

# A STUDY OF SYMBOLS IN SUSAN GLASPELL'S *TRIFLES*

**Maisarah**

*Universitas Pesantren Tinggi Darul Ulum Jombang*

*inmai5@yahoo.com*

## **Abstrak**

There are many symbols presented in Susan Glaspell's *Trifles*. In this article, the analysis is derived from the concept of symbols and characters. The analysis of the significance of the symbols and what they stand for are conducted through the symbolic names, objects, actions and settings. Besides symbolic name, symbolic object also plays a big part in the development of symbols. The examples of physical objects are the rocking chair, the cherry preserves, the quilt, the birdcage and the bird. The examples of symbolic actions are the rocking back and forth movement after killing the husband, the movement from the rocking chair to the ordinary one, and the saving of the dead bird and the husband corpse. The examples of symbolic setting are the time and location. The time of the story happens in winter and the location is in kitchen. Glaspell uses symbolism to stress the condition of women at that time. She wanted to describe that something trivial means very important if someone would see it deeper.

**Key words:** symbolic name, symbolic object, symbolic action, symbolic setting

## **INTRODUCTION**

In the nineteenth century women's right in the United States had not been granted. The era saw the emergence of several prominent female literary figures, two of which included Kate Chopin and Fanny Fern. Like many other women writers, Chopin and Fern wrote inequality of the sexes and the inability of women to live their own lives without reliance on man. In this way, they helped pave the way of female writers of the twentieth century Glaspell, who struggled with similar themes and concerns, inherited a rich legacy from these women (<http://itech.fgcu.edu/faculty/wohlp/alsaglaspell.htm#Criticism>, retrieved 29 May 2005).

Susan Keating Glaspell is an interesting example of the late nineteenth century female writer. She "came of age" about the same time American writing moved from regionalism to modernism and she helped found the modern movement to American drama

(<http://www.georgetown.edu/faculty/bassr/heath/syllabuild/iguide/Glaspell.html>, retrieved 29 May 2005).

Susan Glaspell's *Trifles* is one-act play whose seemingly casual surface belies the strong feelings of its characters and the play ultimate impact. It illustrates the willingness of women to act allies in times of crisis. It is significantly different from other plays even those written by women betray their own sex. Instead, the women in *Trifles* demonstrate their sympathy with and understanding of another women's plight when they are confronted with her violent retaliation against her husband's domination and brutality (Kriegel, 1975: 33).

A Symbol can be defined as an experience, not only from the perceptive point of view but also the creative one. The specific use of the term "Symbolism" refers to the artistic movement that started in the nineteenth century and had a strong impact on the theatre (Pronko, 1982: 41). Glaspell uses symbolism as her literary device to illuminate her theme. In *Trifles*, Glaspell is giving the woman a lot of symbols to justify the women's feelings and making it easy for them to foil the investigation. In this drama also, details were very thought out to help give the reader more ambition to find their own explanation of the symbols. Glaspell's symbolism helps paint a picture that is clear to see and lets the reader see things through the eyes of farmhouse (<http://ea-wikipedia.org/wiki/symbolism>, retrieved, 29 May 2005).

This article explains the symbolisms that exist in Glaspell's *Trifles*: the symbols of name, object, action, and setting.

## **RESEARCH METHOD**

This study deals with literary research. In this study, the sources are mostly taken from the play itself besides the other related materials. The data includes the main data and additional data. The main data are taken from the words, phrases and dialogues in the play of *Trifles* by Susan Glaspell. Meanwhile, the additional data are taken from critics, articles, report, some literary theories and other resources which are connected to the study.

- **Theory of Symbolism**

Symbolism is derived from a Greek word meaning "to throw together" (*sym* means together and *ballein* means throw). A symbol is some specific thing with ideas, values, persons or ways of life (Roberts and Jacobs, 1986: 294).

Concerning with literary symbol, Perrine has a definition of symbol. It is something that means more than what it is (1983: 196). The ability to interpret symbols is nevertheless essential for a full understanding of literature. The reader should be alert for symbolical meanings and should observe the following cautions as described by Perrine (1983: 199):

- a. The story itself must furnish a clue that a detail is to be taken symbolically.
- b. The meaning of a literary symbol must be established and supported by the entire context of the story.
- c. To be called a symbol, an item must suggest a meaning different in kind its literal meaning.
- d. A symbol may have more than one meaning. It may suggest a cluster of meanings.

