

A Jury of Her Peers

Martha Hale is baking bread one cold March morning when County Sheriff Peters comes by and asks her to assist his wife in gathering some personal belongings of Minnie Wright, a neighbor of Martha's, whom Peters has jailed on suspicion of murdering her husband John Wright. Martha reluctantly leaves her kitchen to join her husband Lewis, Sheriff and Mrs. Peters, and County Attorney George Henderson, who are on their way to the Wrights' isolated farmhouse. After arriving at the Wrights, Martha pauses before crossing the threshold, oppressed by feelings of guilt because she had never visited Minnie, her girlhood friend, in the twenty years since Minnie married Wright.

When the county attorney asks Lewis Hale what he found at the Wright place the night before, Martha nervously listens to her husband describe his coming to the isolated farmhouse to see if he could convince John Wright to get a telephone and share the installation costs. Sometime before, Hale had unsuccessfully talked to Wright about getting a phone and thought now he'd try to talk to Mrs. Wright about it, at the same time recognizing that what Mrs. Wright wanted wouldn't make much difference to her husband John. In this way, despite Martha's hopes that her husband would not say anything incriminating about Minnie, his remarks manage to imply the Wrights were not happily married.

County Attorney Henderson takes notes as John Hale tells how Mrs. Wright sat unemotionally rocking in her chair and responded to his request to see her husband by calmly stating that although her husband was home, he would not be able to talk to Hale because he was dead. Pleating her apron, she said he died of a rope around his neck while he was sleeping in bed with her; she did not know who did it because she was sleeping on the inside and she slept soundly.

That Minnie Wright murdered her husband seems clear to the county attorney, but without her confession, he knows that a jury will want to see definite evidence before convicting, especially when trying a woman for murder. Seeking evidence of a motive, the sheriff looks around at the kitchen things, while Mr. Hale comments with a tone of superiority that women are concerned with trifles. Reacting defensively to this condescension, Martha and Mrs. Peters instinctively move closer together and defend their neighbor as if she were a close friend. After Mr. Hale wonders out loud whether

the women would even know a clue if they saw one, the men leave the kitchen to solve the mystery.

Now alone to piece together the puzzle, the two women deduce from small details, such as spilled sugar not cleaned off the table, what must have happened the day John Wright was killed. Looking at Minnie's broken stove and much-repaired clothes, they conclude that her husband John was miserly. Martha suddenly understands why Minnie, once a lively girl who wore pretty dresses and sang in the choir, kept to herself after marriage - - she was ashamed of her worn-out clothing and her shabby appearance. Mrs. Peters observes that a person gets discouraged and loses heart after years of loneliness. Turning their attention to Minnie's unfinished quilting, Martha asks Mrs. Peters whether she thought it was going to be quilted or knotted. At that moment, the men come in and, overhearing Mrs. Hale's inquiry, burst out laughing at what they consider a trifling concern about a quilt. Mr. Hale mockingly repeats his wife's question.

When the three men leave for the barn, the women discover more clues. Mrs. Peters sees erratic stitches on one of the quilting sections, so different from the even sewing of the other pieces, an indication, she believes, of an agitated state of mind. Martha immediately pulls out the uneven stitches, despite Mrs. Peters' warning about touching anything. They recall how Mrs. Wright once sang so beautifully and they think she must have had a canary because they see a birdcage - - a birdcage with its door half torn off. Then while looking for Minnie's sewing things to bring to her in jail, they are shocked to discover her canary wrapped up in a piece of silk with its neck wrung. As they both come to the conclusion that John Wright must have violently ripped off the birdcage door hinge and silenced the chirping canary by wringing its neck, the men return. Without plotting any collaboration, the women instinctively conceal the dead bird in the sewing basket and make excuses to divert the men's attention. When the women are alone again, Mrs. Peters describes an incident from her girlhood when a boy took a hatchet to her kitten and she became so enraged that she would have hurt the boy "if they hadn't held me back". Mrs. Peters then recalls homesteading out in remote Dakota and how lonely she was there after her first baby died. How the men would laugh, she says, to hear their talk about such trivia as a dead canary.

The story concludes as County Attorney Henderson, who has failed to come up with incriminating evidence, facetiously remarks that at least they found out Mrs. Wright was not going to quilt the material and asks the ladies to name the quilting technique mentioned earlier. With her hand against her coat pocket, hiding the dead canary, Mrs. Hale responds, "We call it—knot it, Mr. Henderson."

Analysis and Possible Discussion Points

Legal Framework

Until the Nineteenth Amendment was ratified in 1920, only a few states allowed women to serve on juries. And throughout most of the 20th century, many states required women to proactively sign up for jury duty (opt in) before they would be eligible to be called for jury service. As late as 1961, the Supreme Court in Hoyt v. Florida, 368 U.S. 57, upheld a Florida statute that provided, “No female person shall be taken for jury service unless said person has registered with the clerk of the circuit her desire to be placed on the jury list.” It was another decade and a half before this practice was ruled unconstitutional by the US Supreme Court in Taylor v. Louisiana, 419 U.S. 522 (1975)

A Jury of Her Peers was written in 1917 and set around the turn of the century, most likely in Iowa where the actual murder case on which Glaspel’s story is based on took place. In that era, Iowa did not allow women on juries. In such a context, the action taken by Mrs. Hale and Mrs. Peters can be seen as preemptively providing Mrs. Wright a jury of her peers, since without their intervention, she would be facing an all-male jury whom the two women seem to tacitly agree would be unable to give her a fair trial.

