Susan Glaspell’s Naturalist Scenarios of Determinism and Blind Faith

Mary E. Papke

Most American literary scholars and many students of American literature now know Susan Glaspell, that is, they know Susan Glaspell the playwright and the writer of one short story, “Jury of Her Peers.” The appreciation of her work, just as the amount of her work that has been showcased, is limited not least of all because of a sometimes too narrowly applied feminist focus on issues of subjectivity and canon-making. However, Glaspell has suffered a similarly limited appreciation from critics other than those of the feminist schools. Overlooked for years by drama scholars whose eyes were trained on Eugene O’Neill, Glaspell’s more experimental plays are finally garnering the attention they deserve as examples of early expressionism and as part of a consciously American theater project.

Even more overlooked is her fiction, for which she was renowned during her lifetime both in the U.S. and abroad. Dismissed by literary criticism until very recently as sentimental, as merely local color fiction and therefore extremely passé, as no more than a way to keep food on the table and therefore undeserving of serious critical engagement, her novels have been rarely studied or discussed. Not one is available in print in the United States. None is cited in the usual overviews of American literature as an exceptional work of psychological realism nor even as representative of any type of movement whatsoever, including regionalism, the category to which earlier critics consigned her work. Glaspell the fiction writer simply does not register in our lists of notables. She does not merit, for instance, the slightest mention in E.C. Applegate’s 2002 American Naturalistic and Realistic Novelists, a 425-page gloss on 125 writers, including such notables as John Hay and Paul Leicester Ford; neither do her novels signify in any major overview of
American literature such as the *Columbia Literary History of the United States* or the *Columbia History of the American Novel*.

Recent discussions of her fiction, particularly by Martha Carpentier, Veronica Makowsky, and Kathleen Wheeler, have occasioned reevaluation of her work in relation to modernist, domestic, and realist fiction; however, earlier critics’ dismissal of the novels as technically insignificant, or as mawkish attempts at expressing an oversimplified philosophy of love conquering all, or as not quite as aesthetically rich as a handful of her plays, continue to resonate. This is certainly a curious turn of events—a writer once so forgotten, now so celebrated, and yet kept so very limited—but, then, we have only to look at the case of Kate Chopin’s first novel or Edith Wharton’s post-1920 novels to see that such limitation is often the case, perhaps the very means, of importing a woman into a canon in which there is seemingly little space left for newcomers. We know enough now to read Glaspell’s *Trifles* and *The Verge*, but, as some critics tell us, that is enough of that and one need read no further. Yet, the relation of Glaspell’s works to one another is crucial to any possible elaboration of her aesthetic.

Ironically, Glaspell did not help herself in the making of her critical reputation. If a reader is familiar with any story about Susan Glaspell, it is the one about her knowing nothing whatsoever about writing a play until her husband Jig Cook demanded that she do so nevertheless because he needed a play for his theater, out of which demand was born *Trifles*. The story was promoted in her paean to her dead husband, *The Road to the Temple*, a book in which Glaspell does a spectacular job of effacing herself to the point of nearly complete self-erasure so as to reserve center stage for the glorified account of her husband’s life and contributions to American art. Such gestures of perfect submission to superior masculine talent and vision haunt Glaspell studies: we seem not to be able to discuss her dramatic work without appeasing the ghost of O’Neill, despite the fact that several important contemporary critics championed her superiority. Further, if we accept the critical cliché of reliance on autobiographical fact as the ground for fiction/drama, coupled with the necessary spur of masculine will for her acts of creation seemingly indicated by her humbling her talents for the sake of Cook’s reputation, then it is only one step more to dismissing Glaspell as having her own aesthetic project, agenda, and will to power before, during, or after the Provincetown/Cook years.