

Theories of the Gaze Crossing Feminisms: *Trifles* as a Site to Ponder the Fundamentals

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Abstract

Ever since the publication of Susan Glaspell's play in one act, *Trifles*, in 1916, it has become a playground for different feminist theories to counterpart, many of which struggle to categorize the play as a reproduction of the traditional gender roles set by patriarchy. Since there seems to be no unity in defining the term 'feminism,' many believe that it would do justice to call its varieties, 'feminisms'. Being one of the most well-known terms in feminism, men's gaze has been viewed and reviewed constantly throughout the years. Yet, what seems to be new to this field is the concept of the 'female gaze'. Unlike anti-essentialists, essentialist feminists believe in embracing the 'essential' differences between men and women. Therefore, this paper analyzes Glaspell's play in the light of these two points of view on feminism, especially the theories of gaze, and looks for a shared ground for reconciliation. So, by delving into these theories, the researcher eventually concludes that although *Trifles* is criticizing the female status in a patriarchal society, relating all associated with her to 'trifles,' at the same time, it reproduces the traditional gender roles by approving essentially feminine characteristics which need to be celebrated instead of criticized.

Keywords

Essentialism; Female Gaze; Feminism; Power; *Trifles*..

1. Introduction

Whether considered as an indisputable piece of evidence signaling the vigor of a healthy discourse or an irrefutable eyewitness to attest the sorry state of a set of mismatching assumptions and guidelines, the fact should be stressed that feminism has never been a unified, homogeneous body of either theory or practice. In her scholarly book, *Feminist Thought: A More Comprehensive Introduction*, Rosemarie Tong admits that those who intend to try their hand at studying feminism will find themselves confronted with "the very real problems that come with trying to categorize the thought of an incredibly more forcefully as she asserts that "feminism is not a monolithic ideology and that all feminists do not think alike" (1). Grotesque and unreal as it may sound to expect a large array of

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thinkers to 'think alike,' which leaves enough room to ground some justification and apology for the diversity of feminist thought, the discrepancy, nevertheless, does not stop at the level of thinking differently. The gap is so wide that no single term can ever bridge the diverging, almost-independent branches. Finding no umbrella term to arch over the disparity, Fiona Tolan resorts to the heterogeneous 'feminisms' in order to compensate for the deficiency, of the more unity-oriented 'feminism,' which to her "has become fractured, divided and contradictory" and therefore it should "be understood as a discourse: a discussion of multiple related ideas" (Tolan, 319). Interestingly, Tolan is not alone and the multiplicity of feminism has been acknowledged by the field scholars so that a chorus of authorities have chanted off the plural noun, feminisms, in "full-throated ease" (Keats, 977). M.H. Abram's faith, for instance, seems to be unshakable when he speaks resolutely of "various feminisms" as it is of "a great variety of critical vantage points and procedures, including adaptations of Psychoanalytic, Marxist, and diverse poststructuralist theories" (Abrams, 93-4).

As one more illustrative example, M. A. R. Habib's coverage of the subject along such diverging lines as 'French Feminism', 'American Feminism' and 'British Feminism' (Habib, 669-71), obviously not original coinages but echoes from previous sources, bears testimony to the diversity that extends its roots deep down the heart of the discursive domain in question. After all, it is not for nothing that terms such as Marxist Feminism, Liberal Feminism, Radical Feminism, Psychoanalytic Feminism, Ecofeminism, Postmodern Feminism, and many others have long been adopted and used with such readiness and ease that they can be considered almost as taken for granted.

A particular bone of contention between feminists which has kept them fractured and disunited through almost all their long history of struggle is what Fiona Tolan calls "the essentialism debate" (Tolan, 322). The question that lies at the heart of the dispute is: are women essentially or by nature different from men or the two sexes are equal, identical psychologically, physically, and emotionally? While the differences are merely a series of little myths put together by the patriarchal system. According to Tolan: "essentialists believe that because women are biologically different from men, they are also psychologically and emotionally different," and to them, this difference is not "shameful," but is "something to celebrate: women should be proud to be women" (Tolan, 322-3). In other words, a man is obviously different in the shape and size of the body from a woman. A woman's shorter, less copious, less muscular body with the particular female hormones is secret, to differentiate her as radically from a man with regard to her emotional responses, psychological states, and mental activities as she is physically contrasting him. She will be naturally given to emotions, inclined to sensibility, thin-skinned, easily scared away, soft, kind, cooperating, sensuous, in need of protection, and in many ways passive. That is a given. That is simply what a woman is, what nature gives her, unaffected by her own choice since one can have

