

a jury of her peers analysis

Susan Glaspell's "A Jury of Her Peers" stands as a seminal work in feminist literature and a powerful exploration of justice, societal constraints, and female solidarity. This enduring short story, first published in 1917, delves into the unspoken realities of women's lives in the early 20th century, revealing the profound chasm between legal pronouncements and lived experiences. Through a meticulous examination of the domestic sphere, Glaspell dissects themes of oppression, empathy, and the subversion of patriarchal authority. Our comprehensive a jury of her peers analysis will dissect the narrative's intricate plot, explore its compelling characters, and illuminate its lasting thematic significance. We will delve into the symbolic meanings embedded within the story, the historical context that shaped its creation, and the critical interpretations that continue to resonate today. This deep dive aims to provide a thorough understanding of why "A Jury of Her Peers" remains a vital and thought-provoking piece of American literature, offering insights into the nature of truth and the quiet strength of women.

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The Plot of "A Jury of Her Peers"

The narrative of "A Jury of Her Peers" unfolds in the stark, desolate farmhouse of John Wright, where his wife, Martha Wright, stands accused of his murder. The story begins with the arrival of the county attorney, the sheriff, and two local women, Mrs. Hale and Mrs. Peters, who have been asked to accompany their husbands to the scene. As the men conduct their official investigation in the main living quarters, the women are relegated to the kitchen, tasked with gathering a few personal items for Mrs. Wright. It is in this domestic space, ostensibly mundane, that the true investigation and revelation occur. While the men dismiss the women's observations as trivial, focusing on a supposed lack of motive and evidence, Mrs. Hale and Mrs. Peters begin to piece together the unspoken narrative of Martha Wright's life.

Their meticulous examination of the kitchen and bedroom reveals subtle but telling clues about Mrs. Wright's oppressive existence. They discover her unkempt kitchen, the signs of her neglected duties, and, most importantly, her unfinished quilting. The discovery of a birdcage, its door broken, and a dead canary, its neck snapped, becomes a pivotal moment. These seemingly insignificant details paint a poignant picture of a life devoid of joy, companionship, and even the basic freedom to express herself. The women, drawing upon their own experiences and understanding of women's lives, recognize the quiet desperation and the psychological toll of John Wright's abusive and controlling behavior. The a jury of her peers analysis of these domestic elements allows the women to construct a narrative of motive that eludes the official male investigators.

Ultimately, Mrs. Hale and Mrs. Peters come to understand why Martha Wright might have committed the crime. They realize that the dead canary, a symbol of her suppressed spirit and only source of comfort, was likely killed by John Wright, mirroring the stifling of Martha's own inner life. In a profound

act of solidarity, they choose to conceal the crucial evidence – the dead canary – from the authorities. By withholding the very thing that would condemn Martha, they effectively become her jury, delivering a verdict of acquittal through their silence and their shared understanding. This deliberate act of concealment highlights their rejection of a patriarchal legal system that fails to recognize or empathize with women's suffering, underscoring the central theme of finding justice within their own community.

Key Characters in "A Jury of Her Peers"

Minnie Wright (formerly Minnie Foster)

Minnie Wright is the central figure, though largely absent from the physical scene. Her presence is felt through the remnants of her life and the perceptions of the other women. Once known as Minnie Foster, a girl who sang in the choir and enjoyed life, her transformation into the seemingly dull and lifeless Martha Wright reflects the crushing weight of her marriage. She is portrayed as a victim of her husband's cruelty and neglect, her spirit systematically broken. The a jury of her peers analysis of her domestic environment—the unkempt kitchen, the unfinished work—speaks volumes about her despair and isolation. Her act of murder, though not explicitly detailed, is understood by the other women as a desperate act of self-preservation against an unbearable existence.

Mrs. Peters

Mrs. Peters, the sheriff's wife, initially embodies the cautious adherence to law and order. She is a woman who has also experienced loss and loneliness, having lost a child and a father. This shared experience of hardship allows her to gradually connect with Mrs. Wright's plight. Her initial reluctance to sympathize with Mrs. Wright, stemming from her position as the wife of a law enforcement officer, slowly dissolves as she witnesses the evidence of Martha's suffering. Mrs. Peters's journey from a detached observer to an active participant in withholding evidence represents a significant shift in her understanding of justice and loyalty. Her empathy grows as she recognizes the parallels between her own suppressed emotions and Martha's unbearable circumstances.

