

THE REPRESENTATION OF SISTERHOOD IN SUSAN GLASPELL'S TRIFLES: A KINESIC ANALYSIS

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Abstract: *Susan Glaspell's plays have been recognized for its feminist ideologies. The present study traces the representations of the notion of sisterhood in Glaspell's scrip entitled Trifles by employing Barthes' semiotics and Fischer-Lichte's concept of kinesics. Focusing on the gestural and the proxemic signs of the kinesics included in the script, the present study reveals that the notion of sisterhood grows among the female characters in the play through the increasing realization of their similar positions as women in patriarchal society. This development of solidarity among the female characters implies a strong feminist ideology about how women should stand together in facing oppression in male dominated structures.*

Keywords: *Kinesics, Gesture, Proxemics, Semiotics, Sisterhood*

Abstrak: *Drama Susan Glaspell telah diakui karena ideologi feminisnya. Kajian ini menelusuri representasi gagasan persaudaraan dalam naskah Glaspell yang berjudul Trifles dengan menggunakan semiotika Barthes dan konsep kinesika Fischer-Lichte. Berfokus pada tanda-tanda gestural dan proxemic dari kinesika yang terdapat dalam naskah, penelitian ini mengungkapkan bahwa gagasan persaudaraan tumbuh di antara karakter perempuan dalam drama melalui peningkatan realisasi posisi mereka yang sama sebagai perempuan dalam masyarakat patriarki. Perkembangan solidaritas antar karakter perempuan ini menyiratkan ideologi feminis yang kuat tentang bagaimana perempuan harus berdiri bersama dalam menghadapi penindasan dalam struktur yang didominasi laki-laki.*

Kata-Kata Kunci: *Kinesik, Gestur, Proksemik, Semiotika, Persaudaraan*

INTRODUCTION

Theatrical work is one of the literary products built upon various codes that entangle with cultural comprehension (Wilson, 2020). Dissections on mise-en-scene (or staging of the scene, according to Bordwell and Thompson (Bordwell & Thompson, 2010), depends on the actors' reenacting that is conveyed verbally and non-verbally through various cues. Besides technological apparatus such as camerawork, drama is also created through many linguistic codes that spread around the actors' verbal conveyance and staging composition (Gill, 1995, pp. 203–222). The analysis of linguistic signs can be found in various types of drama, starting from a spiritually-themed narrative (Staiano, 1979) to a realist representation of daily life that signifies a modern psychological trope (Joosa, 2012). The aim of breaking down a theatrical text and analyzing it within the field of the linguistic arena is similar to what other structuralist approaches, such as the Saussurian perspective, have done in other literary discourses

(Suwastini et al., 2019). It fragmentizes theatre or drama as an autonomous entity or having its structure, such as the conception of language (Issacharoff, 1981, pp. 211–212). Scholars' works regarding this methodology are based on the Prague School's structural postulation applied to various European theatrical texts in the early to middle of the 20th century (Veltruský, 1981). The works of Mukarovsky and Zich concerning the disposition of signans and signatums have conceived a thorough awareness of the theatrical arena to be looked at as a cultural product with complex underlying structure beneath it.

The theatrical work that is being analyzed within this paper is Susan Glaspell's *Trifles* (1916). The play is delivered with a one-act narrative structure, which means that the narrativity is performed without conventional staging and exposition corroborations. It tells a story about a murder case of John Wright in which his wife, Minnie, is suspected to be the murderer. The story explores an investigational narrative done by the characters of Hale, Henderson (the county attorney), the Sheriff, Mrs. Peters, and Mrs. Hale. The entire story is performed within a single setting of the Wrights' house. The male characters are searching for evidence, and the female characters are setting up clothing and things for Minnie in the police station.

This paper aims to uncover the ideology of sisterhood represented through the kinesic signs included in the script written by Susan Glaspell, entitled *Trifles*. Although Kinesic signs include mimics, gestures, and proxemics, the present study only focuses on gestural and proxemic signs, as the two are readily available on the script. The mimic signs are available on performance and may or may not be included in a script. The two categories are assessed using Hall's (1968) postulation on spatial proximity and deciphered by Barthes' (Barthes, 1987) semiotic argumentation. The latter theoretical tool is used through the historical juxtaposition of the play to hypothetically delve into the nucleate paradigm, which might or might not be at play during that epoch.