no choice before she is born, and that is what nature imposed on her before she was born. And why should she resent it? Why should she feel ill at ease when it is neither good nor bad in nature. It is looked down upon only when she is caught entangled in the niches and recesses of a patriarchal system that wants her diminished, degraded, inferior, and second-class, as she is considered to be the 'Other'. Tolan seems to approve "anti-essentialists such as de Beauvoir," in accusing the society of this process of otherization, and therefore, suggests how "the means by which this difference has been created must be exposed and discredited so that women can achieve their full potential as the equals of men" (323).

Simone de Beauvoir and her advocates are not denying what is clearly undeniable physical differences between men and women—pointed to in the feminist literature as 'sex'; rather, they attack the set of values associated, by the patriarchal system, to those differences, known generally as 'gender' to keep at bay women, so that male superiority is guaranteed. Constructing men as central, self, and the fixed point of reference, the male-oriented system has portrayed women as other, peripheral, and most notably dependent on men for a definition in the binary opposition they make. Therefore, the patriarchal system would insist, a woman seems to be whatever a man is not; or as de Beauvoir says, "one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman" (de Beauvoir, 273). In an essentialist thought then, man is considered to be rational, therefore a woman must be emotional, and sensitive. To them, a man is tough and strong in the face of harsh realities, a woman consequently must be a thin-skinned, spineless, timid creature; A man is aggressive, competing, and conquering, as a result, a woman must be cooperating, peaceful, kind and caring. That is what, according to anti-essentialist feminists, the phallogocentric society wants women to be, and that is how it constructs and reconstructs them. Then, their society deprives women of many of their human rights on the ground that they are different from men; humans. That is why de Beauvoir attacks the feigned, invented image; and even the very idea of difference as the root cause of women's oppression, encouraging women to "achieve their full potential as the equals of men" (Tolan, 323).

Naturally, the two positions, conflicting and contradictory as they are, cannot be held both at the same time; they go against one another. The heated debate on the question of equality or difference goes on between essentialists and anti-essentialists; and although feminism is against the essentialist view on gender, some of this debate is to be seen amongst different feminists as well, dividing and disuniting them, causing some to accuse others of being unconsciously in league with the patriarchal system in its brutal oppression of women. That is probably why "anti-essentialists respond that the emphasis on difference perpetuates a misogynistic belief system that has traditionally worked to exclude women from the male sphere" (323). The clash is far-reaching and vast enough in scope to leave almost nothing intact in the physical or mental life of a woman, from beauty contests through child-care, cooking, cleaning, sweeping, wearing make-up, dressing, being on a diet, contraception, and abortion to job opportunities. It devours all.

A site for much-heated debate is the female gaze, the way women look at things and see them as different from the way men do. Again, 'equal or different,' (Irigaray, 31) as Luce Irigaray concisely poses the question, is the soul and spirit of the debate. And still a closer look and food for a new round of vehement argument: which image is closer to the reality of a woman, the 'masculine-feminine,' (32) the image that men carve out of a woman as they see and read her, or the 'feminine-feminine,' (32) the one that women themselves have of a woman and being a woman?

Irigaray herself shuns the question, of course, by calling both men and women alike to explore the Lacanian imaginary stage in the life of a child before s/he enters the symbolic order to be pigeonholed and cleft into one of the two categories imposed by the phallogocentric system. When no dividing line keeps males apart from females, there will be no base for difference and hence, no justification for spending time and energy on confirming equivalence.

However, not only critics and feminist theoreticians but also many writers who concern themselves with the question of women, advocate one or the other side of the polarity. Susan Glaspell seems to be zealously in favor of differences between men and women, and also seems to approve of a set of innate, essential characteristics that make a woman, a woman even from the very moment of birth. Hence, she goes straight against Simone de Beauvoir's often-cited anti-essentialist call: "One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman... it is civilization as a whole that produces this creature... which is described as feminine" (de Beauvoir, 273).

