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Justified

In “Twelve Good Men or Two Good Women: Concepts of Law and Justice in Susan Glaspell’s ‘A Jury of Her Peers,’” Mary M. Bendel-Simso uses a feministapproach to analyze Susan Glaspell’s “A Jury of Her Peers.” While most other critics of “Jury” focus on women’s social bonding and women’s legal rights in the early 20th century, this essayist focuses on women and men’s different perspectives of law and justice, particularly in the realm of a justifiable-murder defense for domestic abuse.

The primary work is a short fictional story of a murder in a rural farm community during the early 1900s, a time when women are not permitted to serve as jurors. Minnie Foster Wright is charged with murdering her husband, John Wright, since she was the only other person in the house when he was strangled in their marital bed. As Minnie sits in jail, three men and two women arrive at the Wright house, which is the disheveled crime scene. While the men seek evidence to cement Minnie’s conviction, the women are seemingly collecting some of Minnie’s personal belongings. However, it becomes apparent that the women, Mrs. Hale and Mrs. Peters, are actually uncovering clues. They discover, and later decidedly withhold, evidence of Minnie’s motive that would have surely convicted her.

In this critical analysis, Bendel-Simso begins with a brief plot summary of “Jury,” as well as the background of how it is Glaspell’s fictionalized story of a true murder mystery in Iowa, whichshe had previously covered as a reporter. Then the essayist delves into concepts of law and justice through a feminist lens, as portrayed by the characters. She first states that an “important facet of the story is the dilemma it presents between pursuing the Law and pursuing Justice” (Bendel-Simso 292). Moreover, the main point is how the women and men in “Jury” differ in their perspectives of law and justice, due to their early 20th century gender roles and how this difference plays an important part in solving the dilemma. The essayist adds how Glaspell persuades readers to empathize with the accused murderer and how this fictionalized version differs from the true murder mystery by making Minnie childless, unlike the original murder case where there were nine children. Lastly, Bendel-Simso concludes that “Jury” argues “punishing symbolic crimes will lead to a greater form of Justice than pursuing the Law based on tangible evidence” (292). In other words, “Jury” maintains that justice is better achieved when symbolic crimes are punished.

Bendel-Simso presents her interpretation of “Jury” in a logical and persuasive manner since she provides several examples to support her points, especially of what law and justice mean to both the women and the men. In other words, Bendel-Simso thoroughly supports her arguments with text from the primary work and other sources, such as other critics. Her arguments are logical since they make sense and are substantiated.

This persuasiveness is seen when Bendel-Simso supports her assertion that the characters bring forth their own bias of law and justice from the onset of the investigation, based on their gender. She states, “Whereas the men began the story looking for an eye for an eye, in very concrete fashion, the women look at a much larger context of social concern and try to determine the first eye and even the symbolic eye” (297). Furthermore, she explains how the men arrive with the belief that a woman is guilty of killing a man. They search for the motive, which is the “only missing piece of the holy juridical trinity of means, motive, and opportunity” (293). It is the men’s mission to find “the motive necessary to convince ‘twelve good men’ that Mrs. Wright is guilty of the murder of her husband […] their version of ‘justice’ is based solely upon a consideration of the facts they gather and retribution fueled by vengeance” (292). Simply put, Bendel-Simso shows that the men have the preconceived opinion that a woman is guilty of killing her husband and only care about investigating the motive in order to seal the conviction.

Bendel-Simso asserts that, on the other hand, the women’s reason for investigating the motive is to understand the events that led up to the murder. They recognize clues of Minnie’s mental state at the time of the crime, such as the messy kitchen and the “crazy” sewing. They question what would cause another woman to leave her house in such a frenzied state. They believe that the murder cannot be fairly investigated without taking into account the whole picture, including the unhappy marital relationship. For example, the women blame John for his wife’s loneliness and isolation during the two decades prior to the murder. Likewise, when the women find a dead**,** strangled bird and a damaged birdcage, they consider it evidence of his mistreatment and neglect. They conclude that “John Wright slowly strangled Minnie’s spirit over the previous two decades, isolating her physically and mentally from the community of women and holding her incommunicado” (Bendel-Simso 295). Thus, Bendel-Simso shows how Mrs. Hale and Mrs. Peters’s preconceived notions of women leads them to believe that Minnie was justified in murdering her husband and silently agree to destroy the evidence of the motive, the dead bird.

