

Trifles

SUSAN GLASPELL

1916

Susan Glaspell's one-act play, *Trifles*, is based on actual events that occurred in Iowa at the turn of the century. From 1899-1901 Glaspell worked as a reporter for the *Des Moines News*, where she covered the murder trial of a farmer's wife, Margaret Hossack, in Indianola, Iowa. Hossack was accused of killing her husband, John, by striking him twice in the head with an ax while he slept.

Initially it was assumed that burglars had murdered the farmer, but a subsequent sheriff's investigation turned up evidence suggesting Mrs. Hossack was unhappy in her marriage. Ultimately, she was charged with and found guilty of the crime and sentenced to life in prison.

Over the course of sixteen months, Glaspell wrote twenty-six articles covering the case, from the announcement of the murder until Hossack's conviction. The author found herself feeling more and more sympathy for the accused, in spite of the grisly nature of the crime.

Years later, Glaspell and her husband, George Cook, along with some friends, founded the Provincetown Players, an amateur theatrical company on Cape Cod, Massachusetts. In 1916 the group presented a summertime series of plays that included Eugene O'Neill's *Bound East for Cardiff*. In need of a new play to end the season, Cook suggested Glaspell should write a one-act for the company. Her memory of the Hossack trial inspired *Trifles*.



Trifles is a murder mystery that explores gender relationships, power between the sexes, and the nature of truth. In the play, the farmer and his wife never actually appear; instead, the story focuses on the prosecutor, George Henderson, who has been called in to investigate the murder; Henry Peters, the local sheriff; Lewis Hale, a neighboring farmer who discovered Wright's body; and Mrs. Peters and Mrs. Hale, wives to the two local men.

While the men bluster and tramp around the farmhouse searching for clues, the women discover bits of evidence in the "trifles" of a farmer's wife—her baking, cleaning and sewing. Because the men virtually ignore the women's world, they remain blind to the truth before their eyes.

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

On July 1, 1882, Susan Glaspell was born in Davenport, Iowa. She excelled in academics as a student, studying Latin and journalism. After graduation from high school, she worked as a newspaper reporter for the *Davenport Morning Republican*, then as the society editor for the *Weekly Outlook*. From 1897-1899 she attended Drake University and received a Ph.D. in Philosophy.

Immediately after college she resumed her career as a journalist, writing for the *Des Moines News*. In 1900 she was assigned to cover the trial of Margaret Hossack, an Iowa farmer's wife accused of murdering her husband while he slept. The trial would later become the basis for Glaspell's short story "A Jury of Her Peers" and one-act play *Trifles*.

Glaspell traveled the world from 1901-1915, working as a freelance author. She spent time in Chicago, New York, Colorado, and Paris, while contributing articles to the *Chicago Daily Review*, as well as national magazines like *Harper's*, *Leslie's*, and *Munsey's*. In 1913 she married George Cram Cook, a longtime friend who had recently divorced his second wife. The couple settled in New York and spent summers in Provincetown, on Cape Cod, Massachusetts.

Glaspell made quite an impression on the American literary scene in the first few decades of the



Susan Glaspell in 1948

twentieth century. Along with Cook, and the legendary playwright Eugene O'Neill, she helped found the Provincetown Players, an amateur theatre company that was partly responsible for launching the "little theatre" movement across America, and helped define American dramatic literature in the modern era. Eleven of her plays were first produced by the Provincetown Players, including *Trifles*, *The People*, *The Outside*, *Woman's Honor*, *Bernice*, *Inheritors*, and *The Verge*.

In 1931 she was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for her play, *Alison's House*. In the full-length drama, the family of a dead poet reflect on her life and writing and discover a greater understanding of love and each other.

Glaspell was a prolific writer. At the time of her death in 1948, she had written fifty short stories, nine novels, and fourteen plays; most of these works feature strong female protagonists and stories that focus on the experiences of women. Perhaps not surprisingly, her work faded from public interest during the conservative 1950s, and practically disappeared from bookshelves and the stages of amateur theatres. Yet in the past few decades, her work is being reexamined and celebrated by a new group of critics and audiences.