What follows is a study of the female versus male gaze embedded in the wider context of the essentialist-anti-essentialist debate among feminists. The literary work which is scrutinized as a point of reference is Glaspell's short but in many ways outstanding play entitled *Trifles*, written in ironic defiance of men's view of women's gaze.

2. *Trifles* by Susan Glaspell: The Question of the Gaze

What is dubbed theories of the gaze in the contemporary critical legacy does not, in reality, signify a well-grounded critical theory or a disciplined systematic literary movement or critical school. It is not even an approach proper in the sense of practical guides to literary theory and criticism layout before their readers. It is a less refined, less systematized, less disciplined, and less developed body of assumptions and theories; however, much like a fully-fledged approach, it equips the reader with a stance, a point of view focusing on certain aspects of a literary or artistic work and foregrounding them at the expense of some others, asking certain questions and coming out with answers not totally possible to elicit and obtain through other approaches and methods of reading.

The immediate connection with Foucault's 'Panoptic system' leaves little doubt as to the broader political, social, and cultural contexts with which theories of the gaze concern themselves. "Culture, history, politics, and most of all *power*," asserts Jeremy Hawthorn, "theories of the gaze are very much occupied by these factors" (Hawthorn, 509). A given power structure, according to Foucault, disciplines the population by making them internalize the panoptican gaze. They are "caught up in a power situation of which they are themselves the bearers" (Foucault, 201). Whether the disciplinary agent is really spying on them or not, they always feel bound to his controlling presence, and therefore they behave exactly the way they would have done, had he really been present. So far, the gaze is intermingled with power at the level of a nation probably, a population in any case. But the interpersonal level of interaction and communication also is the site of unison between gaze and power.

The gaze is by no means neutral or devoid of some degrees of power exercise. However, it should be noted first that gaze can signify not merely the literal act of looking, but much more significantly, it implies the figurative act of reading, literal reading as well as interpretation and meaning-making. As Jeremy Hawthorn succinctly puts it: "theorists of the gaze are concerned to develop ways of exploring the interaction between different forms of literal and metaphorical looking" (Hawthorn, 509). The gaze, therefore, includes not only the looks characters take at each other, but also the way the writer looks at them and at the narrator if any, the way the narrator looks at the characters and the way characters read themselves, other characters, and the context that surrounds them.

An important aspect of theories of the gaze is their concern with sex and gender. Do females really develop a gaze different from males? Does it originate from their biological, and therefore, psychological differences? Or the female gaze is gendered simply because of the social and cultural milieu in which women are brought up? If the difference is real, whatsoever the cause, is there any base for preference, e.g. for considering the female gaze as either superior or inferior to the male gaze? And finally, how does the whole discourse concerning the female gaze contribute to the essentialist-anti-essentialist debate going on among feminists?

Contemplating the question from a Foucauldian standpoint, Hawthorn argues that "the gaze is unambiguously a means of control... the owner of the gaze is... he who decides and controls" (512). If the 'owner of the gaze' is the one who exercises power over the one who is looked at, what can the mere nomenclature 'female gaze' signify? John Berger, one of the first to originate theories of the gaze through publishing his *Way of Seeing* in 1972, would not seem to admit the idea. For he, too, believes that "men act and women appear. Men look at women. Women watch themselves being looked at" (Berger, 47). To him, this shapes not only the relations between the two genders, but also determines "the relation of women to themselves. The surveyor of woman in herself is male: the surveyed female. Thus, she turns herself into an object-and most particularly an object of vision: a sight" (47)

Berger's profession, though admittedly true and verifiable in many cases, draws on the same cliché that Hawthorn points out: "the empowered 'lookers' and the disempowered 'looked-at'" (Hawthorn, 514). Glaspell's *Trifles*, though written more than half a century earlier than the publication of Berger's book, opens a space for more complicated, subtler considerations of the gaze.