Mrs. Hale

Mrs. Hale is the primary perspective through which the reader experiences the events. She is a neighbor of the Wrights and feels a sense of guilt for not visiting Martha more often, acknowledging that she could have offered support. Mrs. Hale is more outspoken and empathetic from the outset, readily understanding the stifling nature of Martha's marriage. She is the one who most forcefully articulates the women's growing conviction about Martha's innocence, not in the legal sense, but in the sense of her being driven to an extreme act by unbearable circumstances. Her keen observation skills and her innate sense of justice drive the a jury of her peers analysis of the crime scene. She is the catalyst for Mrs. Peters's growing understanding and courage.

County Attorney Henderson

County Attorney Henderson represents the patriarchal legal system and its inherent blindness to the realities of women's lives. He is portrayed as condescending, dismissive, and focused solely on superficial evidence. He views the women's inquiries into domestic matters as irrelevant and foolish, unable to comprehend how details like a quilt or a bird might hold any significance. Henderson embodies the external force of judgment that fails to penetrate the emotional and psychological depths of the situation. His preoccupation with the obvious—like a motive for murder—prevents him from seeing the subtler, more profound reasons behind Martha's actions.

Sheriff Peters

Sheriff Peters, like his wife, is an agent of the law but is largely portrayed as a less developed character, acting primarily as an appendage to the county attorney. He is depicted as a man of duty, who follows the official investigation without questioning its limitations. While he is not overtly malicious, his male perspective aligns with the prevailing societal norms that devalue women's experiences and their internal struggles. His presence highlights the systemic indifference that Martha Wright faced, both before and during the legal proceedings. The a jury of her peers analysis shows how his authority, like Henderson's, is rendered ineffective by his lack of understanding.

Mr. Hale

Mr. Hale is Mrs. Hale's husband and another local man present at the scene. He is somewhat more observant than the sheriff but still operates within the confines of male-centric assumptions. He recounts the initial discovery of John Wright's body, highlighting John's seemingly mundane daily routine before his death. His testimony provides factual details but lacks the emotional insight that the women possess. He represents the average man of the era, largely unaware of or unconcerned with the internal lives of women, particularly those suffering in isolation.

Thematic Analysis of "A Jury of Her Peers"

Oppression and Confinement

The overwhelming theme of oppression permeates "A Jury of Her Peers." Martha Wright's life is depicted as one of relentless confinement, both physically and emotionally. Her home, meant to be a sanctuary, becomes a prison under her husband's tyrannical rule. The story meticulously details the signs of this oppression: the neglected kitchen, the unfinished chores, and the general air of desolation. John Wright's cruelty is implied through his actions, such as his habit of breaking things dear to Martha, mirroring the breaking of her spirit. The a jury of her peers analysis reveals how this systematic subjugation, devoid of any outlet for expression or comfort, creates an environment where extreme actions become the only perceived escape. The women's recognition of this oppression is the key to their understanding of Martha's potential motive.

Justice and Injustice

The story critically examines the concept of justice, contrasting the legal definition with a more nuanced, empathetic understanding. The male characters, representing the official legal system, are focused on finding concrete evidence and a clear motive that fits their preconceived notions. They fail to see the injustice Martha has suffered in her marriage, a daily torment that far outweighs the act of

killing her husband. The women, in contrast, recognize that true justice requires understanding the context of Martha's life and the psychological pressures she endured. Their decision to conceal evidence is an act of rebellion against a system they deem unjust because it cannot account for the suffering of women. This theme questions whether the law, as administered by men, can ever truly deliver justice to women in patriarchal societies.

Female Solidarity and Empathy

A powerful theme in "A Jury of Her Peers" is the burgeoning solidarity and empathy among the women. Initially, Mrs. Hale feels a degree of estrangement from Martha, admitting her failure to visit. However, as she and Mrs. Peters delve into the domestic details, a profound connection forms. They recognize their shared experiences as women in a male-dominated world, understanding the quiet desperation, the unexpressed desires, and the social constraints they all face to varying degrees. Their shared discovery of the dead canary and the broken birdcage solidifies this bond. They become a jury of their own peers, making a collective decision based on empathy rather than legal precedent. This solidarity is the driving force that allows them to subvert the official investigation.

