

Johanssen 3

Within these institutions, grandeur and vulgarity coexist; in a sense, they are one and the same.

The speaker's negativity climaxes in the phrase "Shining in the darkness, of the light" (24). This paradoxical statement suggests the negative truths hidden beneath America's glamorous surface. All the grand and illustrious things of which Americans are so proud are personified by Jeremiah Dickson, the spoiled brat in the ice cream parlor.

Like America, Jeremiah has unlimited potential. He has native intuition, curiosity, courage, and a pioneer spirit. Unfortunately, however, both America and Jeremiah Dickson are limited by their willingness to be led by others, by their greed and impatience, and by their preference for quick, easy, unambiguous answers rather than careful philosophical analysis. Regardless of his—and America's—potential, Jeremiah Dickson is doomed to be hypnotized and seduced by glittering superficialities, light without substance, and to settle for the "double bills of the moon pictures" (25) rather than the enduring truths of a philosopher like Kierkegaard.

Conclusion
reinforces
thesis

53e Writing about Drama

When you write a paper about a play, you focus on the special conventions of drama. Here, for example, you might consider not just the play's plot and characters but also its staging.

✓ CHECKLIST: WRITING ABOUT DRAMA

- ✓ **Plot** What happens in the play? What conflicts are developed? How are they resolved? Are there any subplots? What events, if any, occur offstage?
- ✓ **Character** Who are the major characters? The minor characters? What relationships exist among them? What are their most distinctive traits? What do we learn about characters from their words and actions? From the play's stage directions? From what other characters tell us? Does the main character change or grow during the course of the play? What motivates the characters?
- ✓ **Staging** When and where is the play set? How do the scenery, props, costumes, lighting, and music work together to establish this setting? What else do these elements contribute to the play?
- ✓ **Theme** What central theme or themes does the play explore?

Kimberly Allison, a student in an introductory literature class, was assigned to write a short paper on one element—plot, character, staging, or theme—in a one-act play. She chose to write about the characters in Susan Glaspell's 1916 play *Trifles*. Her completed paper, annotated to highlight some conventions of writing about drama, appears on pages 744–48. (Note that because all students in the class selected plays from the same text, Kimberly's instructor did not require a Works Cited page.)

Allison 1

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English 1013

Professor Johnson

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Double-space

Desperate Measures:

Acts of Defiance in Trifles

Opening sentence identifies author and work

Susan Glaspell wrote her best-known play, Trifles, in 1916, at a time when women were beginning to challenge their socially defined roles, realizing that their identities as wives and domestics kept them in a subordinate position in society. Because women were demanding more autonomy, traditional institutions such as marriage, which confined women to the home and made them mere extensions of their husbands, were beginning to be reexamined.

Introduction places play in historical context

As a married woman, Glaspell was evidently touched by these concerns, perhaps because when she wrote Trifles she was at the mercy of her husband's wishes and encountered barriers in pursuing her career. But for whatever reason, Glaspell chose as the play's protagonist a married woman, Minnie Foster (Mrs. Wright), who has challenged society's expectations in a very extreme way: by murdering her husband. Minnie's defiant act has occurred before the action begins, and as the play unfolds, two women, Mrs. Peters and Mrs. Hale, piece together the details of the situation surrounding the murder. As the events unfold, however, it becomes clear that the focus

Allison 2

Thesis statement

of Trifles is not on who killed John Wright, but on the themes of the subordinate role of women, the confinement of the wife in the home, and the experiences all women share; through these themes, Glaspell shows her audience the desperate measures women had to take to achieve autonomy.

Topic sentence identifies first point paper will discuss: women's subordinate role

The subordinate role of women, particularly Minnie's role in her marriage, becomes evident in the first few minutes of the play when Mr. Hale observes that the victim, John Wright, had little concern for his wife's opinions: "I didn't know as what his wife wanted made much difference to John" (1164). Here Mr. Hale suggests that Minnie was powerless against the wishes of her husband. Indeed, as these characters imply, Minnie's every act and thought were controlled by her husband. Minnie only had power in her kitchen, and Mrs. Peters and Mrs. Hale understand this situation because their behavior is controlled by their husbands. Therefore, when Sheriff Peters condemns Minnie's concern about her preserves, saying, "Well, can you beat the women! Held for murder and worrying about her preserves" (1166), he is, in a sense, condemning all three of the women for worrying about domestic matters rather than about the murder that has been committed. Indeed, the sheriff's comment suggests that he assumes women's lives are trivial, an assumption that pervades the thoughts and speech of all three men.

Topic sentence introduces second point paper will discuss: women's confinement

Allison 3

Mrs. Peters and Mrs. Hale are similar to Minnie in another way as well: throughout the play, they are confined to the kitchen of the Wrights' house, while their husbands enter and exit the house at will. This scenario mirrors Minnie's daily life, as she remained in the home while her husband went to work and into town. The two women discuss Minnie's isolation in being housebound: "Not having children makes less work—but it makes a quiet house, and Wright out to work all day, and no company when he did come in" (1171). Beginning to identify with Minnie's loneliness, Mrs. Peters and Mrs. Hale recognize that, busy in their own homes, they have, in fact, participated in isolating and confining Minnie. Mrs. Hale declares, "I wish I had come over once in a while! That was a crime! That was a crime! Who's going to punish that? [. . .] I might have known she needed help" (1173)!