3. Applying the Reading Method to the Play

To begin with the title of the play, Glaspell carefully chooses her ironic title, *Trifles*, first to re-construct and in a way reproduce the male outlook, the male judgment of women's care, gaze, reading, and outlook and then to dismantle it with a cruel sneer of triumph. *Trifles* is what perfectly describes the female world, perception and life from the viewpoint of a typical man. They focus on trifles. They worry over trifles. Furthermore, they see nothing but trifles. Not only that, but they perceive nothing but trifles. Likewise, they live in a world of trifles. They speak of trifles. In brief, they are trifles. That is what best summarizes a man's view of women. The whole patriarchal system is based on that viewpoint, and the outcome is the taken-for-granted inferiority of women as opposed to the superiority of men. Not at this early stage indeed, but later on, when the play gets close to its end, the title reveals its ironic, subversive side when the male view is proved to be wrong, sterile, fruitless, misleading, and unable to discover the truth. What the patriarchal system bypasses as trifles turn out to be precisely the heart of the matter, what should have been obtained by the end of the male inspection but remained unnoticed.

Thus, the very title of the play, reveals a gaze that, far from simple, is at least threefold. Through reading the play or watching it staged, the readers, receivers, spectators, the addressees, in general, keep their gaze not only at the characters who talk and act in their world but also at Glaspell. Glaspell, in turn, keeps her gaze fixed on the characters she created and over their heads at the real men and women they represent, and finally, the characters look at themselves and look at other characters. The audience looks at Glaspell, she looks at men, men look at women, women look at themselves through the eyes of men, and they also look at men through the eyes of men, then, they retain their original feminine looks: they look at themselves from a feminine point of view; thereafter, they keep the same gaze on men and the gaze is revolutionary, uprooting, destructive, and simultaneously constructive, taking the established orthodoxies upside down and establishing new norms, new forms and new ways of looking, judging and perception. The characters then look back at Glaspell and at the audience. Glaspell, too, looks back through her characters at her audience, and the audience looks at themselves and at the others, refashioning themselves and reconstructing their view of, and relation to, others.

The world Glaspell sees—evident even from the opening of the play—or the world Glaspell wishes to make us believe that men see, is divided neatly into pairs of non-compromising two: men as opposed to women, active versus passive, central in contrast to peripheral, discourse in opposition to silence, certain conflicting with dubious and so on. Mr. Henderson, the county attorney, Mr. Peters, the Sheriff, and Mr. Hale, as a witness, are active, central participants in an endeavor—certainly the task of a man rather than a woman—to discover the truth of murder. Their capability and sound judgment are ample warranty to lead them through. Naturally, they make the whole discourse that is going on. Or is it the entire discourse going on there? Mrs. Peters, the Sheriff's wife, and Mrs. Hale, the witness's wife, are driven to the periphery. Or are they really? They are passive onlookers, asking no questions and answering none. Or are they? They are silent. Or are they? Their capability is as dubious as to their judgment. Or is it?

In fact, in the presence of men, women in the play take only a peripheral position, leaving the center to the men as their privilege. "COUNTY ATTORNEY (*at stove rubbing his hands*) This feels good. Come up to the fire, ladies./ MRS. PETERS (*after taking a step forward*) I'm not-cold" (Glaspell, 979). It is as if women's peripheral place here signifies their peripheral position not only in the search after John Wright's murderer but also as a general rule in the patriarchal society they live in.

While the men are present, it is they who do the whole conversation, driving the women to silence. The way women look at men and see them, and the way they judge the conversation themselves, drives them to a speechless state not broken until the men leave the scene.

"SHERIFF (*unbuttoning his overcoat and stepping away from the stove to the right of the table as if to mark the beginning of official business*) Now, Mr. Hale, before we move things about, you explain to Mr. Henderson just what you saw when you came here yesterday morning.

"COUNTY ATTORNEY (*crossing down to the left of the table*) by the way, has anything been moved? Are things just as you left them yesterday?" (979)

Then, a round of explanation, questioning, and answering follow and continues well through the middle of the play, undertaken entirely by men while the women are absolutely given to silence and passivity as if they did not exist at all. Keeping silent and passive for as grotesquely long a time like that, they begin to talk and act only when they make sure the men are gone upstairs to search for tell-tale signs.