The Significance of Domesticity

Glaspell elevates the domestic sphere from a place of triviality to one of profound significance. The kitchen, typically seen as the woman's domain and often dismissed by men as unimportant, becomes the site of critical discovery and understanding. The men overlook the details of Martha's domestic life—her quilting, her sewing, the care (or lack thereof) for her birds—while the women recognize these as direct reflections of her state of mind and her suffering. The a jury of her peers analysis centers on these domestic elements, demonstrating that the very spaces men deem insignificant hold the keys to understanding the truth of a woman's life and, in this case, her potential crime. The story challenges the patriarchal devaluation of women's work and experiences.

Silence and Voice

The narrative explores the power of silence and the struggle for voice. Martha Wright has lived a life of enforced silence, her true feelings and experiences suppressed by her husband. The broken birdcage and the dead canary symbolize the silencing of her spirit and her joy. The men's dismissal of the women's observations is another form of silencing, a refusal to acknowledge their perspectives. However, the women ultimately find their collective voice through their unspoken agreement to protect Martha. Their silence in the face of the men's questioning becomes a powerful act of defiance. By withholding the evidence, they speak volumes about their condemnation of the injustice Martha faced and their solidarity with her. The a jury of her peers analysis highlights how their collective silence becomes their most potent form of communication and resistance.

Symbolism in "A Jury of Her Peers"

The Birdcage

The birdcage, found in the corner of the kitchen with its door ripped off its hinges, is a potent symbol of Martha Wright's confinement and her desire for freedom. Canaries were often kept as pets for their song, representing joy, beauty, and spirited expression. The broken birdcage signifies the destruction of that joy and the stifling of Martha's spirit by her husband. The fact that the door is ripped off suggests a violent disruption, mirroring the violence inflicted upon Martha's inner life. The men dismiss it as insignificant, but the women recognize it as a crucial clue to Martha's emotional state and the environment she endured.

The Half-Stitched Quilt

The half-finished quilt discovered by the women represents Martha Wright's interrupted life and her lost sense of purpose. Quilting was a traditional domestic activity, often associated with comfort, creativity, and the creation of warmth and beauty. The fact that it is only half-stitched suggests that Martha's life

was cut short in its domestic duties, or that her spirit was too broken to complete the task. The men dismiss the quilting as "knotting," a trivial detail. However, Mrs. Hale and Mrs. Peters understand that Martha's work on the quilt mirrors her internal state: it is either meticulously done or done with a frantic, irregular stitch, indicative of her emotional turmoil. The a jury of her peers analysis of the quilt reveals the unfinished nature of Martha's life.

The Sewing Box

The sewing box, which the women are asked to gather for Martha, also carries symbolic weight. While seemingly mundane, the contents of a sewing box can reveal a great deal about a person's life, their habits, and their emotional state. The careful organization or disarray within the box can speak volumes. In this context, the sewing box represents the private, intimate world of the woman, a space that the men are unwilling or unable to enter and understand. It is within these domestic tools and accoutrements that the women find clues to Martha's experience, reinforcing the idea that the most important truths are often found in the overlooked details of women's lives.

The Canary

The canary, found dead with its neck snapped, is arguably the most significant symbol in the story. It directly parallels Martha Wright's own situation. The canary was her sole companion, providing song and joy in an otherwise bleak existence. John Wright's act of killing the bird—a violent, senseless act of cruelty—is understood by the women as the final straw that pushed Martha to murder. The snapped neck of the canary mirrors the snapping of Martha's spirit under her husband's abuse. It represents the silencing of her voice, her joy, and her very being. The a jury of her peers analysis culminates in the women recognizing the canary as the ultimate proof of John Wright's cruelty and the catalyst for Martha's desperate act.

Historical Context of "A Jury of Her Peers"

Susan Glaspell wrote "A Jury of Her Peers" during a period of significant social and cultural change in the United States, particularly concerning women's roles and rights. The early 20th century saw the burgeoning of the suffrage movement, which fought for women's right to vote, and a growing awareness of the limitations placed upon women in society. Many women were still largely confined to the domestic sphere, with limited legal and economic power. Glaspell herself was a prominent figure in the Provincetown Players theater group, which sought to create new, more realistic forms of American drama, often exploring social issues. "A Jury of Her Peers" can be seen as a literary manifestation of these changing attitudes, offering a critique of a patriarchal society that often failed to protect or understand women.

