The Political as Personal in the Writing of Susan Glaspell

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One of the unique and consistent qualities of Susan Glaspell’s writing is her uncanny ability to present serious critiques of society in such a way that audiences and readers are often unaware that they are being exposed to new ideas and positions, so seamlessly is the political woven into the very personal plots and lives of her usually engaging, identifiable—and non-threatening—female personae. From her first columns written in Davenport, Iowa, between 1896 and 1897, when she was Susie Glaspell, twenty-year-old Society Editor of the Weekly Outlook, to her last novel, Judd Rankin’s Daughter, composed in her home in Provincetown, Massachusetts, in 1945, three years before her death, Glaspell made use of her wit and subtle irony to serve up acute readings of American society in concoctions that were easy to ingest yet could produce the desired, salutary effects. Her method of submerging the political in the personal was so cleverly framed that readers and audiences were often not fully aware of the radical ideas being presented, and were thus more amenable to the ideas than they would have been in more didactic renderings. Because of the subtlety of her method, even today some contemporary critics fail to acknowledge Glaspell’s political bent or her attempts to infuse her writing with social, cultural, and political critiques. The following discussion explicates a few instances of this characteristic element in Glaspell’s writing.

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Gaspell’s “Social Life” columns for the Weekly Outlook already display her ability at pointed social commentary set in detailed,
familiar contexts. The technique was determined by the particular format of the column, which consisted of two parts. The first section was a series of paragraphs, sometimes joined to a central theme, but more often separate vignettes on a wide range of issues, similar in format to what the *New Yorker* would popularize in its “Talk of the Town.” They might focus on contemporary issues such as the debate over euthanasia or the introduction of private kindergartens, the socialist agenda, or even the philosophy of Emerson. More often they describe a specific concern of what Glaspell calls Davenport’s “upper ten”: the rich, famous, and the would-be-so. In these brief sketches about local society, the tone is usually sarcastic, the writer taking obvious joy in disclosing the silly customs she observes around her, positioning herself outside the circle of Davenport “high society,” and lobbing some powerful volleys at the foibles and banalities of the members. Yet, immediately following these general topics, she was called upon to report on what this same Davenport society actually busied itself with during the preceding week. A column about parties, where invitation lists were made out “using the utmost caution in putting down only such as had the money and social position to reciprocate,” is followed by a description of the Library Ball, where “all the society people of the three cities were in attendance and it was universally acknowledged one of the greatest social successes of the season.” A description of how young women are expected to be “mechanical dolls” hanging on the conversation of rich, eligible bachelors leads into an engagement announcement of “yet another popular young society lady” to a man who “received the contract for the building of the City Hall.” Because of the double mandate of the column, Glaspell was forced to separate her critique of Davenport society foibles from descriptions of the actual events that reflected them. However, in her later writing she was free to use the specific to point to the general, the personal to the political, more directly.

The column does illustrate, even at this point, her ability to create a whole gallery of first person commentators, colorful and engaging, able to draw readers into the world she is attacking. In one column, she writes as “a very commonplace old maid,” in another a world-weary sophisticate who could drop with great

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1 Copies of the *Weekly Outlook* can be found in the Putnam Library, Davenport, Iowa.