METHOD

This study uses a qualitative approach and closed-reading to determine the whole bodily and inanimate codes found within the text. It intertwines several critical paradigms in the field of Cultural Studies and Linguistics, respectively. First and foremost, the notion of a dramatic semiotic approach is emphasized to delve further into the object. As previously implied, theatrical work as literary products should be theorized into a coherent and logical structure. The nature of signs to be found within the theatre is significant. It contains a communicative system within it, in which it is directed both to its spectators and the cultural system that operates (Eco, 1977). It links the concrete appearance of a sign to the mental state of the spectators (Elam, 1980). Further, this notion is equipped with theatrical semiotics in kinesics analysis (Agnus, 2012; Harrigan et al., 2008). According to Fisher-Lichte (1992, pp. 30–61), kinesics signs cover all facial movements and gestures, categorized into mimics, gestural, and proxemic signs. These theoretical tools are structured within Barthesian semiotic structure, including denotative, connotative, and mythological interpretation (Barthes, 1982, 1987). Exclusively, the mythological operation within the play is

hypothesized within the scope of feminist discourse. The notion of “sisterhood” is thoroughly examined in Glaspell’s *Trifles* by using structural approaches as mentioned above to strengthen the interpretation (Balsler, 1987; Lyshaug, 2006; Tyson, 2006).

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The play is performed in a single setting in its entirety. It minimizes the notion of an expansive setting. It utilizes the scope of a single house to be a significant sign that helps the play convey its intentional meaning. All of the characters are trapped in a narrow space and thus forcing them to limit their movement. This occurrence thus needs to be delved further in the context of *Trifles*. This section will discuss further how the characters’ gestures and proxemics play significant roles in representing the ideology of sisterhood in Susan Glaspell’s *Trifles*.

Gestures

In Glaspell’s *Trifles*, the characters’ gestures play crucial roles in representing sisterhood among the female characters. These include instinctive tidying up of the kitchen, the concern on the fruits and preserves, the need for apron and shawl for Mrs. Winnie Wright, and the unspoken agreement to hide the dead bird.

In the description of the play, the setting is described as “kitchen in the now abandoned farmhouse.” The condition of the kitchen is further detailed, as displayed in the following excerpt.

SCENE The kitchen in the now abandoned farmhouse of John Wright, a gloomy kitchen, and left without having been put in order—unwashed pans under the sink, a loaf of bread outside the breadbox, a dishtowel on the table—other signs of uncompleted work.

(Glaspell, *Trifles*, pp. 5)

The excerpt above shows that the kitchen is untidy, with dirty pans under the sink, while the bread and the dishtowel are out of place. When Mrs. Peters and Mrs. Hale are left alone in the kitchen (pp. 12), the two women talk, while Mrs. Hale “arranges the pans under the sink...” and then she straightened the dirty towel, “gives the roller towel a pull.” Simultaneously, Mrs. Peters is described to have “gone to a small table in the left rear corner of the room, and lifted on and end of a towel that covers a pan.” The gestures of the two women continue to mindlessly tidy up the kitchen, as emphasized in the gestures performed by Mrs. Hale after Mrs. Peters discovers the set bread:

MRS. HALE *(eyes fixed on a loaf of bread beside the breadbox, which is on a low shelf at the other side of the room. Moves slowly toward it.) she was going to put this in there. (Picks up loaf, then abruptly drops it. In a manner of returning to familiar things.)*

(Glaspell, *Trifles*, pp. 13)

From the excerpt above, it can be observed that Glaspell explicitly stated the description of Mrs. Hale’s gestures in dealing with the bread loaf: “in a manner of returning to familiar things.” This description includes the words “manner” and “familiar,” signifiers of habitual movements. They signify that the movements of picking the bread loaf and dropping it are something that Mrs. Hale would do without thinking. The instinctive gestures may be read as a signifier for a

secondary signifying process, resulting in two possible interpretations. The first one is that the concept of cleaning the kitchen has been firmly implanted into the women's minds that they instinctively do it when they face an untidy kitchen. The other interpretation leans toward the representation of sisterhood, where the two women tried to clean up the kitchen as solidarity toward Minnie Wright, who is unable to clean her kitchen.

At the second reading, the second representation can further be interpreted as an effort from Mrs. Hale to defend Mrs. Minnie Wright since the County Attorney repeatedly points at Mrs. Minnie Wright's incapability in keeping her kitchen tidy. On page 10, the County Attorney called the kitchen "a nice mess," points at the dirty towel on the kitchen table and calls it "roller towel" (pp. 11), and establishes Mrs. Minnie Wright as lacking "the homemaking instinct" (pp. 11). When Mrs. Hale tries to explain the amount of work in a farmhouse as the reason for the untidy kitchen, the County Attorney, Mrs. Hale is "loyal to [her] sex" (pp. 11). The attorney's comment signifies a strong recognition of sisterhood between Mrs. Hale and Mrs. Weught because they are both female and neighbors. The concept of sisterhood works within the realm of psychology. Its praxis can be found in kinesic signs such as in this one. Without having to be ordered, Mrs. Hale directly cleans up the untidiness she finds during the play. Although her determined role is to prepare Minnie's things, her emotional affection for Minnie drives her to assist her in household activities. She crosses the boundary based on a similar fate.