The story is closely based on a real-life murder case that Glaspell covered as a journalist: the murder of John Hossack in Iowa in 1900 by his wife, Margaret. Glaspell's reporting on the trial highlighted the lack of evidence and the unusual circumstances, but it was the societal context and the perceived motivations of the accused that likely fueled her fictional exploration. The limitations faced by women in legal proceedings of the time, where their testimony and experiences were often devalued, are central to the story's power. The a jury of her peers analysis of the story's historical roots reveals its grounding in the lived realities and legal struggles of women seeking agency and recognition in a world that often rendered them invisible or subservient.

Critical Reception and Legacy of "A Jury of Her Peers"

"A Jury of Her Peers" has consistently been recognized as a masterpiece of short fiction and a cornerstone of feminist literary criticism. Since its publication, it has been lauded for its subtle yet powerful portrayal of female psychology, its incisive critique of patriarchal structures, and its innovative narrative techniques. Critics have praised Glaspell for her ability to convey profound emotional truths through seemingly mundane domestic details, a technique that became a hallmark of modernist literature. The story's lasting impact lies in its prescient exploration of themes that continue to be

relevant: gender inequality, the nature of justice, and the importance of empathy and solidarity.

The story's enduring legacy is evident in its frequent inclusion in anthologies and university literature courses. It is studied not only for its literary merit but also for its historical significance in articulating early feminist concerns. The a jury of her peers analysis in contemporary literary studies often focuses on its contribution to feminist theory, its exploration of the female voice, and its subversion of traditional narrative forms. Glaspell's work is seen as a crucial precursor to later feminist writers who continued to challenge patriarchal norms and explore the complexities of women's lives. The story's subtle defiance and its ultimately hopeful portrayal of female connection have cemented its place as a vital and influential work.

Conclusion: The Enduring Power of "A Jury of Her Peers"

In conclusion, "A Jury of Her Peers" remains a profoundly moving and critically important work that continues to resonate with readers today. Through its masterful storytelling and its keen observation of human nature, Susan Glaspell exposes the devastating effects of patriarchal oppression and celebrates the quiet strength and solidarity found among women. The a jury of her peers analysis reveals how the seemingly insignificant details of domestic life become the very keys to understanding truth and delivering a more humane form of justice. The story's exploration of themes such as confinement, empathy, and the subversion of authority offers timeless insights into societal structures and individual resilience. Glaspell's legacy is undeniable, as "A Jury of Her Peers" continues to inspire discussions about gender, justice, and the enduring power of female connection in a world that still often struggles to hear women's voices.

Frequently Asked Questions

What is the central theme explored in 'A Jury of Her Peers'?

The central theme is the oppression of women in a patriarchal society and the collective, albeit silent, resistance and solidarity that can emerge among them.

How does the setting of the story contribute to its themes?

The stark, isolated farmhouse reflects the restrictive lives of rural women. The oppressive atmosphere of the house and its contents, like the unfinished sewing and the neglected kitchen, symbolize the stifled lives and unfulfilled potential of Mrs. Wright and, by extension, the other women.

What is the significance of the birdcage and the dead canary in the story?

The dead canary, choked and with its neck wrung, is a potent symbol of Minnie Wright's own suppression and eventual violent outburst. The broken birdcage represents her trapped state and the loss of her freedom and spirit.

How do the women (Mrs. Hale and Mrs. Peters) develop agency throughout the story?

Initially, they feel powerless and disconnected. However, as they observe the evidence of Minnie's suffering, they begin to understand her actions and develop a sense of empathy and solidarity, culminating in their decision to conceal the evidence.

What does the title 'A Jury of Her Peers' mean in the context of the story?

The title is ironic. While the men act as a literal jury, the women, Mrs. Hale and Mrs. Peters, become a metaphorical jury of Minnie Wright's 'peers' – women who understand her experiences and judge her actions based on that understanding, ultimately acquitting her in their own way.

How does Susan Glaspell use symbolism to convey the characters' inner lives?

Glaspell uses objects like the disordered sewing, the empty shelves, the quilt, and the dead canary to symbolize the emotional states, suppressed creativity, and domestic burdens of the women, revealing

their inner lives more effectively than dialogue often does.

What is the significance of the men's dismissive attitude towards women's concerns?

The men's condescending dismissal of the women's 'trifles' highlights the patriarchal societal norms that devalue women's experiences and perspectives. Their inability to see the significance of the domestic details mirrors their inability to understand the motives behind Mrs. Wright's actions.

How does the story critique the legal system of its time?

The story critiques a legal system that fails to account for the psychological and emotional pressures faced by women. The male-dominated justice system, focused on objective evidence, cannot comprehend the subjective reality of domestic abuse and its consequences.

