and so very few women wrote plays during the early years.

The most successful woman playwright in the early part of the 20th century was Rachel Crothers. Not only did she write a lot of plays but also directed them. Not many women were able to forge a partnership with producers like her. Around the time of World War I, however, the "little theatres" started mushrooming which gave a platform for the women playwrights to showcase their talent. The most important of these groups was the Province Town Players. Susan Glaspell was the co-founder of the Province Town Players. According to John Gassner, this group was responsible for the 'modernizing trend' in American theatre.

*Trifles* (1916) is Glaspell's best known play. It has been widely translated and frequently anthologized. On the surface, *Trifles* is a murder mystery but when one probes deeper one realizes that it is a profound play that unravels how men and women have divergent perspectives when encountered with the same situation or scene. Apart from depicting the way

women feel, think and act the play explores the repercussions of stifling marriages on the minds of women.

The plot of the one-act play is as follows: Ms Minnie Wright is suspected of murdering her husband, John Wright. The guardians of law come to the scene to collect evidence along with two women. As the women move around the house they are able to decipher the scattered clues and untangle the mystery behind her husband's murder. Ironically the same hints elude the men who are supposed to be the upholders of law and justice. At the end of the play the women decide to cover up their discovery.

The County Attorney orders the men to search everywhere except the kitchen for motives for the murder, indirectly demeaning the domestic activity associated with the kitchen. On the contrary, the things that lay around catches the attention of women and for them these seemingly unimportant things are invested with a lot of meaning. Whereas, the men just mock at the women by saying that they are used to worrying about "trifles". However, the very trifles that the men denounce as insignificant contain the pieces of the missing jig-saw puzzle of murder.

As the play progresses the women also investigate the crime in their own way. Their strategy is radically different from that of men. Unlike the men who pan across the house, the women zoom in on each object in the kitchen. It is this unique insight, this focus on minute details which men lack help the women to fathom the murder mystery.

In the sewing box, to their horror, they find a bird that has been brutally throttled and they immediately comprehend the motive of the murder. They conjecture that her husband must have killed the bird as he detested singing and she must have killed him for avenging its death and more importantly as a reaction to her suppressed silence.

According to Judith Barlow, although the prevailing cultural myth speaks of men being “trapped in marriage” *Trifles* portrays the wife as an imprisoned partner. Ms. Wright is trapped in a loveless marriage and is eager to free herself from the clutches of her despotic husband.

One more reason why the women are able to penetrate the mystery is the fact that they are able to empathize with the accused. They “share her experience”. They are able to identify with Ms Wright as they have gone through similar experiences. Both women agree with the fact that life would have been very hard in the company of her oppressive husband. Though the Sheriff’s wife is “married to the law”, she conceals the evidence as she seems to agree with the inevitability of the situation.

The play is not just about the suppression of women; it also highlights the fact that sometimes women are also callous towards the sufferings of their own sex, thereby perpetuating injustice. Mrs Hale admits: “I wish I’d come here once in a while! That was a crime...We live close together and we live apart.” (*Trifles* 84)

Times have changed. Women have become more assertive, independent and they resist injustice of any kind. Therefore, the theme of the play might seem dated to some readers. But that would be reading the play superficially. The play is not just an indictment of the male dominated society or of the institution of marriage and further of an insensitive society which compels women to live with an incompatible and tyrannical husband, it is also gives us an indirect message in being more humane. In this sense the play is timeless and worth reading. The pleasure of reading the play lies in unknitting the profound meaning in the play. We certainly cannot brush it aside as “*Trifles*”

Another important playwright who chronicled the lives of women trapped in domesticity was Zona Gale. She began her writing career with fiction and later turned

to drama. Encouraged by producer Brook Pemberton she adapted her novel *Miss Lulu Bett* (1920) into a play of the same name.

The plot of the play revolves around Lulu, who lives with her sister Ina’s family. She is financially dependent on them and does all the domestic jobs for the family in return. She is treated as a slave in their house, an automaton bereft with any feelings, emotions, ambitions and a life of her own. When her brother-in-law’s brother Ninian visits their family, for the first time, Lulu realizes her worth as an autonomous human being. Ninian is the one who makes her realize her servile position in the family. He tells her, “They make a slavery of you ...Damned shame I call it.”(*Miss Lulu Bett* 103). Ninian and Lulu get married. However, just within a month Lulu returns to her sister’s family and it is revealed that Ninian was already legally married to a girl who left him immediately after two months. Lulu accepts her unfortunate lot, but her despotic brother- in-law insists that she should tell everybody that Ninian left her in order to prevent the family name from getting tarnished. Lulu is not convinced and rebels against the family and leaves her sister’s family.

The play had two endings. The original version was open-ended wherein she leaves the family and decides to script her own life and chart her own journey. The audience were not able to digest the original end and so she complied to the popular tastes and wrote a revised ending where Ninian asks for forgiveness and Lulu forgives him.

The play is seminal as it mirrors the pathetic conditions of the women of its era. The play is also a critique of the institution of marriage and patriarchy that reduces the woman to a mere follower of men. Ina, though seemingly enjoys a better position in the household than Lulu, has put on blinkers and blindly follows her husband. She has no opinion of her own and accepts

her husband's point of view on everything. The play is significant for another reason as it gives a covert message that economic independence helps the woman in elevating herself in the eyes of the world and in her own.

Both the plays *Trifles* and *Miss Lulu Bett* are set in a domestic set up. They are a critique of the institution of marriage. In case of Minnie Wright of *Trifles*, marriage destroys her whereas, in contrast, in case of Lulu her invalid marriage to Ninian empowers her and sets her free from the tyrannical rule of her brother-in-law. Both plays explore the indifference of women towards women. In case of *Trifles* the women are able to realize their callousness towards their sex but Ina of *Miss Lulu Bett* fails to understand her own sister and joins hands with her husband in heaping

humiliation and injustice on Lulu. These plays by women playwrights do not fascinate one just for a moment; they are aesthetically compelling even today due to the witty dialogues and authentic characterization

According to the book, *Women Pulitzer Playwrights: Biographical Profiles* only eleven women got this coveted prize until the year 2002. Quira Algeria Hudes got the Pulitzer Prize for drama for the year 2012. Nowadays, there is a massive rise in the number of women playwrights. This could be achieved only because of the women who labored and created a legacy and a female tradition in drama. Today the scenario seems a little hopeful for women dramatists as women like Susan Glaspell, Zona Gale, among others provided them a beacon of light!

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