



*Female Discourse, ‘Parler Femme,’ and Genderlect Theory in Susan Glaspell’s
Trifles*

Olfa Gandouz

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The University of Gabes, Tunisia
olfagandouz@yahoo.fr

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ABSTRACT

The prominent French feminist theoreticians, namely Hélène Cixous and Luce Irigaray, challenge male discourse and argue that it does not provide women with freedom of expression. Irigaray suggests the invention of “parler femme” as a new dialect for challenging the social stereotypes assigned to women and reshaping female subjectivity. Irigaray’s view is supported by Cixous, who believes that women should have a language of their own and that they should subvert the phallogentric language through the intermediary of “l’écriture féminine.” This new type of female discourse is expected to deconstruct the symbolic order and to establish a new order based on a better representation of women. Cixous’s “écriture féminine” raises female revolutionary voices against male dialect and its misrepresentation of the female plight. Susan Glaspell’s dramatic text in *Trifles* can be classified as an example of “l’écriture féminine” because it invites the audience to analyze female silences, puns, and new images. Indeed, the French feminist lines of thought assist in the endeavor of comparing the differences between male and female discourses in *Trifles*. Unlike the male characters who use an authoritarian style and look for concrete proof to uncover the identity of the murderer, the female characters rely on symbols, images, intuition, metaphors, silence, tone, mood, and psychology to interpret the homicide. Glaspell’s female characters succeed at finding out the identity of the murderer, and their investigative style is more constructive because they dig deep into female silence, and they understand the unspoken words of Minnie Wright. On the other hand, the male discourse fails at examining the motives of homicide because it is based on stereotypes, authority, and repression. “Parler femme” is achieved in the play through the solidarity of Mrs. Hale and Mrs. Peters, through their sympathy with Minnie Foster, and through their belief that domestic violence is the unjust outcome of patriarchal oppression.

Some feminist stylisticians who analyze female style in a specific social context argue that male and female modes of expression are different, but equal. In her “genderlect theory,” Deborah Tannen affirms that differences are sources of richness, and “both men and women could benefit from learning each other’s styles” (298). This present research focuses on the intersection between French feminism and feminist stylistics, thematic concerns, textual analysis, and theatrical props and objects to understand the differences between male and female discourse, where, for instance, Glaspell’s female characters choose social exile instead of duplicitous, phallogentric communication. As members of Glaspell’s audience, we must evaluate the importance of female discourse, study Glaspell’s ideas about the richness of female discourse and the necessity of establishing a smooth dialogue between male and female discourses, and recognize the female playwright’s call for dismantling marginal spaces and liberating modern American women.

KEYWORDS

female discourse, French feminism, “parler femme,” “l’écriture féminine,” female silence