What is the role of guilt and responsibility in the women's decision to conceal the evidence?

The women feel a sense of shared guilt and responsibility for not intervening in Mrs. Wright's suffering sooner. Concealing the evidence becomes a way to protect her from a system they believe would not understand, and perhaps a way to atone for their own passive complicity.

How does 'A Jury of Her Peers' foreshadow the feminist movements of the 20th century?

The story is considered a foundational text of early feminism. It powerfully illustrates the need for women's solidarity, the importance of understanding women's experiences from their own perspectives, and the critique of patriarchal structures that silence and oppress women.

Additional Resources

Here are 9 book titles related to "A Jury of Her Peers" analysis:

1__The Yellow Wallpaper and Other Stories__

This collection features Charlotte Perkins Gilman's seminal work, which, like "A Jury of Her Peers," explores a woman's confinement and mental deterioration within patriarchal domesticity. The stories often delve into the psychological impacts of societal expectations and the limited agency afforded to women in the late 19th century. Analyzing these narratives alongside Susan Glaspell's work can reveal broader themes of female oppression and the subtle forms of rebellion found in women's literature of the period.

2__Trifles and Other Plays__

While "A Jury of Her Peers" is a short story, this collection includes Susan Glaspell's original one-act play, *Trifles*, from which the story was adapted. Reading both allows for a comparative analysis of how Glaspell developed her themes and characters across different mediums. It highlights the nuances of dramatic versus narrative presentation of the same core critique of gender roles and societal blindness.

3__The Story of an Hour and Other Writings__

Kate Chopin's work, particularly "The Story of an Hour," resonates with "A Jury of Her Peers" through its examination of female desire for freedom from oppressive marriages and societal constraints. Chopin's writing often explores the internal lives of women and their yearning for independence, mirroring the quiet longing and eventual decisive action seen in Mrs. Wright's case. These stories provide a rich context for understanding the emerging feminist consciousness in American literature.

4__Women and Fiction by Patricia Meyerowitz__

This critical study likely examines the historical development of women's writing and the themes they addressed. It would offer an academic framework for understanding the literary and social context of "A Jury of Her Peers," placing it within a broader tradition of female voices challenging societal norms. The book would provide insights into the critical reception and ongoing analysis of works by women writers.

5__Feminist Literary Criticism: An Introduction by Mary Eagleton__

An introduction to feminist literary criticism would equip readers with the theoretical tools necessary to deconstruct texts like "A Jury of Her Peers" from a feminist perspective. It would explain concepts like patriarchy, gender roles, and the male gaze, which are crucial for understanding the power dynamics and critiques embedded in Glaspell's story. This book would guide an analysis of how the story subverts traditional notions of justice and societal expectations.

6__The Cambridge Companion to American Women's Writing__

This comprehensive companion would offer scholarly essays on major American women writers and movements. It would likely feature discussions on realism, modernism, and feminist literature, providing historical and critical context for Susan Glaspell's work and the broader literary landscape she inhabited. Understanding her place within this tradition is key to appreciating the groundbreaking nature of her contributions.

7__Narrative and Meaning by Wallace Martin__

While not exclusively focused on feminist themes, a book on narrative and meaning would offer theoretical approaches to analyzing how stories construct their messages. It would help dissect the deliberate choices Glaspell made in structuring her narrative, from the character development of the male investigators to the subtle revelations made by the female characters. Analyzing the narrative techniques can illuminate how the story subtly conveys its critique.

8__The Madwoman in the Attic: The Nineteenth-Century Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination by Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar__

This foundational work in feminist literary criticism examines the experiences of women writers and the imagery of confinement, madness, and rebellion in their work. It provides a powerful lens through which to view Mrs. Wright's situation and the symbolic significance of her arrested development and the bird. The book would help connect "A Jury of Her Peers" to a long tradition of women expressing their societal subjugation and desires for liberation.

9__A Literature of Their Own: British Women Novelists from Brontë to Lessing by Elaine Showalter__

Although focused on British literature, Elaine Showalter's seminal work on women's literary history

establishes important methodologies for analyzing a canon of women's writing. Her concept of "gynocriticism"—the study of women as writers—provides a framework for understanding how women authors have historically engaged with and responded to patriarchal literary traditions. Applying these analytical strategies to Glaspell's story can highlight its unique position and contribution to the development of American women's literary voices.

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