"COUNTY ATTORNEY Yes, but I would like to see what you take Mrs. Peters, and keep an eye out for anything that might be of use to us.

"MRS. PETERS Yes, Mr. Henderson (*The men leave by up right door to stairs. The women listen to the men's steps on the stairs, then look about the kitchen.*)

"MRS. HALE (*crossing left to sink*) I'd hate to have men coming into my kitchen, snooping around and criticizing. (*She arranges the pans under sink which the LAWYER had shoved out of place.*)

"MRS. PETERS Of course it's no more than their duty. (*Crosses to cupboard up right*)" (983).

Thus, they appear out of their passive shells of silence and begin to talk and act. The conversation goes on for a rather long time, until-until the men reappear. The women moving to the center of the scene, action, position, and place in the absence of men, shrink back to their peripheral position of nothingness as immediately as the men reappear on the scene.

Glaspell does not deny that there is a male gaze, domineering, aggressive, imposing, and mesmerizing. The men look at themselves, at other men as peers, and at women as subordinate, little trifles. They have made women fully internalize their gaze so that "the surveyor of woman in herself is male" (Berger, 47). Men do have a gaze peculiar to them, exclusively theirs. They look at things women do not; they focus on aspects of things women feel hardly interested in. So far, Glaspell confirms.

But men ascribe unusual importance to their gaze. In their myth-making snobbery, they go so far as to claim exclusive perception, significance, and centrality, driving women to triviality. That is what Glaspell makes Mr. Hale give voice to, probably in lieu of all men of all times: "HALE Well, women are used to worrying over trifles" (Glaspell, 982). And that is exactly what she wished to subvert. She does not seem to deny that from a male point of view there *could* be such a thing as a female gaze, but then it would be viewed as equal to nothing, to 'trifles' worthy of no serious attention.

To insist on her essentialist feminist position and to counteract the male megalomania, Glaspell cultivates two parallel gazes side by side: a male gaze and a female gaze; one which boasts and trivializes and overlooks, and one which notices and mocks and subverts. The male gaze is there; true, and the women not only see it but also admit to it. The female gaze is there too, as forcefully, as vigorously, and as potently as the male gaze or even more, but then the men do not see it, do not notice it, and do not admit to it. In other words, women are not active, rather passive. They do not take action or, at least, not a significant, and remarkable action. That is true only as far as the male gaze is concerned. But the male gaze overlooks a lot. It overlooks what it does in the name of *Trifles*, while that is merely an oversimplification of the truth.

Among the things the male gaze overlooks for its supposed lack of significance, one can mention female action. Women act, and it is meaningful, and noteworthy action they participate in, but they do it far beyond the reach of the male gaze. They know the men's world, but they have a world of their own, unknown to men indeed, which serves them as the fountain of their power. That is what Glaspell insists on articulating. Therefore, Glaspell's women are silent. They make no discourse, no conversation, no reasoning, no argument, at least, none that is worth its while; none that is worthy of sophisticated, and trained ears of the men in her play, for they disregard original, all-important pieces of female conversation as trifling prattle. Women speak. They ask questions. They answer. They make assumptions. Likewise, they test them and they reach final solutions for the problems they face. But all that is left unseen. They are continuously exposed to male discourse, indispensable from the male gaze. They know it all too well, but they make discourse of their own outside the domain of male perception, and the secrecy protects them. When the play approaches its closure, with the proofs of the murder either disturbed or taken away and the female dialogues revealing Mrs. Wright's guilt in murdering her husband, all made and passed, Mrs. Peters gives voice to the relief she shares with Mrs. Hale in making all the conversation in secret: "my, it's a good thing the men couldn't hear us" (989).

Glaspell poses three major questions in her *Trifles*, and many more minor, relevant ones, indeed. Firstly, there is a female gaze that in many ways goes its own way and works independently of the dominant male gaze. Secondly, the female gaze differs, at times even radically, from the male gaze; and thirdly, that authentic, real power and knowledge are to be obtained through the female gaze, not male.

