

UNIT 3(I)

BIRTH OF TWENTIETH-CENTURY AMERICAN DRAMA. THE PROVINCETOWN PLAYERS. SUSAN GLASPELL'S *TRIFLES*

I. FROM REALISM TO MODERN DRAMA

Decline of theater in XIX cent. not only American --> Mass art

Novel predominated --> social art of new bourgeoisie

Theater lacked subtlety --> literary platform for posturing

Romanticism = emphasis in individual, actor as self-dramatizing figure

XIX Cent. Am. = public myths of upward mobility

Am. Actor no longer looked to Europe --> Theater = distraction & potential

Theater = mirror of events & national spectacle

Realism = notion of reality --> particular production style --> Belasco = new system of electric stage design

II. PROVINCETOWN PLAYERS

Forms & conventions not adequate to XX century

George Cram Cook + Floyd Dell + Susan Glaspell = visionary socialism & mystical view of life --> sex significance + women role + liberating art

Provincetown Players (1915) = American plays

Common = new aesthetic & moral development --> not just surface art

(<-- Experimental theater movement in Europe)

1915 - *Suppressed Desires & Constancy*

Model of Greek theater --> members of clan

1916 - O'Neill's *Bound East for Cardiff* (Playwrights Theatre)

No creation of one-act plays but lend itself to small theater -->

Space (lightning & effects) --> individual spiritual location

John Reed, Louise Bryant, Floyd Dell, Neith Boyce, Hutchinson Hapgood,
Susan Glaspell & Others - Weekly bills (7-8/season -3 plays each) - 450
subscribers & Stage Society

I World War --> collapse of Washington Square Players --> few original
members (Provincetown)

1920 - Greatest success - O'Neill's *Emperor Jones* --> also decline

8 seasons = 93 plays (47 American playwrights) --> theater serious artistic
activity & importance of group working together

2nd stage --> *The Hairy Ape* (1922) --> O'Neill withdrew in 1926

III. WASHINGTON SQUARE PLAYERS

Lacked individual like George Cook & resident playwright (O'Neill)

Less concerned with American repertoire, but Robert Edmond Jones

Closed in 1918 --> Theater Guild (capital \$500 & Garrick Theater)

Improve Guild production standards & acting + Experiment more +

Permanent ensemble acting company + Maintain a fine repertoire + Establish

Studio for Arts of Theater

IV. SUSAN GLASPELL (1882-1948)

More controlled than O'Neill, more reticent(subtle) style, indirection

Visionary drive + Nietzschean life force <--> tragic potential

Trifles (1916) = well-observed study of male arrogance & insensitivity

Comedies = sense of egocentrism of anarchist movement --> *The People*

(1917), *Close the Book* (1917), *Women's Honor* (1918), *Tickless Time* (1918)

--> in-jokes(chistes), mocking of own pretensions & over-seriousness

Weakness --> over sentimentality (*Bernice* 1919 & *The Comic Artist*, 1928)

Early plays --> flawed(imperfectos), effects too far, symbol too overt

The Outside (1917) --> from realism towards abstraction

The Inheritors (1921) --> Am. idealism <--> reaction & pragmatism

The Verge (1921) --> refusal to be contained by form or language + imperfect, precious dialogue, collapse of comedy & pretentiousness

Alison's House (1930) --> self-justification for violation of social taboo

Glaspell = radicalism + conservatism --> celebrates old values

Idealism -> politic. pragmatism / celebration of life -> biolog. persistence

Director of Mid-West Bureau for the Federal Theatre - one year

Contemptuous of social & artistic evasion & belief in incorruptible human nature & desire to transcend materialism

Imagination in terms of symbols

Eclipse of later work + O'Neill --> conceal her achievement

V. SUSAN GLASPELL'S *TRIFLES*

QUESTIONS FOR STUDENTS (UNIT 3/I):

- 1.- What is the plot of Susan Glaspell's *Trifles*?
- 2.- Which are the main themes of Glaspell's *Trifles*?
- 3.- How can you characterize *Trifles* in literary (linguistic) terms (plot, style, characters, action development, denouement, asides, theatrical directions...)?
- 4.- Point out any literary differences between *Trifles* and Herne's *Shore Acres*.
- 5.- Do you think Glaspell wants to convey any particular message in her play *Trifles*?
- 6.- Can you find any special instances of symbology in Glaspell's play?
- 7.- Where can you locate Glaspell's *Trifles* from an historical literary perspective?
- 8.- Give your personal opinion about the play *Trifles*? Could you name its strong points and its weaknesses from a literary point of view?

