

Susan Glaspell's 1916 play *'Trifles'* demonstrates how gender can affect a reader's response. Gender describes the physical and social condition of being male or female. When viewing the Wrights kitchen as a text and the characters as the reader, it becomes clear how gender is an integral feature of the theory of reading.

The reader response theory consists of multiple elements; it looks at how a reader interprets a text and what contributes to that interpretation. Raman Seldon *et al* states 'we differ about interpretations only because our ways of reading differ'.¹ The way we read a text will also depend on personal experience.

Wolfgang Iser argues that a piece of literature contains 'blanks',² these are spaces in the text that only the reader can fill. If these blanks exist within an unfamiliar area, the reader is unlikely to fill them. This affects the readers' construal of the text in this case the Wrights kitchen. In the early 20th century the kitchen was a place rarely occupied by men and the County Attorney is quick to observe 'nothing important here, nothing that would point to any motive'.³

The men in this scene are typical of the 'implied reader' described by Raman Seldon *et al* as 'the reader whom the text creates for itself and amounts to a network of response-inviting structures'.⁴

The theory looks at how a text projects itself to the reader, Umberto Eco's 'the role of the reader' argues that some texts are open while others are closed, the

¹ Raman Seldon *et al*, *A Reader's guide to contemporary Literary Theory*, 4th edition, (Hertfordshire: Prentice Hall/Harvester Wheatsheaf 1997) p48.

² Raman Seldon *et al*, p50.

³ Susan Glaspell, *Trifles*, Lecture Handout, 30/10/03.

⁴ Raman Seldon *et al*, p56.

former invites reader collaboration in the development of meaning, the latter has its meaning already determined and has anticipated the readers response.⁵

'*Trifles*' is an open text, it invites the readers, in this case the men and women to find the meaning/evidence. The men's inability to fill the blanks signifies gender issue and contributes to their ultimate failure.

Another aspect of reader-orientated criticism is the 'reception theory', Hans R Jauss, a German supporter of this theory uses the term 'Horizon of expectation'⁶ to describe the criteria readers use to judge literary texts in any given period. The men of law enter the scene with a predetermined 'horizon of expectation'. Their historical experience of similar crimes means they look for a particular set of codes in this case signs of evidence, because this case does not fit into that experience they fail to discover the evidence. They are restricted by their gender role and unable to read the text as anything other than masculine.

Alongside the men, the 'implied reader' is Mrs. Hale. According to Raman Seldon *et al* we can categorise her as the 'actual reader' she 'receives certain mental images in the process of reading',⁷ but the images also depend on her 'existing stock of experience', in this case her understanding of what it is to be a woman in her time.

Referring to Judith Fetterley's notion of the resisting reader, Sara Mills argues that 'although texts may address us as males, we as females can construct a

⁵ Umberto Eco, *The Role of the Reader: Explorations in the semiotics of Texts*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1979) p178

⁶ Hans R Jauss, *Toward An Aesthetic of Reception*, trans. T. Bahti (London: Harvester Wheatsheaf 1982)

⁷ Raman Seldon *et al*, p56.

space of reading which resists the dominant reading'.⁸ Mrs. Hale resists the dominant reading and participates in a feminine reading of the text; this enables her to read the scene from a female perspective. Mrs. Peters reads the text both as a man and as a woman, although she only appears to do this at a subconscious level. She is the sheriffs' wife; therefore, she has a stricter gender role to adhere to, her role of wife has almost obscured her natural femininity.

Sara Mills describes the gendered reading of a text as 'one whereby the reader comes to the process of reading with a framework of expectations which are determined by her gender, and she interacts with elements in a text in a gendered way'.⁹ Mrs. Hale defines her gender role in comparison with Mrs. Wright when talking about Minnie she says 'she didn't even belong to ladies aid'¹⁰ she accepts that they are both farmers' wives and that Minnie never fully embraced that gender role. Minnie did not get involved with other women or with organisations that would have given her freedom. The quote implies that it was the least she could have done, Mrs. Hale does however empathise with Minnie influencing Mrs. Peters to do the same.

Raman Seldon *et al* state 'the act of interpretation is possible because the text allows the reader access to the author's consciousness',¹¹ this allows the reader to think and feel what the author does.

⁸ Sara Mills, *Feminist Stylistics*, (London: Routledge 1995) p75.

⁹ Sara Mills p75.

¹⁰ Susan Glaspell, *Trifles*, Lecture Handout, 30/10/03.

¹¹ Raman Seldon *et al*, p52.