The next gestural sign appears in the women's concerns about Mrs. Minnie Wright's fruits:

- MRS. PETERS : (to the other woman). Oh, her fruit; it did freeze. (To the Lawyer). She worried about that when it turned so cold. She said the fire'd go out and her jars would break.
- SHERIFF : Well, can you beat the women! Held for murder and worryin' about her preserves.
- COUNTY ATTORNEY : I guess before we're through she may have something more serious than preserves to worry about.

(Glaspell, *Trifles*, pp. 10)

The exchange between Mrs. Hale and the male characters juxtaposes the contrast of male and female occupations in the play. Mrs. Hale shares Mrs. Wright's concerns about the fruit, while the men comment on how women focus on trifles than the ongoing murder investigation. Thus, at the first level of reading, the fruits serve as the stimulus of the male characters to remark that women are so fond of trivial things. They base their utterance because the fruit is being worried about by Minnie when she has a bigger problem. The fruit then denotes one of the signs stamped with triviality, just like other things mentioned above.

On the second level of reading, the significance of the fruits as a signifier can be interpreted by how the fruit symbolizes cultural and economic position at the same time. The interpretation of this may sound Bourdieusian since it incorporates the concept of taste. As Bourdieu argues in his ethnographic data, fruits can be symbolized as a standard meal for the bourgeoisie, and the lower

class would prefer foods that are lardy (Gartman 1991). This postulation is an empiric realization from Marxist argumentation regarding the class division of foods (Foster 2016). It brings out a more profound social question of why Minnie urges to keep the fruit fresh. Her wish signifies a symbolic wish for her to keep her social status in the eye of others. It is subconsciously rooted and leaves her to act even in the most trivial thing as her effort to secure symbolic capital she owns. On the surface, it seems to reflect her concern for household matters, while sociologically deciphered, it aims sincerely to maintain her representation on others.

Another triviality of women's domestic concerns is signified in Minnie Wright's special request to bring her daily apron and shawl to the police station.

- MRS. PETERS. : She said she wanted an apron. Funny thing to want, for there isn't much to get you dirty in jail, goodness knows. But I suppose just to make her feel more natural. She said they was in the top drawer in this cupboard. Yes, here. And then her little shawl that always hung behind the door. (*Opens stair door and looks.*) Yes, here it is. (*Quickly shuts door leading upstairs.*)
- MRS. HALE : (*abruptly moving toward her.*) Mrs. Peters?
- MRS. PETERS : Do you think she did it?
- MRS. HALE : (*in a frightened voice.*) Oh, I don't know.
- MRS. PETERS : Well, I don't think she did. Asking for an apron and her little shawl. Worrying about her fruit.

(Glaspell, *Trifles*, pp. 14)

The mentioning of the apron and shawl functions as properties that belong to Minnie. In the first level of signification, these properties are seen as another set of signifiers for triviality both by the men and the women in the play. Further reading of the signifiers can lead to another interpretation that Minnie Wright's need for the two properties signifies her need for her daily comfort: the clean house she is in when wearing the apron and the warmth she feels when wearing the shawl. However, at the second level of reading, her psychological state in the police station contradicts the previous interpretation of detachment from her household routine. The fact that she wants to get her daily things to make her feel comfortable at the police station results in a conclusion that she does not feel trapped within domestic responsibility. Instead, the existence of John Wright is now taking up the spotlight as the central stimulus of Minnie's disrupted psychological state. Thus her "confinement" is not symbolized through the apron and shawl or maybe other daily things. However, these two properties deceive themselves as a sign of lack of freedom and cover up a consensual marriage problem between John and Minnie Wrights.

At the structural level of the plot, the two properties lead to the discovery of Minnie Wright's unfinished quilt that covers the dead bird. It is described:

(*Their eyes meet. A look of growing comprehension of horror. Steps are heard outside. Mrs. Hale slips the box under quilt pieces, and sinks into her chair. Enter Sheriff and County Attorney. Mrs. Peters rises.*)

(Glaspell, *Trifles*, pp. 20-21)

Glaspell's description of the women's expression upon realizing the implication of the dead bird signifies the growing sisterhood between Mrs. Hales and Mrs. Peters. As the wife of the Sheriff, Mrs. Peters tends to lean towards the law. At the beginning of the play, she rationalizes that the men are trying to do

their duty while Mrs. Hale takes offense to the men's remarks about the messy kitchen (pp. 12). However, at the point where they start to understand how lonely Minnie Wright has been. Thus, when they find the birds, they take the common ground to hide the dead bird: while Mrs. Hale hides the dead bird, Mrs. Peters rises to greet and distract the men when the County Attorney and the Sheriff enter the room. Their gestures when finding out about the dead bird and its implication in providing a motive for Mrs. Minnie Wright to strangle her husband are strong signifiers of sisterhood between the two female characters in the play and the non-diegetic Mrs. Minnie Wright.