Additionally, Bendel-Simso argues that the characters could only attain justice for their own peers. She points to Mrs. Hale and Mrs. Peters’s opinion that justice can only be attained if Minnie is protected from the law. The essayist believes that readers can deduce this, based on the actions of the men at the crime scene. Stated differently, since the men at the crime scene only want to look at tangible evidence and pursue the law, male jurors would probably not consider any kind of justifiable defense for Minnie. Bendel-Simso states that the men “can seek justice only for men (their peers), and can only impose Law upon women” (**293**). In other words, Glaspell portrays men as narrow-minded and only empathetic toward other men, who are their peers. A murder against a man, by a woman, is unjustifiable and the murderer needs to be lawfully punished.

The essayist further argues “Jury” illustrates that only truly qualified peers, such as rural farm women of her generation, can serve as jurors for the accused because they could relate to her and judge her fairly. Since the men are clearly not Minnie’s peers, they may not be empathetic toward her. Bendel-Simso concludes that the women take matters into their own hands because they held no hope that justice would prevail if Minnie had been tried before a jury of men. According to Bendel-Simso, had the legal system allowed women to act as jurors, readers are led to believe that the jury would reach the same conclusion as Mrs. Hale and Mrs. Peters.

Also, the essayist claims “Jury” establishes that “[w]ithout empathy, one has only vengeful Law” (Bendel-Simso 295).That is, it would be merciless to follow the law without having empathy. The critical writing further explains Glaspell’s ability to appeal to both the readers’ emotional and symbolic senses, thereby creating empathy for Minnie that persuades them of a justifiable murder defense. Bendel-Simso uses several examples of such emotional appeals and symbolism. One example is the strangled dead bird, “wrapped for burial in a piece of silk and placed in a pretty box of a coffin” (295). Readers can relate to the death of a beloved family pet and understand Minnie’s sorrow and pain over the murdered pet bird. The essayist points out that readers are sentimentally drawn in with Mrs. Hale’s comparison of Minnie to the dead bird, whereby she describes Minnie “like a bird…[r]eal sweet and pretty but kind of timid and – fluttery” (295). Minnie may be physically alive, but her spirit has been stifled and she is just as dead as the beloved bird.

Moreover, the essayist claims that Glaspell’s choice to exclude children in “Jury,” which is different from the true account where there were nine children, was an effective way to show how isolated and lonely Minnie felt. This loneliness is discussed by Mrs. Hale and Mrs. Peter, who agree that “after years and years of nothing, if you then had a bird to sing to you, the stillness after the bird’s death would be unbearable” (Bendel-Simso 294). In effect, she argues, Glaspell cleverly altered this detail in order to appeal to the reader’s emotion.

Another example that Bendel-Simso provides is the symbolism of the murder weapon and method of death. She asserts that the rope and strangulation symbolize vindication for the murder. The essayist supports this by stating, “[Minnie] does indeed cause her husband’s death, [but] she is not responsible for it, and rather than being innocent, she is justified; like the hangman, she cannot be guilty, for she is merely the arm of justice” (296). Thus, Bendel-Simso persuasively argues that Glaspell is able to appeal to readers’ emotional and symbolic senses, which allow them to empathize with Minnie’s life as a rural, early 20th century American woman. As a result, Glaspell persuades the reader to side with Minnie and Bendel-Simso questions whether the reader would now need to re-evaluate his/her own interpretation of law and justice.