According to Perrine, symbol can be an object, a person, a situation, an action or some other item that has a literal meaning as well (1983: 196). The statement is also supported by Robert and Jacobs. They stated that a person, thing, place, action, situation or even though can be symbols in short stories and other types of literature (1986: 294).

There are some symbols that will be described in this study, they are:

### **1. Symbolic name**

Name can be used as a very simple illustration of symbol. Most names are simply labels but a name can tell something about a person to whom it is attached. In a story however, names are used to serve not only to label the characters but also to suggest something about them (Perrine, 1966: 227-228).

Perrine gives some examples of symbolic name in some literary works. In fictional trilogy "*The Forsyte Saga*", John Galsworthy chooses '*Forsyte*' as the family name of his principal characters to indicate their practical foresightedness. The name of Mr. Nilson, might be analyzed as "Nil's son", son of Nil or nothing. Mr. Tandram (It sounds like both tandem and humdrum) is made up of drum, a very small measure, and 'tan', a substance for converting skin into leather. Whether Galsworthy consciously chooses the names with these meanings in view or picked them because they "sounded right" and whether or not the reader recognizes these suggestions, the names are felt to be appropriate.

## **2. Symbolic object**

Symbolic objects can be known by perceptive reader only. Perrine stated that symbols will fit so naturally into the natural context. The most perceptive reader will apparent the value of symbols in some stories (1983: 197)

A symbol may also have no apparent connection and therefore may be considered arbitrary, but is often a topical or integral relationship between the symbol and thing it stands for. Something important, however, is that the symbols point beyond itself to greater and more complex meaning (Robert and Jacobs, 1986: 294).

## **3. Symbolic action**

According to Kennedy, a gesture with larger significance than usual is a symbolic act (1983: 146-147).

This is the example of action that can be presented as symbols. In Thomas Hardy's "In Time of The Breaking Nations" (p.799), the action of the man plowing the field symbolizes the continued life and vitality of the folk, the people, despite political and military changes that are constantly raging in the world (Roberts and Jacobs, 1986: 788).

## **4. Symbolic setting**

A setting can be used by an author to frame a story by opening with a description of it, and the setting constantly affect the reader's thought about the story than return to the description at the end like a picture frame (Roberts and Jacobs, 1986: 209). They also stated that the natural and artificial scenery or environment in which characters in literature live and move is called setting.

Here are the use of setting according to Roberts and Jacobs (1986: 206-207).

1. One of the major purposes of setting is to lead realism to set a story in a particular place or time makes the action credible. The more detail the description of setting, the more believable the events of the story become. Without a basis in detailed setting, the works would lose some of their credibility even though they make no pretenses at actual realism.
2. Setting may intersect with characters with one of the means by which the character is to be underscored and therefore understood.
3. Author might also use setting as a means of organizing their works.

4. Setting also affects the atmosphere or mood of stories. Descriptions of warm color may contribute to a mood of stories.
5. Setting is present as an element of concurrence, agreement, reinforcement and strengthening of character and theme, so it may work as an element of irony. The setting in other words, may create an environment that is the opposite of what actually occurs in the story.

## ANALYSIS

There are some symbols in *Trifles* that can be observed. They are symbolic name, symbolic object, symbolic action and symbolic setting.

### 1. *Symbolic name*

#### *Family name: The Wright*

The family name of the main character, Minnie Foster is The Wright. The word “Wright” has the same pronunciation as “right” that means something that must be accepted by someone, thing that one may do or have. The choice of using “Wright” as the family name is to indicate that the story will be talking about right, and so does the problems faced by the character in this drama.

#### *The name of the main character name: Minnie Wright*

Before married, the name of the main character is Minnie Foster. The word “Minnie” has almost the same pronunciation as “mini” that means a thing that is small or something considered minority. The word “Foster” sounds like “force” that means power. The name Minnie Foster indicates that the character does not have enough power and she considers being a weak person.

After married with John Wright, of course she uses her husband’s last name. Her name now becomes Minnie Wright. It has been explained above that “Minnie” sounds like “mini” that means something small. The word “Wright” also sounds like “right” means one should have or do. When the words put together, the word “Minnie” and “Wright”, it will cause a new meaning that the women in this case lack of right.