1. Theoretical Framework on Female Discourse

1.1 Parler femme and the Setting

According to Luce Irigaray, language is responsible for female inferiority because women are misrepresented by male discourse. Indeed, “Woman’s social inferiority is reinforced and complicated by the fact that the woman does not have access to language except through recourse to masculine systems of representation which disappropriate her from her relation to herself and to other women” (Irigaray 85). In other words, male discourse is dominated by patriarchal practices and it fails to present the inner dilemma of women, to reflect their social confinement and to grasp their psychological turbulence. For example, the play opens with the image of a chaotic kitchen: “The kitchen is the now abandoned farmhouse of JOHN WRIGHT, a gloomy kitchen, and left without having been put in order—unwashed pans under the sink, a loaf of bread outside the bread-box, a dish-towel on the table—other signs of incompleted work” (Glaspell 1). The kitchen —associated with female chores and housework obligations —is disordered, which shows the refusal of the female householder to be engaged in domestic activities and her rejection of the patriarchal mindset which defines the ideal woman as a caretaker and an angel who is expected to be in charge of the family needs. Disorder shows the chaotic relationship between MR. Wright and his family and it suggests the presence of an unconventional wife. Male discourse is thus introduced from the very beginning of the play and the kitchen is interpreted by male discourse as the sphere of women and it is seen as an invalid evidence. Female discourse reverses male interpretation, and female characters rely on the disordered kitchen as a tangible proof and cause of homicide. Unlike male investigators who observe ‘Nothing here but kitchen things’ (Glaspell 1), women believe that the dark kitchen reflects the gloomy aspect of the home and suggests the presence of a dysfunctional couple. According to Selina Kolls, a researcher in American gender and arts, “While the incomplete works in Minnie’s kitchen send a message of an incompetent housekeeper to the male character, the women on the hand, interpret it as a sign of a disturbed consciousness’ (99). Kolls uses capital letters when she refers to the ‘kitchen’ to highlight the role of domesticity in heightening female psychological malaise. It is noticeable that female characters dig deep into female psyche and they look for the causes rather than the identity of the murderer. They are fully convinced that the traditional mindset of the husband, his harshness and his inability to get along with his wife are the deepest- rooted factors of the murder. The female character’s psychological interpretation of Minnie Wright recall Luce Irigaray’s ‘parler femme,’ which represents the inner concerns of women and provides them with the opportunity to speak their minds. “For Luce Irigaray, women’s language is the articulation of an unconscious that cannot speak about itself, but can try to make itself heard. Women need to be able to enter language as subject and to speak

our own identity" (Jackson 95). Indeed, female characters succeed at understanding the unconscious side of Minnie because they rely on 'parler femme'. On the other hand, male characters trivialize women's interpretation and Mr. Hale argues that 'women are used to worrying over trifles' (Glaspell 401). His statement reveals the minimization of female characters and the indifference about female needs and minute details. Male discourse clearly fails to decipher female inner psyche and emotional concerns.

1.2 Female Discourse and Female Isolation

Female discourse and 'parler femme' can be further analyzed through the seclusion of Minnie and her unhappy marriage. Images of the jar, the fruit, the cherries, and the telephone party show the role of abstract and non-verbal language in translating the female plight. Luce Irigaray and Mary Green point out that, unlike male discourse, which underestimates details, female secrets, and inner depth, "parler femme has multiple meanings not limited to but including speaking the feminine, speaking of and to women, speaking as women-subject- and action or speech by or on behalf of women ([sic] pour les femmes ou au nom des femmes" (*Teaching Irigaray* 131). Glaspell speaks on behalf of women when she puts a female murder who is victimized by male repression and who is misrepresented by male language. Indeed, "traditional or non-feminist poetic discourse responds to the two main restrictions excreted on women's publication and production of a discourse in which the words and forms to be used have already been determined by men" (Diocaretz 46). Female characters in *Trifles* sympathize with Minnie and they use a feminist discourse when they try to fathom her hidden codes and her non-verbal language and bodily gestures. In fact, "Feminist discourse encircles verbal constructs created with textual strategies (imagery, arguments, perspective) that contribute to an expansion of messages in which the individual and the collective experience originate from a critical stance against the social contexts of patriarchy and its language" (Diocartez 46). Female characters challenge male discourse when they invite the audience to grasp the motivations behind the murder.

To start with, images of the cold jar of cherries and the fire reflect the walls of misunderstanding between Minnie and her husband and the cold relationship of the couple. In this respect, Mrs. Peters notices and murmurs: "*to the other woman*) Oh, her fruit; it did freeze, (*to the LAWYER*) She worried about that when it turned so cold. She said the fire'd go out and her jars would break"(Glaspell 403). Like Minnie who needs warmth, care and mutual understanding, cherries need full sun to thrive. It is clear that female interpretation digs deep into the details of Minnie and looks for the motivation behind the murder. Killing her husband (John