From that point, Mrs. Hale and Mrs. Peters change opinions about what has happened to the bird and what the bird has meant to Mrs. Minnie Wright. There is less and less talk about abiding by the law from Mrs. Peters, as she now leans more toward the sisterhood. The Climax of the plot signifies the strength of sisterhood through the unspoken agreement between the two women to hide the dead bird:

(...Mrs. Hale rises, hands tight together, looking intensely at Mrs. Peters, whose eyes take a slow turn, finally meeting Mrs. Hale's. A moment Mrs. Hale holds her, then her own eyes point the way to where the box is concealed. Suddenly Mrs. Peters throws back quilt pieces and tries to put the box in the bag she is wearing. It is too big. She opens the box, starts to take the bird out, cannot touch it, goes to pieces, stands there helpless. Sound of a knob turning in the other room. Mrs. Hale snatches the box and puts it in the pocket of her big coat. Enter County Attorney and Sheriff.)

(Glaspell, *Trifles*, pp. 25)

The excerpt shows that the evidence of a dead bird, which will be discussed in the next section, is being hidden by the female characters to evade Minnie from getting a severe punishment. This moment serves as character development, especially for Mrs. Peters. She initially orients herself on the objectivity of law. She shifts her support to Minnie's emotional state, just like what Mrs. Hale's characterization had already built upon at the beginning of the story. It also culminates all of the kinesic performances that are significant in decoding the actors' cultural codes. The final significant kinesic nature occurs in the story's penultimate when the women decide to hide a piece of substantial evidence to the case. It is an extension and further realization of how women's psychological relation or sisterhood had been presented even before this concept was advocated. It fully closes the women's arc as fully siding with Minnie Wright, although what she has done is objectively unlawful. They emphasize emotional and social consideration rather than the validity of the rule which worked at that time.

Proxemics

In the script, proxemics is identified in italics to identify how the characters move on the set. Glaspell's *Trifles* includes contrasting spatial arrangements between male and female characters, as clearly seen from the first scene at the beginning of the play. In this beginning, the Sheriff, the County Attorney, Mrs. Peters, and Mrs. Hale entered Mrs. Wright's kitchen for investigation. During this scene, the male characters comment on how women focus on trivial things. The following excerpt shows the reactions of the female characters when the male characters make the comments.

The County Attorney, after again looking around the kitchen, opens the door of a cupboard closet. He gets up on a chair and looks on a shelf. Pulls his hand away, sticky

COUNTY : Here's a nice mess.

ATTORNEY

(The women draw nearer.)

MRS. PETERS : *(to the other woman)*. Oh, her fruit; it did freeze. *(To the Lawyer)*. She worried about that when it turned so cold. She said the fire'd go out and her jars would break.

SHERIFF : Well, can you beat the women! Held for murder and worryin' about her preserves.

COUNTY : I guess before we're through she may have something more serious than preserves to worry about.

ATTORNEY

HALE : Well, women are used to worrying over trifles. *(The two women move a little closer together.)*

From the above excerpts, the spatial proximity of the male and female characters is juxtaposed. The women's spatial proximity gradually got smaller, along with the rising harshness of the men's comments. Examined through behavioral studies, this closeness generally infers a condition wherein two speakers are engaged in a pleasant conversation, or the two of them are closely related (Hall et al., 1968). Audience dan presupposes their reaction to infer that Mrs. Hale and Mrs. Peters are becoming closely related by their uncomfortableness in responding to the males' remarks. On the second level of interpretation, how women utilize the stage's space and gradually move closer to each other is a signifier to their non-verbal motive of sisterhood. It signifies how sisterhood develops when women feel they share the same fate. Hence, once feeling threatened, they subconsciously move closer and feel how they share the same fate. It is a physical move that accentuates close bonding for them (Lyshaug, 2006).

