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Deconstructing Assumptions in *A Jury of Her Peers*

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ABSTRACT

A Jury of Her Peers is truly a small masterpiece. Set in limited rural community, it reaches far back to eons of lost history. From the vivid dramatic scenes and from the heart of a feminine reticence embedded in them, it seems that a desperate cry against injustice toward women echoes. The Minnie Foster who we never meet has an imposing spiritual presence from start to end. Her pitiful silence seems to lament the dark shadow of cruelty and suffering which has overwhelmed of the life of despondent women throughout history. Following her final, desperate attempt to defend herself from being wholly crushed she is subdued by a burden heavier than that from which she had tried to escape. From the rough unsympathetic hands of a husband she is put under the glaring stare of cold uncaring law. What becomes of her remains unknown, just as the lament of her pitiful cry for justice remains unfulfilled.

Keywords: Deconstruction; male oppression; binary oppositions

1. INTRODUCTION

The unity informing the story embraces it very closely, seemingly giving clear focus to all its assumptions. Language however, assert the deconstructionists, is inherently unable to maintain unified meaning. It inevitably contradicts itself breaking its own image in the mirror of itself. In this essay I have experimented with this postmodern premise by trying to deconstruct some of the assumptions underlying the structure of Susan Glaspell's *A Jury of Her Peers*. Much of what I write is based on assumptions which are, rather than being explicit in the text, woven in between its lines [1].

2. DECONSTRUCTING ASSUMPTIONS

The most significant binary opposition in the story is the man/woman binary. From the ironic drama which propels the story from one scene to another the reader on the whole, gets the notion of obtuse, blunt and unfeeling masculinity which, illogically, has a highly regarded itself on the one hand and reticent feminine potential imbued with liveliness of mind which lacks the opportunity of showing its wit, on the other.

The story begins when the two women and three men go to Minnie Foster's house where recently her husband has been strangled to death with a rope. Minnie is in prison suspected of

murder. In her house, the dull-witted men walk around noisily with an air of foolish pride and find nothing; the two women – Minnie’s peers – remain quietly in the kitchen and unravel the mystery of the death.

As they set off towards Minnie's house Mrs. Hale feels uneasy with the presence of the sheriff. She had hitherto thought of him as “pleasant and lively with [them] all” (par. 5 line 14) but it had now suddenly dawned on her that he was a sheriff. However, there seems to be no dissatisfaction on Mrs. Hale's behalf. She lives a normal life, is content with her it, and does not object throughout the whole story of any kind of insecurity. But how is this security established? Undoubtedly by the very same sheriff who comes to her mind with “a stab”: “and right there it came to Mrs. Hale's mind, with a stab, that this man..... was going to the Wright’s now as a sheriff.” (par. 5 line 13 – 15). At that moment, Mrs. Hale's seems to forget that the very reason for their own security and that of her family is because “this man” goes to people's houses “as a sheriff”.

Another aspect of the man/woman binary implied in the story and which can be considered as a critique of society is that of hierarchy. The men have priority, without logical reason over the women: ‘ “I'm glad you came with me”, Mrs. Peters said nervously, as the two women were about to *follow* the men through the kitchen door’ (emphasis not in the original, par. 10 lines 1,2) and it is only after the men have warmed themselves that one of them invites the ladies to the warmth of the fire:

‘Young Henderson, the county attorney, turned around and said, “Come up to the fire, ladies.”’ (par 10 lines 2,3).

Also, of course, implicit throughout the story is a generalization of the male dominance over the female through the allusions to Minnie's silent suffering at the disposal of her tyrannical husband. However, when Mrs. Hale's husband starts giving his evidence in relation to his encounter with Minnie Foster and Mrs. Hale feels he is saying too much she “[tries] to catch her husband’s eye,” and as he continues “she [keeps] her eye fixed on her husband as if to keep him from saying unnecessary things”. The implication gives clear insight to the internal relations of the Hale family. In this family it is Mrs. Hale who is in charge, even to the point of decreeing the limits of what her husband is allowed to say. So much for male superiority!

Moreover, Minnie’s worrying over her preserves is a joke for the men:

‘Mrs. Peter’s husband broke into a laugh.

“Well, can you beat the women! Held for murder and worrying about her preserves!”

The younger attorney set his lips

“I guess before we are through with her she may have something more serious than preserves to worry about.”

“Oh, well”, said Mrs. Hale's husband, with a good-natured superiority, “women are used to worrying over trifles.” (par 72 -76).