Legal / Social Dominance of Men

The author carefully assembles all the factual details of the story - - especially the interactions between the men and women - - to carry her short and unambiguous message that Mrs. Wright was unlikely to receive a fair trial at the hands of men. The sheriff, county attorney, and Mr. Hale are smug and condescending to women, making negative comments about the suspect, Mrs. Wright, and joking about the “trifling” work and trivial concerns of the two women who have accompanied them to the Wright farmhouse. The role assigned to Mrs. Hale and Mrs. Peters is merely to pick up some clothing for the jailed Mrs. Wright and so they do not range through the house looking for clues like the men, instead they remain in the part of the house that was uniquely a woman’s domain, the kitchen. But it is the kitchen that contains all the clues which might show Mrs. Wright’s frame of mind and her motivation for killing her husband - - a sugar bucket left half-filled, the badly stitched quilt piece, the damaged birdcage, the dead canary. Seeing these “trifles” and knowing that John Wright was a dour, hard, and emotionally cold man and Minnie Wright a childless, deprived, and lonely woman, the two women quickly figure out what happened and, equally important, spontaneously collaborate in concealing the evidence.

Whether the sheriff, the county attorney, or Mr. Hale, eying the same evidence, would have deduced its significance and come to the same conclusion as the women is not knowable, since the women, acting spontaneously in unspoken agreement, hide the critical items. Further, when the county attorney notices the birdcage (but not the unhinged door) and wonders about the bird, Mrs. Hale immediately volunteers that the cat probably got it, although she knows there isn't any cat. When the county attorney then asks where the cat is, Mrs. Peter's corroborates Mrs. Hale's fabrication by telling the attorney that cats are superstitious about death and so it's likely the Wrights' cat ran away. The story concludes with the county attorney facetiously referring to the method of assembling the quilt - - knotting it - - that shortly before had been the subject of smug male banter. The literal "cluelessness" of the men as they leave the scene of the crime, especially that of the sheriff and county attorney who ought to have some forensic expertise, is the crowning irony of *A Jury of Her Peers*.

- What is the attitude of the men in the story toward the women?
- What is the attitude of the women in the story toward the men?
- Do women view things differently from men?
- If so, is that difference due to:
 - a) genetic disparity between women and men;
 - b) society-prescribed gender roles;
 - c) individual life experiences?
- Does Mrs. Wright effectively receive a jury of her peers?

Law vs. Equity

Another strand that may be discerned in the story is the familiar one of law vs. equity, in this case represented, respectively, by men and women. Men, it is implied, abstract from the circumstances of a dispute a few salient facts and make them legally determinative. Women, on the other hand, base judgment on all the circumstances of the case. While the letter-of-the-law male approach would likely find Mrs. Wright guilty,

a focus on the total factual environment of the murder introduces equitable considerations that could well preclude a guilty verdict.

In fact, Mrs. Hale and Mrs. Peters not only consider the facts of Mrs. Wright's miserable marriage, but their witnessing the evidence of spousal abuse in the sad farmhouse kitchen engenders in them such an empathetic bond with Mrs. Wright that they, in effect, preemptively acquit her.

- Are Mrs. Hale and Mrs. Peters justified in breaking the law by hiding critical evidence - - in effect becoming accessories after the fact?

A False Note

Unlike *The Oresteia*, *The Theban Trilogy*, *The Merchant of Venice* or *Billy Budd*, *A Jury of Her Peers* can be classified as a realistic work. Realism in the arts is broadly defined as "the faithful representation of reality", the attempt to represent subject matter truthfully, without artificiality and avoiding artistic conventions, implausible, exotic, and supernatural elements. Realism as a movement in literature was based on "objective reality", and focused on showing life and everyday activities, primarily among middle or lower class society, without romantic idealization or dramatization. (While *Billy Budd* presents a veneer of realism - - so much so, that it has engendered scholarly dispute concerning such topics as its portrayal of the British Articles of War - - it is at bottom an allegory.) In contrast to the four earlier works, which all predate the advent of literary realism, *A Jury of Her Peers* should be evaluated, at least in part, on the basis of how true to life the story is.

Mrs. Wright is depicted as a frail, abused wife, described by Mrs. Hale as "kind of like a bird herself . . . timid and fluttery". Although John Wright's physical characteristics are not described, he was probably between 40 and 50 years of age and a strong man (since he was an active farmer) who, we are told, did not drink. So, although the story is highly realistic in most of its factual detail, the proposition that Mrs. Wright could succeed in strangling her husband with a rope does not seem plausible. Accordingly, the act of murder is not portrayed in the story - - all we are given is Mrs. Wright's bare-bones description of waking up in bed and finding her husband next to her dead with a rope around his neck.

In contrast, an axe was the weapon used by the wife in the "Haddock Murder", the trial Susan Glaspel covered as a court reporter that served as the basis for *A Jury of Her Peers*. Further, County Attorney Henderson notes that there was a gun in the house available to Mrs. Wright and wonders why it wasn't used in the murder. The answer

seems to be a purely literary one - - having John Wright strangled by his wife in retribution for an abusive married life that culminated in his strangling her canary is just too deliciously ironic for Glaspel to resist. Plus, the method selected by Mrs. Wright to murder her husband, considered in light of the running verbal exchange between the men and women over whether the quilt was to be quilted or knotted, further highlights the theme of pervasive male obtuseness.

Although Glaspel's straying from a strictly realistic approach in order to make a more literary ironic statement is a distraction, the overall message of the story - - grounded on carefully observed details of the women's status and their interactions with the men - - comes across strongly: a woman judged by an all-male jury would not be judged by a jury of her peers.