Before she is married, her name is Minnie Foster that means she is a weak person and lack of power. After married, her name changes into Minnie Wright mean

lack of right. Because she is a weak person so that she does not have enough braveness, and the effect of being lack of power, makes her lack of right.

## 2. *Symbolic Object.*

### *The Rocking Chair*

After killing her husband, Minnie sits in the rocking chair. The rocking chair indicates that it is the way of Minnie to stay calm and becomes as natural as she could. It is a place where Minnie can feel comfortable and enjoy herself, so that she can escape from the reality for a while.

Minnie is sitting on the rocking chair because it helps her to stay comfortable for a while because she was very frightened, so she tried to be as natural as she could by holding her apron and pleating it while she was rocking back and forth.

### *The Cherry Preserves*

When the cherry preserve first found by the two women, Mrs. Peters and Mrs. Hale, it was already broken from the cold. Cherry is a fruit which grows in the spring. Its color is red just like Minnie's spirit of life when she was a girl, cheerful and happy. After married, Minnie felt that she could not do what she wanted to do, just like cherry that is kept in the preserve. Because of pressure and a very low temperature, the preserve had cracked and broken. It is just like Minnie herself. She kept her secret to do what she wanted to do. She is certainly under pressure and the result is the cracked of Minnie's heart because of the coldness of her marriage.

### *The Quilt*

The quilt is made of patches of fabric that put together to put an enlarging square. In the drama, the quilt does not finish yet. It symbolizes the fate of Minnie, the patches of fabric symbolize every single information found and from that, the women found out the murder. The fate of Minnie is still up in the air, just like the unfinished quilt.

When the first time the quilt is found, it had not done yet, so that they (Mrs. Hale and Mrs. Peters) wanted to know whether she is going to quilt it or knot it. If she is going to quilt it, means that her work does not stop in there, and she must

pieces the quilt until a certain large of square. If she is going to knot it, means she is done and does not need to piece it any longer. It just implies the fate of Minnie dealing with the murder.

### *The Birdcage*

When the two women, Mrs. Hale and Mrs. Peters were looking for a piece of paper and string, they found a broken birdcage. The Birdcage symbolizes Mr. Wright's treatment toward Minnie, his coldness and harshness prevents Minnie to make a friend and socialize to other people. Because of that, Minnie is like the bird that is trapped in the birdcage herself. She cannot do anything she wants to do and can only concern with the matter of housekeeping.

When the birdcage firstly found by the two women, Mrs. Hale and Mrs. Peters, it was already in the broken condition with no bird inside as if somebody got the bird roughly, so that it broke the cage. It implies what just happened to Minnie's life, which she can finally out from a cold and hard husband with a rough way too. The birdcage seems like a prison that is built by John Wright for years to Minnie.

### *The Bird*

When Mrs. Hale found that the bird is dead. She noticed that the bird died not because of natural causes, but it was killed because somebody broke its neck.

The dead bird was put in a beautiful box and wrapped with a silk. It indicates that the bird is a special thing for the owner and of course the killer was not Minnie. The question is, why did she wrap the dead bird with something beautiful as the silk? It is because the dead bird is a worthy thing for the owner and she wanted to give the last honor to it, so that she gave the bird something beautiful as the silk and the pretty box. Another perception is that, she wanted everybody knows the death bird, that she was suffering too, just like the bird.

### *3. Symbolic Action*

#### *The rocking back and forth movement after killing the husband.*

When Mrs. Hale came to the house for the first time after the murder, he saw Mrs. Wright sat on the rocking chair, back and forth. After killing her husband, she did not know what to do and she just sat on a chair. The chair that she chose was

a rocking chair. On that chair she felt comfortable and tried to ease her nervous. By rocking back and forth, she tried to be as natural as she could. She even held an apron and pleating it. It symbolizes her way to stay calm and her weakness to solve the problem by pretending nothing happens before.

*The Movement from the rocking chair to an ordinary chair*

After knowing that John Wright was already died, Mr. Hale wanted to call the coroner or the sheriff about the murder. Knowing this, Minnie directly moved from the rocking chair to an ordinary chair. It is because she did not feel comfortable anymore. she knew that she is in trouble and will be caught soon. On the ordinary chair, she sat with her hands held together and looking down. It is clearly seen that Minnie is very nervous at that time and kind of not knowing what to do next. her moving from the rocking chair to an ordinary chair symbolizes Minnie's realization that she is not dreaming anymore and has to face the reality.