Transitional paragraph discusses women's observations and conclusions

Soon the two women discover that Minnie's only connection to the outside world was her bird, the symbol of her confinement; Minnie was a caged bird who was kept from singing and communicating with others because of her restrictive husband. And piecing together the evidence—the disorderly kitchen, the poorly stitched quilt pieces, and the dead canary—the women come to believe that John Wright broke the bird's neck just as he had broken Minnie's spirit. Now, Mrs. Peters and Mrs. Hale see the connection between the dead canary and Minnie's situation. The stage directions

Allison 4

describe the moment when the women become aware of the truth: "Their eyes meet," and the women share "A look of growing comprehension, of horror" (1172).

Through their observations and discussions in Mrs.

Wright's kitchen, Mrs. Hale and Mrs. Peters come to understand the commonality of women's experiences. Mrs. Hale speaks for both of them when she says, "I know how things can be—for women. [. . .] We all go through the same things—it's all just a different kind of the same thing" (1173). And, once the two women realize the experiences they share, they begin to recognize that they must join together in order to challenge a male-oriented society; although their experiences may seem trivial to the men, the "trifles" of their lives are significant to them. They realize that Minnie's independence and identity were crushed by her husband and that their own husbands have asserted that women's lives are trivial and unimportant as well. This realization leads them to commit an act as defiant as the one that has gotten Minnie into trouble: they conceal their discovery from their husbands and from the law.

Significantly, Mrs. Peters does acknowledge that "the law is the law," but she also understands that because Mr. Wright treated his wife badly, Minnie is justified in killing him. They also realize, however, that for men the law is black and white and that an all-male jury will not take into account the extenuating circumstances that prompted Minnie to kill her

Topic sentence introduces third point paper will discuss: commonality of women's experiences

Allison 5

husband. And even if Minnie were allowed to communicate to the all-male court the abuses she has suffered, the law would undoubtedly view her experience as trivial.

Nevertheless, because Mrs. Hale and Mrs. Peters empathize with Minnie's condition, they suppress the evidence they find, enduring their husbands' condescension rather than standing up to them. Through this desperate action, the women attempt to break through the boundaries of their social role, just as Minnie has done. Although Minnie is imprisoned for her crime, she has freed herself; and, although Mrs. Peters and Mrs. Hale conceal their knowledge, fearing the men will laugh at them, these women are really challenging society and freeing themselves as well.

Conclusion
places play in
historical
context

In *Trifles*, Susan Glaspell addresses many of the problems shared by early twentieth-century women, including their subordinate status and their confinement in the home. In order to emphasize the pervasiveness of these problems, and the desperate measures women had to take to break out of restrictive social roles, Glaspell does more than focus on the plight of the woman who has ended her isolation and loneliness by committing a heinous crime against society. By illustrating the vast differences between male and female experience, she shows how men define the roles of women and how women can challenge these roles in search of their own significance in society and their eventual independence.

53f Using Literary Terms

When you write about literature, you use a vocabulary appropriate to the discipline. The following glossary defines some of the terms you will use.

- ✓ **alliteration** Repetition of initial sounds in a series of words, as in "dark, damp dungeon."
- ✓ **allusion** A reference to a historical event, a work of literature, a biblical passage, or the like that the author expects readers to recognize.
- ✓ **antagonist** The character who is in conflict with or in opposition to the protagonist. Sometimes the antagonist is a force or situation, such as war or poverty.
- ✓ **assonance** Repetition of vowel sounds in a series of words, as in "fine slide on the ice."
- blank verse** Lines of unrhymed iambic pentameter in no particular stanzaic form; approximates the rhythms of ordinary English speech.
- ✓ **character** The fictional representation of a person. Characters may be *round* (well developed) or *flat* (undeveloped stereotypes), *dynamic* (changing and growing during the course of the story) or *static* (remaining essentially unchanged by the story's events).
- ✓ **climax** The point of greatest tension or importance in a play or story; the point at which the story's decisive action takes place.
- closed form** A kind of poetic structure characterized by a consistent pattern of rhyme, meter, or stanzaic form.
- ✓ **conflict** The opposition between two or more characters, between a character and a natural force, or between contrasting tendencies or motives or ideas within one character.
- ✓ **consonance** Repetition of consonant sounds in a series of words, as in "the gnarled fingers of his nervous hands."
- denouement** The point in the plot of a work of fiction or drama at which the action comes to an end and loose ends are tied up.
- ✓ **exposition** The initial stage of the plot of a work of fiction or drama, in which the author presents basic information readers need to understand the story's characters and events.
- figurative language** Language whose meaning is not to be taken literally. The most commonly used figures of speech are *metaphor*, *personification*, and *simile*.
- free verse** Poetry that does not follow a fixed meter or rhyme scheme.