The scene dramatizes male insolence and complacency and the silence of the ladies who “moved a little closer together” while “[n]either of them spoke” (par. 77 lines 1,2) adds emphasis to female weakness in the face of unsympathetic male foolishness. Immediately, however, “[t]he county attorney seem[s] suddenly to remember his manners and *think of his future.*” therefore he compensates by saying, “for all their worries what would we do without the ladies?” (par 77 lines 2,3; par 78 lines 2,3; emphasis not in the original). It seems the ladies are not as weak nor as much in the control of the gentlemen as the text would have the reader believe. On the contrary, disrespect towards the ladies may put a man's future in jeopardy.

Implicit throughout the story and undoubtedly the main concern of the story's man/woman binary is Minnie Foster's having been oppressed by an unfeeling, tyrannical husband who would not even let her have the simple pleasure of having a telephone, to have at least the opportunity of talking with somebody over the wire. In other words, Minnie was – if not literally – metaphorically imprisoned by a man who only wanted her at his disposal and had no care whatsoever for her feelings. Living with this man, Minnie, who according to Mrs. Hale “was kind of like a bird herself. Real sweet and pretty, but kind of timid and – fluttery,” loses her spirit, her liveliness and her vigor for life; so much so that Mrs. Hale continues, “How – she – did – change” in broken syntax which shows how deeply she sympathizes with Minnie now. This loss, of course, is tacitly attributed to Mr. Wright, Minnie's husband, and we as the readers truly have reason enough to condemn the man and put him in the wrong. The implication here is a questioning of the law; in the justice/injustice binary, justice is given priority, but what kind of law is it the story asks, that allows the killing of a person's soul but persecutes the killing of a person's body? However, Mrs. Hale has been, for the past twenty years Minnie's neighbor. She admits that during these *twenty years*, she did not call on Minnie *even once*. If she had called on her, even if only on a single occasion she may have realized how serious her situation was and taken some kind of action. She could have at least tried to do something. However, the story tacitly condemns the inadequacy of the law – which seems to be considered as a masculine construct – but offers no condemnation of Mrs. Hale's twenty – year neglect of her neighbor. Mrs. Hale voices her own wrongdoing: “oh, I wish I'd come over [Minnie's house] once in a while!” She cries but even here, where the sole person responsible is none but herself, she puts the blame on the law, “That was a crime. Who's going to punish that?” It seems the frigid law is not only inadequate for its neglect of human emotions, it is also responsible for people's own mistakes.

Furthermore, Minnie who knows the meaning of imprisonment herself, does not refrain from keeping a bird in a cage. Ironically, Mrs. Hale, compares Minnie to a bird to show more emphatically just how free and lively she had been when she was young. The bird itself however, to whom nature had given wings to fly as far and wide as it may please, is imprisoned by Minnie but this does not evoke any comment. On the contrary, it is used to provoke more pity for Minnie's sake. Notwithstanding the fact that Minnie is a human and a bird is merely a creature, the underlying essence of the issue here is a condemnation of the strong in the strong/weak opposition between Wright and Minnie, but there is no such condemnation of the same binary in relation to Minnie and the bird.

Near the end of the story, as the men are still going around boisterously without being any closer to the truth, the ladies slowly unravel the mystery. The main clue to the secret of the murder – the bird with its “wrung” neck – is, however, found by pure coincidence: “Here, maybe her scissors are in here – and her things.” (par 213 lines 2,3). It is in the box in which they look for her scissors that the dead bird is found and at this moment “the eyes of the two women met – this time clung together in a look of dawning comprehension.” (par 227 lines 1,2). The female wit which seems to be under constraint and lacking the opportunity to reveal itself is apparently shattered by the coincidence of the discovery.

At the very end of the story, in the last instant before the men come in, Mrs. Hale manages to hide the bird in her pocket. The implication is, of course, that if they had seen the bird they too would immediately have unraveled the secret. So, they are probably not as dull as we had up till now supposed them to be.

3. CONCLUSION

In any case the story here, at this point, reaches its conclusion; with the hiding of the box in which the bird is wrapped up that the ladies, with tacit agreement, decide that Minnie is innocent even if the law thinks otherwise. And we as the readers, despite the moral uncertainty surrounding the episode, are not very unwilling, to agree with them.

Reference

- [1] Glaspell Susan, “*A Jury of Her Peers*”, Perrine’s Literature Structure, Sound, and Sense Fiction, ninth edition., Ed. Thomas R. Arp, Greg Johnson. Thomson Wadsworth 2006, 389-408.

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