Bendel-Simso logically and persuasively concludes that Glaspell dictates another form of justice than was traditionally given in the early 20th century. She asserts that “Jury” re-defines justice as, “crimes are no longer just overt acts, and Justice is more than just a reaction to them[…]neither wholly rational nor objective, but as requiring emotion and empathy and an ability to read and value figurative interpretations over literal ones” (297). In other words, attaining justice involves the ability to see the larger context and requires empathic abilities.

I agree with the main points raised by Bendel-Simso in her feminist approach to analyzing “Jury.” She correctly asserts that the female and male characters in “Jury” show their unique perspectives of law and justice from the beginning. This is quite evident by the way the men go briskly about their business of searching for clues in the bedroom, while the women stay in the kitchen to presumably collect Minnie’s belongings. The men are already convinced that Minnie is the murderer, while the women look about the kitchen to unravel the mystery of why a woman, with their same rural background and generation, would be driven to such an act as murder. These are definitely two different perspectives and it is no surprise that they end up with different conclusions.

I reach the same conclusion as Bendel-Simso in that the women and men of “Jury” could not serve as peers for the opposite sex. Since women were not allowed to serve on juries, it is understandable that the women in this story further empathize with Minnie, who they know could not get a fair trial with a jury of men.

Furthermore, I agree that Glaspell’s use of symbolism and emotional appeal was effective in promoting empathy for Minnie. For example, the dead strangled bird in a beautiful box was quite moving since it showed how important the bird had been to Minnie. Also, using a bird as a symbol is impactful because it symbolizes the life that was ultimately squeezed out of the bird, as surely as it was squeezed out of Minnie after her marriage to John. Also, the exclusion of children in the story is a valid example of how Glaspell instills empathy for lonely Minnie, whomay have wanted children.

I agree with Bendel-Simso’s assertion that Glaspell redefines justice as one that needs to look at more than tangible evidence. The essayist shows how Glaspell covers this issue well through the use of the female characters’ ultimate decision to withhold evidence, which would probably convict Minnie.

Opponents of feminism would not be drawn to Bendel-Simso’s critical analysis and especially to Glaspell’s re-definition of justice. If they were to read “Jury,” they would likely argue that twenty years of oppression does not justify murder. Minnie was not in imminent danger for her life when she wrapped that rope around her sleeping husband’s neck. Murder is murder.

I was also initially reluctant to accept that Minnie was justified in killing her husband, especially since John was strangled in his bed. Obviously, this took some premeditation and led me to believe Minnie knew what she was doing. However, I cannot ignore men’s views of women as inferior beings, during the story’s time period. This is emphasized throughout the story by the male characters’ derogatory comments, such as “women are used to worrying over trifles” (Glaspell 83) and “would the women know a clue if they did come upon it?” (89). More importantly, Bendel-Simso points out that “women did not have societal power and were disenfranchised and without a voice in the courts” (293). Simply put, women were treated by men as substandard and they did not have legal rights or recourse if they were abused, physically or mentally. Keeping this in mind, I empathize with Minnie, whose defense is that she had been mentally abused for 20 years. Mental abuse can be just as traumatic as physical abuse. Therefore, I agree with Glaspell’s re-definition of justice whereby more than tangible evidence needs to be considered before convicting someone of murder.

In conclusion, this critical analysis was successful in discussing the concepts of law and justice, as seen by “twelve good men” on a jury or “two good women,” in the kitchen of the Wright house. In other words, the essayist clearly demonstrates that there is a significant difference between the perspectives of the women and the men in this story. Had Minnie gone to trial with twelve men on her jury, she surely would have been convicted. However, as it turns out, she was judged and acquitted by the two women, who are her true peers. Additionally, this critical paper brings up another important point -- Glaspell’s ability to persuade readers to side with Minnie by using empathy and leaving the reader to re-evaluate his/her own interpretation of law and justice. Thus, this analysis shows how a story from 1917 can still impact a reader today because it asks whether it is ever acceptable to ignore the law in order to attain justice. When is murder justifiable? Thisquestion is still significant today with respect to justifiable-homicide defenses in domestic violence cases.

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