*The saving of the dead bird and the husband's corpse.*

The bird was already dead and Minnie covered it with silk, means that it was a special thing for her. Minnie did not burry the bird directly because she wanted somebody would ask who did this. In other words, she wanted to tell everyone that she was suffering. Minnie also did the same way to her husband's corpse. She just left the corpse until somebody realized it.

She is able to bury her husband's corpse directly after she killed him to escape the clue endangering her position, but Minnie did not do that. She left her husband's dead body lying down on the bad upstairs. It is because she lets somebody find the dead body and it also implies that she is guilty of killing her husband.

*4. Symbolic Setting*

- *Time*
- *Winter*

The setting of the play happens in winter. In winter, the weather turns so cold; the tree lost their leaves and sometimes died. The season often deals with

death. In this drama, the setting is in winter and there are some character die, they are John Wright and the bird.

In the drama, the jar was cracked because of the cold. The cold weather symbolizes John Wright's treatments toward Minnie. She is like the jar itself. When her husband treatment came to the limitation of Minnie's patience, she tried to rebel and out of the situation by killing her husband.

- *Place*
- *Kitchen*

The kitchen in this drama is a dirty and gloomy kitchen where all of the dishes and equipment are in disarray condition. A gloomy kitchen may indicate that Minnie is sad and all are mixed together in her mind that she is very nervous and has no idea to do anything.

As 19<sup>th</sup> century woman, Minnie has to maintain the house, especially the kitchen. That is why, kitchen is supposed to be women dormitory. Kitchen is a place where woman spends a lot of time cooking, washing dishes, ironing and other homemaking so that kitchen should become a clean and order place. It is different from the condition of Minnie's kitchen now. Everything is dirty and disarray. It is because she feels free that no one will complain her about the dirty and the messy of the kitchen anymore. She does not have burden and feels free from the routine activity. The dirty kitchen symbolizes Minnie's feeling of freedom because she finally release from the cruel husband.

## **CONCLUSION**

The drama, *Trifles* talking about a murder and the problem behind, gender conflict. Glaspell seems try to show the difference of man and woman point of view. In this 19<sup>th</sup> century drama, *Trifles*, man is described as an authoritarian and put the woman in the second position. A woman at that time must only concern with the kitchen and other homemaking. In this drama, what a woman says or thinks about something that seem does not have any correlation with the murder, men judge it as something trifle. Women in this drama, usually use their own feeling and perception whenever they find the clues.

Here, Glaspell tries to show the difference thought between men and women to face a problem. Besides, she tries also to show how important is trifles things as symbols in this drama. Glaspell also seems challenge the reader to interpret the symbols by their own perception to find out the deeper meaning. *Trifles* is an interesting drama, when the readers read it, they need to look and pay attention to every single word given, because it may convey a further meaning. *Trifles* is an exciting drama that need a good comprehension and interpretation. That is why, the readers need to read it more than once, because every time reading this drama, there will be a new comprehension, so that it can carry a better understanding to the readers.

## REFERENCES

- Kennedy, X. J. *An Introduction to Fiction, 3<sup>rd</sup> Ed.* Canada: Little Brown Company Limited.
- Kriegel, Harriet, 1975. *Women in Drama an Anthology*, Canada: The New American Library, Inc.
- Perrine, Laurence. 1966. *Story and Literature, 3<sup>rd</sup> Ed.* New York: Harcourt Brace & World, Inc.
- Perrine, Laurence. 1983. *Literature: Structure, Sound and Sense, 4<sup>th</sup> Ed.* New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Inc.
- Pronko, Leonardo C. 1982. *Drama and Symbolism.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- (<http://itech.fgcu.edu/faculty/wohlpart/alsa/glaspell.htm#Criticism>, retrieved 29 May 2005).
- (<http://www.georgetown.edu/faculty/bassr/heath/syllabuild/iguide/Glaspell.html>, retrieved 29 May 2005).
- (<http://ea-wikipedia.org/wiki/symbolism>, retrieved, 29 May 2005).