This is a significant point, the men in the play try to interpret Mrs. Wright's manner but are unable to come to any conclusions, when the women discover the untidy sewing they are able to make assumptions about her mood and state of mind, they can identify with her as a woman and as a wife.

Sara Mills states that 'the reader is subject to many discursive pressures which lead her to read in particular ways.'¹² Mrs. Peters avoids answering direct questions with her own opinion when asked by Mrs. Hale 'do you think she did it?'¹³ She replies with the opinions of her husband and his colleagues.

She does sympathise, but what follows is an abrupt recall of her masculine implied reader response, e.g. 'I know what stillness is, but the law has got to punish crime, Mrs. Hale'.¹⁴

A reader always takes to a text a framework into which they fit the text, this explains why the men read the scene the way they do. The men interpret the text from a masculine point of view, they only know the facts, Mr. Wright is dead and Mrs. Wright was the only other person present. It would be natural for them, taking into consideration their historical viewpoint, implied reader response and gender role, to look for obvious signs of an argument or struggle. The notion of a gendered difference is critical when analysing reader positioning.

The kitchen plays an integral part in signifying the gender roles. Gainor states in her essay, 'if the kitchen is coded as the woman's sphere, then surely the

¹² Sara Mills, p66.

¹³ Susan Glaspell *Trifles*.

¹⁴ Susan Glaspell *Trifles*.

bedroom must be thought of as the male arena,'¹⁵ this is where the men spend most of their time and of course where John Wright died.

Mrs. Hale and the men in the play have a contradictory view of John Wright's character. When Mrs. Peters states, 'they say he was a good man,' she is again referring to the men's opinion. While Mrs. Hale admits that he 'didn't drink', 'kept his word' and 'paid his bills', she also refers to her own impression of him as a 'hard man'. Mrs. Hale sees beyond the masculine observations and trusts her own instincts; she describes talking to him as 'like a raw wind that gets to the bone'.¹⁶

The men in the play do not discuss John Wright's life or personality. The women do discuss Minnie Wright, Mrs. Hale describes her before her marriage, 'she used to wear pretty clothes and be lively, when she was Minnie Foster'.¹⁷

Mrs. Hale builds up an image of Mrs. Wright that Mrs. Peters can relate to and identify with, she later describes her as 'like a bird herself',¹⁸ this coupled with the cold character of Mr. Wright and the discovery of the birdcage create an image of Minnie being caged herself.

The discovery of the bird with its broken neck is an important moment of realisation for the two women. The extent of the sadness in Minnie Wright's life has become abundantly clear and the recognition of what this grim discovery signifies seems to set Mrs. Hale's mind racing.

¹⁵ J. Ellen Gainor, *Detective Work: Glaspell's form and intent in 'A Jury of her Peers' and Trifles* in *Literature and Gender*, ed. By Lizbeth Goodman (London: Routledge 1996)

¹⁶ Susan Glaspell *Trifles*.

¹⁷ Susan Glaspell *Trifles*.

¹⁸ Susan Glaspell *Trifles*.

Again, referring back to her own personal experience of Mr. Wright, Mrs. Hale states 'No, Wright wouldn't like the bird-a thing that sang. She used to sing. He killed that, too'.¹⁹

This statement is sufficient to make Mrs. Peters obviously uncomfortable with how the situation is unfolding.

Mrs. Hale reproaches herself for not calling on Mrs. Wright occasionally; she declares 'that was a crime, who's going to punish that?'²⁰ This questioning adds to the inference that the murder was not the only crime that took place in the farmhouse.

Ultimately, both women read the text from a gendered perspective enabling them to justify why they hide the evidence.

The two women show compassion for Minnie Wright, they understand the hardships of being a woman in their time, and Mrs. Hale says 'we all go through the same things – it's all just a different kind of the same thing'.²¹ It is here the women seem united, in defense of one they feel has done wrong and been wronged, in a final act of female solidarity they hide the evidence they have found and protect Mrs. Wright.

Susan Glaspell's *'Trifles'* is a play in one act that demonstrates the significance of gendered theories of reading. It achieves this by showing how the women make their observations and unknowingly build up the circumstances surrounding the crime. They notice small details that are significant to them as

¹⁹ Susan Glaspell *Trifles*.

²⁰ Susan Glaspell *Trifles*.

²¹ Susan Glaspell *Trifles*.

women; these details enable them to identify with the text. The men in this play overlook these details because they only view the scene from a masculine perspective. They read the text within a rigid framework of ideals that do not apply in this case, to be able to interpret a variety of texts is to be able to read from a gendered point of view.