

Film or Theater Review

Length: 500 words

There is a difference between evaluating a work and merely liking or disliking it. When you evaluate, you must make a judgment about the quality of the play or film; is it good, bad or mediocre. Here are some questions I want you to answer as you make this judgment.

1. What type of work is this. Name one or two other works of this type.
2. Does it succeed on its own terms? What is the goal of this play or film, and does it achieve that goal?
3. Analyze its parts. Plot, character and theme you are familiar with. Also discuss the staging of the work; how does it look?
4. Does it transcend its own time to say things that are universally true? Do you expect people to be watching this work in 20 or 50 or 400 years?

Review: “Trifles” by Susan Glaspell

I

“Trifles” is a short play which fits the description of several different types of literature. First, it is a murder mystery, but an unusual one: the murderer and the method are obvious, so detectives concern themselves with motive only. It is also a feminist drama in which we see women marginalized by men, sometimes patronized and sometimes oppressed. These women unite and rebel. Finally, it is a tragedy in the classic sense because someone dies but also in a more contemporary sense since the gender conflict that caused the Wright marriage to end in murder and imprisonment is also seen in the marriages of two other couples in the play.

II

.The goal of this drama is to demonstrate the misunderstandings that regularly occur between men and women--even husbands and wives—and show their tragic consequences. The harsh treatment of John Wright toward his wife is replayed in a quieter manner as the attorney and the husbands refer to “the ladies” in a demeaning way, refusing to believe that they are doing anything important or relevant to the investigation. By discounting their wives and criticizing Minnie Wright’s housekeeping skills, they put the women on the defensive and insure that the women will not share their discoveries.

III

This short play tells the story of three men who come to the bleak Wright farmhouse to solve the murder of John Wright, who has been strangled in his bed. Two of their wives also come, to gather some clothes for Minnie Wright, who is in jail, awaiting trial because she was present at the scene of the crime. The men investigate, but the women discover the truth of the crime. Minnie has strangled her husband in his sleep after years of loneliness because he has murdered her pet canary. However, they lie about evidence, destroying it and hiding it, feeling more loyal to Minnie than to their husbands and the visiting attorney, all of whom treat them disrespectfully.

The characters develop along gender lines. The men are official, arrogant and unwilling to admit what they don’t know. While they pretend admiration for women, this is their basic attitude: “Well, women are used to worrying over trifles” (Glaspell 947). The women are astounded by what they find, but are drawn together by sympathy for Minnie

right. Mrs. Hale, the neighbor, says to Mrs. Peters, the sheriff's wife, "We all go through the same things—it's all just a different kind of the same thing" (Glaspell 954).

The theme is clear. When we don't respect each other, we all suffer. The men might have asked for, and possibly received, the women's help in solving the crime. Instead, by believing them incapable of anything but trifles, they alienate the women. Minnie Wright may go free, since there is no motive to link her to the murder, at least none that the men can see or understand.

I watched a version of this play filmed in 1974 in black and white. The lack of color fit perfectly with the story. It was bleak and symbolic, since the story is all about seeing the shades of gray. The farmhouse sat alone in the landscape, its paint peeling and its wood starting to rot. Unlike the play, this version also showed the bedroom, with the rope drawn over the back of the headboard; its position explained how a small woman might strangle a large man by using the headboard as a pulley. There was also a scene in the barn, where the men found a rope from which a piece had been cut and realized its significance. However, they commented on a sack of birdseed, but failed to see its importance in the crime.

IV

"Trifles" has a message which is universally true: men and women are different, and the differences can be a good or bad thing. When women are oppressed for being women, they may choose to rebel, even to the point of murder or the destruction of evidence. The

play was published in 1916, just a few short years before American women officially became voters on August 26, 1920 (“Women’s Suffrage Movement”). Yet its lesson is still true.

There is also the difference between what the male characters say about women and the way they act toward them. The young County Attorney says, “And yet, for all their worries, what we would do without the ladies?” (Glaspell 947). The female characters have a place; it is just not a place equal to the men. Imagine what a different play this might have been if John Wright had appreciated his wife’s love of companionship and music, or if the men sent to solve the crime had asked for help from the women who understood it. (795 words)

Bibliography

Glaspell, Susan. “Trifles.” Literature, A Portable Anthology. Ed. Janet Gardner, Beverly Lawn, Jack Ridl and Pete Schakel. Boston” Bedford St. Martin’s, 2004. 944-955.

"Women's Suffrage Movement." About.com. 2005. 8 Apr. 2005

<http://americanhistory.about.com/od/womenssuffrage/>>.