As for the reality of the female gaze, Glaspell appears to be a zealous essentialist feminist, firmly believing that innate, inborn characteristics distinguish women from men: not non-existent, negative voids in the female body or psychology that amount to the absence of positive, existing male privileges, but positive, hard advantages that men cannot boast of. It is not that women cannot make their minds, or act independently of men, or accept responsibility, or play central roles in accomplishing a task, or judge, or reason, or piece together evidence, or infer, or realize, or exert power, or protect, or deter, or reject. They do all the above just as the play, *Trifles*, sets forth a detailed example of, yet, they do so in their own way. There is a feminine way of taking responsibility, a feminine way of judgment, a feminine way of reasoning, drawing conclusions, inferences, and understanding. There is a feminine way of acquiring knowledge and a feminine way of exercising power, which Glaspell depicts in her *Trifles*.

As for the difference that sets the female gaze apart from the male, Glaspell shows how close to the heart the female gaze is as opposed to the head-oriented male gaze, how focused on particular, concrete, everyday elements it is in contrast to the more abstract, far-fetched, and general concepts on which the male gaze concentrates, and finally, how sympathetic and considerate it is in contradistinction from the cold, indifferent distance the male gaze assumes from its subject.

The part that heart plays in the female gaze, clearly making for a debasing absence, a lack, a void, a bottomless abyss in the male gaze, and of whose positive presence only the female gaze may boast, realizes itself in the emotional implications of a broken birdcage door, a dead canary, a wrung neck (of the dead canary), a wrong knot on a quilt, a table, half cleaned, half knot, "a dirty towel," pans carelessly put under the sink, a beautiful little box, an apron, broken jam glasses and so on:

"MRS. PETERS MR. Henderson said coming out that what was needed for the case was a motive; something to show anger, or-sudden feeling.

"MRS. HALE (*who is standing by the table*) well, I don't see any signs of anger around here. (*She puts her hand on the dishtowel which lies on the table, stands looking down at the table, one-half of which is clean, the other messy.*) It's wiped to here. (*Makes a move as if to finish work, then turns and looks at a loaf of bread outside the breadbox. Drops towel. In that voice of coming back to familiar things.*) Wonder how they are finding things upstairs. (*Crossing below table to downright.*) I hope she had it a little more red-up up there. You know, it seems kind of sneaking. Locking her up in town and then coming out here and trying to get her own house to turn against her!" (984)

The absence of heart in the male gaze sends the county attorney and the Sheriff upstairs to look for "signs of anger" or as Mrs. Peters says "sudden feeling." In their heartless, typical male gaze, they do not see "the dishtowel which lies on the table," (984) nor the clean half of the table, nor the messy half, not the "loaf of bread outside the breadbox" (985). No wonder Mrs. Hale sympathizes with Mrs. Wright, the female murderer, and worrying over her fate as she is, should take a sigh of relief and tell Mrs. Peters "wonder how they are finding things upstairs" (985). This is only one instance of cold female sneer at the gullibility of the male gaze in the rich course of the play, which abounds with mocking moments. The men, devoid of emotion in their gaze, search upstairs and the barn for evidence while the kitchen lying open, bare and unmasked before they are crammed with proofs they are not simply equipped to see.

What the male characters in the play mock most in females, is their perpetual worries over trifles, as they call them. That partly refers to the remarkable place that near-at-hand, concrete, individual, commonplace objects occupy in the female gaze. The whole female world seems to men to revolve around banal, cheap things unworthy of attention or worry. One point of departure leading to an unrepairable, wide gap between men and women seems to be the difference in their priorities, which is directly bound to abstract-concrete or general-particular dichotomy. An instance from the play proves revealing.

"SHERIFF Nothing here but kitchen things. (*The COUNTY ATTORNEY, after again looking around the kitchen, opens the door of a cupboard closet in right wall. He brings a small chair from right-gets on it and looks on a shelf. Pulls his hand away, sticky.*)

"COUNTY ATTORNEY Here's a nice mess. (*The women draw nearer up center.*)

"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 (*rises*) Well, can you beat the woman! Held for murder and worrying' about her preserves.

"COUNTY ATTORNEY (*getting down from chair*) I guess before we are through she may have something more serious than preserves to worry about. (*Crosses down right center.*)

"HALE Well, women are used to worrying over trifles. (*The two women move a little closer together*)" (982).