Men's spatial proximity is presented differently in the scene. On the first level, the male characters are depicted to focus on investigating the case. In contrast to the relative stationary position of the women and their gradual convergence, the men were depicted to move freely around the room, talk about the case, and comment on the way women think. On the first level of reading, the men's freedom to roam the room and question everything in the room is a signifier of the male's stereotypical trait to focus on the objective rather than the emotional state of the others (Hall et al., 1968). On the second level of reading, the rigidity of males' convention to regulate the space between them is a concrete example of how male stereotypes are stimulated through representational space. Sherriff, County Attorney, and Mr. Hale maintain their distance by freely moving in the kitchen. The sustained distance between these male characters is a signifier of males' reluctance and difficulty showing intimacy (Gupta et al., 2013).

Thus, the juxtaposition between the diminishing space between the female characters and the maintained proximity between the male characters in this scene signifies the corroboration of the gendered stereotypes of how men

and women should behave. While the female characters are depicted to confirm the feminine stereotype of passivity and solidarity, the male characters are depicted to confirm the masculine stereotype of logical thinking and independence. As pointed by Blangsinga et al. (2021), Riskayani, Suwastini, and Wahyuni (2021), and Suwastini, Suprianti, and Fitrianti (2018), narrative texts can reflect binary oppositions maintained in a patriarchal society while opening a fertile ground for deconstructions of the gendered oppositions that marginalize women (Suwastini, 2013; Suwastini et al., 2020). In the case of Glaspell's *Trifles*, proxemics is employed to highlight the stereotypes, drawing attention to how women should stand together in the face of patriarchal male domination.

The use of the kitchen as the scene's setting is also essential to discuss the proxemic signs included to represent sisterhood in Glaspell's play. The beginning of the script of Glaspell's *Trifles* provides a brief description of the scene, in which the setting is stated as the kitchen "in the now abandoned farmhouse of John Wright." The kitchen itself is presented as "a gloomy kitchen." At the first level of reading, the kitchen presents a limit to the stage's space, where the male characters are undermining the female characters. Not only is the place limited, but it is also gloomy. The emphasis on the "gloomy" atmosphere in the description of the scene marks a foreshadowing of what the female characters feel: how Mrs. Hale and Mrs. Peters felt when being scrutinized by the County Attorneys and the Sheriff.

Further reading of the kitchen reveals the kitchen as the limiting space of the women's confinement in the farmhouse. Freidan (1963) notes that women have been mystified to believe that the kitchen and the domestic areas are the appropriate spaces for women. Darling (2007) points how modern architecture relates the kitchen as women's spaces in 1930's flat plans. Space suggests a limited movement for the characters to undertake. It deeply brings back to the spectators' revelation on how this setting influences Minnie Wright as the native inhabitant of that space. This emotional vision also haunts Mrs. Hale and Mrs. Peters, respectively, stimulating their comprehension of why Minnie decides to kill her husband. As Ben-Zvi (2002) suggests, the limited space and functionality of a kitchen illustrates a restrained nature of women to be trapped only for domestic occupations. This stockade is what stimulates Mrs. Hale to psychologically and emotionally condone what Minnie Wright had to do. She shared the same frequency of distress, and her gesture and utterances signal this revelation. It is reflected in Mrs. Hale's statement that "[she] liked her all well enough. Farmers' wives have their hands full, Mr. Henderson. And then it never seemed a cheerful place" when the County Attorney asks Mrs. Hale's opinion on Mrs. Minnie Wright.

Since the kitchen is the assigned space for women in a patriarchal society (Gillis & Hollows, 2009), the play highlights two main issues in a patriarchal society through proxemics. The setting underlines the stationary position of women in the domestic domain, placing women on the servitude of the household. The kitchen is where the women are assigned to cook and do other domestic chores to produce food, clean linen, and comfort the family. Thus, while bringing the women onstage but returning them to the kitchen, the play shows how women are trapped in the domestic space. In contrast, the men are brought

into the kitchen to freely move around and criticize Mrs. Wright's ineffective kitchen management. The coming of the men into the kitchen can be read as an invasion of the women's space: one that is forcefully assigned to them (Freidan, 1963). With this invasion, their criticism is like rubbing salt to the women's wound: patriarchy condemns women to domestic space. It ascribes women to domestic chores while men become the judge to assess whether women do their job well or not.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, through a detailed semiotic analysis of the kinesics included in Susan Glaspell's *Trifles*, the study reveals that the script includes gestures and proxemics to represent sisterhood between the female characters. The notion of sisterhood is reflected through how the female characters' gestures are psychologically driven and their use of space surrounding them. The women are shown to subconsciously act to intentionally benefit other women, leaving their logical and legal convictions about right and wrong. More importantly, the sisterhood is growing more potent the more they understand each other's positions and situations. It is an essential feminist ideology, where women should form solidarity because of their shared fate as the oppressed in a patriarchal society.

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