ANSWERS TO QUESTIONS (UNIT 3/I):

1.- What is the plot of Susan Glaspell's *Trifles*?

Following the murder of a man, apparently by his wife, the County Attorney, the Sheriff and his wife, and a neighbouring farmer and his wife arrive at the empty house to collect the clothes for the imprisoned woman and to look for clues.

2.- Which are the main themes of Glaspell's *Trifles*?

The main theme is the study of male arrogance and insensitivity, and the more subtle and intuitive behaviour of the women when facing a serious problem. It also talks about the oppression of animals, the exploitation of women by men and, in general, the alienation of man in society.

3.- How can you characterize *Trifles* in literary (linguistic) terms (plot, style, characters, action development, denouement, asides, theatrical directions...)?

The plot is very simple, though it has, in a sense, a certain suspense created by the police investigation of a murder.

The characters are not well-depicted as corresponds to a very short one-act play. They are characterized by means of their behaviour in a disagreeable situation.

The dialogue is vivid and quite natural, although there is not much physical action. Action remains at the level of thoughts, inquiries.

The play ends up with the women discovering the real reasons of the murder, which they do not reveal, while the men have not conclusive clues whatsoever about the real motives of the crime.

4.- Point out any literary differences between *Trifles* and Herne's *Shore Acres*.

James Herne's *Shore Acres* is a realistic play, developed by a realistic technique, even though it pertains to the psychological fin de siècle Ibsenesque realism. Susan Glaspell's *Trifles* still employs a realistic technique -though much more subtle and indirect- but its aims are more far-reaching than the mere depiction of life events as in a strictly XIX century realistic play.

5.- Do you think Glaspell wants to convey any particular message in her play *Trifles*?

She wants to denounce the male arrogant behaviour in contrast to the more subtle and intelligent attitude of women. She also tries to conjure up the different kinds of

oppression, suffered by animals, women and man in a politically reactionary and morally pragmatic social system.

6.- Can you find any special instances of symbolism in Glaspell's play?

Broken hinge on the bird cage reflects the broken neck of the bird, the broken neck of the man killed and also the spirit of the woman who had bought the cage. This symbolized the woman imprisoned by the man, the bird imprisoned by the woman, and all imprisoned by an implacable system.

The disordered state of the stitch-work on her quilt reflects the tensions which finally turn her from a creative to a destructive force.

7.- Where can you locate Glaspell's *Trifles* from an historical literary perspective?

Trifles was a product of the Provincetown Players, which was a collective of playwrights who tried to break with the exaggerations of XIX century theater (and acting), the theater as celebration of the new ascending bourgeoisie with its pieties and its dreams of upward mobility, its superficiality and a total lack of subtlety. The new theater should draw its attention to the role of women and the liberating nature of art through a new aesthetic, which considers the foundering of classical liberal principles and a human environmental reality in which conscious and unconscious emerge, in contrast to the biological determinism of realism.

8.- Give your personal opinion about the play *Trifles*? Could you name its strong points and its weaknesses from a literary point of view?

Constructed with economy and grace

Subtlety - Controlled dialogue and action

Message indirectly conveyed: (a) Women create instinctive theories out of trifles = play out of small gestures: (b) Symbolism : Man imprisons woman --> woman imprisoned bird --> All imprisoned in system - Disordered state of stitch-work --> tensions (from creative to destructive force)

Opposes life (women's talk) to tragic forces (crime)