Preserves, jars, jam, knitting, quilting, sewing, a loaf of bread, a breadbox, a roller towel, a cupboard, the hinge of a cage door, "a stitch or two that is not sewed very good," and "a piece of paper, and string," (985) are examples of commonplace, little things that preoccupy women, fill them with anxiety and send worries down their backbones right in the middle of a murder scene. The men find themselves justified in laughing, with the Sheriff, at a woman who is detained for murder and yet is filled with anxiety lest the cold weather would break her jars. And the women find every reason to mock back the men for their lack of proper understanding of the emotional significance of a jar for a woman who has nothing in the world but her jars. No wonder a gaze with such trifles as its nucleus should sound alien and unintelligible to men who find more general, abstract, rationale rather than sensational concepts at the center of their gaze.

What Glaspell illustrates in her *Trifles* as the third characteristic of the female gaze, as distinct from the male one, is the continuous, non-stop presence of sympathy and identification. The female characters in the play seem to put themselves in Mrs. Wright's shoes each time they make the slightest reference to her or her paraphernalia. Each time they seem to ask themselves a series of unstated questions to which their dialogues are only answers: How would I have reacted, how would I have felt, what would I have said, what would I have done, had I faced a similar situation? They seem to ask themselves time after time, and then describe in vivid, concrete pictures what they would have done, what they would have said, and how they would have felt. They describe Mrs. Wright's states and actions in terms of their own feelings and sensations, as if they had been Mrs. Wright herself. That incessant occurrence and reoccurrence of identification are nowhere to be found in the male gaze. To name only a few occasions as illustration.

"MRS. PETERS oh, what are you doing, Mrs. Hale?

"MRS. Hale (*mildly*) Just pulling out a stitch or two that's not sewed very good. (*Threading a needle.*) Bad sewing always made me fidgety.

"MRS. PETERS (*with a glance at door, nervously*) I don't think we ought to touch things.

"MRS. HALE I'll just finish up this end. (*Suddenly stopping and leaning forward*) Mrs. Peters?

"MRS. PETERS Yes, Mrs. Hale?

"MRS. HALE What do you suppose she was so nervous about?

"MRS. PETERS Oh – I don't know. I don't know as she was nervous. I sometimes sew awful queer when I'm just tired" (985).

That is when the two ladies find a piece of Mrs. Wright's sewing done all "so nice and even," except for one or two stitches. And when they discover Mrs. Wright's dead canary in her basket, once more Mrs. Peters identifies with her.

"MRS. PETERS (*in a whisper*) When I was a girl-my kitten-there was a boy who took a hatchet, and before my eyes—and before I could get there—(Covers her face an instant.) If they hadn't held me back I would have—(*catches herself, looks upstairs where steps are heard, falters weakly*)—hurt him" (988).

Last, but not least, is Glaspell's assertion that it is the female and not the male gaze that yields power, authority, and knowledge. In sharp contrast to the male arrogance and contempt for the female gaze, the men's search comes to nothing, paving the way for the female perception to take the upper hand. The ladies discover, one by one, all the tell-tale signs that show beyond doubt Mrs. Wright's guiltiness only to eliminate them in defiance of the male confidence in the male gaze, male perception, and male power.

It is impossible to distinguish power from knowledge in *Trifles*. Knowledge is the power since punishing Mrs. Wright for murder or exempting her as guiltless which equals respecting or violating the right John had to live, all depends upon having or not having positive evidence as to suggest anger, "sudden feeling" or quarrel. The female gaze enables the women in the play to find out a remarkable number of such pieces of evidence and to sympathize with Mrs. Wright as a result of which they change the scene to an eradication of the proofs. The final outcome is exercising power over men. They take away what the men could rely on in claiming back the life right of one of their fellows and punishing a person of the opposite sex who had taken his life. Thus, the women thwart their plan and leave them bankrupt of all evidence. The result will be Mrs. Wright's freedom.

Belonging to detective literature, the play poses plenty of secondary questions, all of which contribute to the main question, namely who killed John Wright? One secondary question is: why should a rope be put around John's neck while there was a gun in the house? Like all other questions posed, the male method of inquiry comes to no clear answer in this case either, though it is implied in the play that the female way does. The ladies must have come, through their emotional speculation of commonplace objects, to recognizing the female in the rope as it circles, vagina-like around the phallic neck, as they must have come to see the male in the gun as its phallic bullets penetrate the flesh much as the penis does. And the ladies must have felt the female discharging its feminine hatred against the male authority, oppression, stiffness, and abuse. The loops of the rope and them encircling around John's neck are, thus, charged with female passion and significance, just as the straight, linear shape of the gun and the linear trace of its bullet is rich with male implications. Therefore, the shape can play a part in the male/female dichotomy in the same way that space and position do.

As a play intended for the stage and not silent reading sessions, *Trifles* conveys part of its meaning through its use of space and position, especially the center/margin binary opposition is obviously ripe with significance. In the presence of men, the women in the play always take a marginal position, leaving the center of the scene to the men. Once the men leave the scene, the women move gradually to the literal center of the scene which is accompanied by their figurative movement to the center of action, perception, interpretation, and therefore, importance. The center of the men's action and search is located first at the upstairs and then the barn. It is only for casual search, getting warm, and making fun of ladies if they ever appear in the kitchen which is the center of the women's activity, search, focus, and concern. Since the evidence they-men as well as women-are after, is found in abundance in the kitchen but by no means at the barn or upstairs, the male center turns out to be a false center, a mirage, devoid of what it is invested with, while the female center rewards the women abundantly. And at the end, it is the male gaze that is revealed as sterile, barren, and unproductive in sharp contrast to the female gaze that proves to be all fertility, creativity, and production.

4. Conclusion

This essay approves of the possibility of the female gaze being presented in Glaspell's play, as distinct from the male gaze, which at times can prove to be even more productive than the latter. By doing so, Susan Glaspell exposes herself to everlasting praise on the part of essentialist feminists, but also to eternal criticism on the part of anti-essentialist feminists who subscribe, one way or the other, to Simone de Beauvoir's ideas. Essentialists would admire Glaspell for her insistence on essential female characteristics whose lack in men has led to worldwide bloodshed, cruelty, and lack of security, and whose cultivation in women will certainly make a more harmonious, peaceful world of construction, and progress. Anti-essentialist feminists, however, would seem to point the same sharp criticism at Glaspell as they do, according to Fiona Tolan, at ecofeminism since Glaspell and ecofeminists seem to have a lot in common with regard to their image of women as well as men. Glaspell, similar to ecofeminists, depicts the potential that the female gaze can display for authority, however, she reproduces the basic distinction that the patriarchal system makes between men and women. Hence, she deserves both the reprimand and the admiration.

All in all, *Trifles* by Susan Glaspell can serve as a point of convergence where the recently-developed theories of the gaze can meet. Feminism has always been one of the most controversial theories, and not just relating to literature and literary theory, therefore, taking deeper looks at literary works to examine different feminist points of view seems to be of high importance. This paper, being library-based analytical research in nature, discussed how Glaspell takes a side with essentialist feminists, insisting on an innate difference that takes women apart from men forever. To essentialist feminists, the differences between men and women are not limited to biological differences, and at the same time, is not something to be ashamed of, rather something to celebrate. Yet, between essentialist feminists, some warn their readers to be aware, for this essential way of seeing these differences might unconsciously and – even – unintentionally lead to reproducing the same patriarchal values that have suppressed women throughout history, in the name of such differences. This paper went through these points of view concentrating on the concept of female gaze associated with nature, sensuality, concreteness, commonplaceness, sympathy, emotionality, and interdependence which nonetheless, can outwit the male gaze whose essence must be abstraction, rationality, distance, generality, culture, and individuality. An authentic shortcut to power, authority, and knowledge, the female gaze Glaspell implies, will remain a privilege for women, far beyond the male, phallogocentric reach. Yet, Glaspell seems to be reproducing the stereotypical gender roles for both men and women on a deeper level, while at the same time, of course, she is criticizing such poor judgments. The dialogue between theories of the gaze and different feminist views will not necessarily bridge the gap between diverging branches of feminism. On the contrary, it procures more controversy, deepening the gulf still further, though it will enrich both fields alike: theories of the gaze and feminisms.

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