Wright) is a sign of challenging the social institution of marriage. Indeed, the conventional marriage of Mr. Wright and Minnie is based on a cold relationship and it is meant to fulfill the patriarchal agenda. Mrs. Peters' comment about the explosion of the jar alludes to Minnie's inability to support the patriarchal norms and her refusal to be confined within the institution of marriage. Non-verbal language, the image of the jar and the symbol of the cold cherries have helped female characters uncover the identity of the murderer and the hidden secrets of Minnie. "Her secrets kept under pressure burst from their fragile containers. The single intact jar symbolizes the one remaining secret, the motive to complete the prosecutor's case" (Smith 175). Not only has Mrs. Peters succeeded at identifying the identity of the murderer, but she has revealed the role of the cold relationship, the mis-matching that has bound Minnie and her husband together, and the lack of communication that has initiated domestic violence in Minnie's home.

'Parler femme' is also traced through Mrs. Hale's implicit interpretation of food imagery. 'Irigaray refuses to codify a parler femme and adopts a Derridean deconstructionist strategy in her texts, one that continually undoes fixed sexual designations and makes ambiguity the marker of her feminist-re-evaluation' (MaKaryk 48). The ambiguous language of the play is conveyed through the symbol of the loaf bread and the image of the withering cherry. MRS Hale counters male discourse and she uses her own female investigative style. This investigative style is observed in the following utterances: "MRS HALE: (*eyes fixed on a loaf of bread beside the bread-box, which is on a low shelf at the other side of the room. Moves slowly toward it*) She was going to put this in there, (*picks up loaf, then abruptly drops it. In a manner of returning to familiar things*) It's a shame about her fruit. I wonder if it's all gone. (*gets up on the chair and looks*) I think there's some here that's all right" (Glaspell 405). The body language of MRS Hale reflects the way women cross linguistic boundaries and they rely on gestures as a mode of self-expression. In this respect, MRS Hale's eyes which are "fixed on a loaf of bread beside the bread-box" (Glaspell 405) indicate the female characters' focus on details of Minnie's psyche and their ability to understand her psychology. Indeed, the bread box suggests the situation of confinement and the isolation of Minnie. She is expected to be an ideal housewife and to create a neat house, but Minnie keeps bread beside the box as a sign of rejecting domestic roles and raging against the patriarchal mindset. In fact, "Cross-culturally in both physical and metaphysical references, bread is the basic substance of life" (Amar 26). The presence of the bread outside the box shows Minnie's longing for freedom as the main feature of leading a comfortable life. The loaf of bread thus indicates that Minnie is denied the basic elements of a happy life: mutual understanding, a good companion and respect.

MRS Hale sympathizes with Minnie, she tries to comfort her by hiding the secret of homicide and she regrets the fact of not supporting her neighbor in moments of needs. MRS Hale affirms: 'you, it's queer, Mrs Peters. We live close together and we live far apart. We all go through the same things—it's all just a different kind of the same thing' (Glaspell 404). The overgeneralization alludes to the situation of some modern couples, the remarkable split and gender inequality. While the couple live together, they fail to create a functional family because of female repression. Domestic violence is perceived by Glaspell as the outcome of the patriarchal agenda which denies female political and socio-economic rights. Accordingly, the female characters of the play do not legitimize domestic violence, but they understand that Minnie is implicitly looking for a warm home and a supportive husband instead of being confined in domestic activities. Female discourse is further reinforced through the image of the clothes. Mrs. Hale renders Mr. Wright responsible for domestic violence because of his male domination and his indifference about Minnie's interests.

Mrs. HALE uses the sartorial appearance of Minnie before and after marriage and she implicitly argues that Minnie is the scapegoat of matrimony as a social institution. She reveals: 'I wish you'd seen Minnie Foster when she wore a white dress with blue ribbons and stood up there in the choir and sang' (Glaspell 402). Minnie's festive mood, positive vibes, fresh looks and sweet past are replaced by a gloomy mood, tragic deeds and dramatic situations. Mrs. Hale's female discourse is also punctuated with the use of negation and affirmation. For instance, the lady denies the fact that the disharmony of the couple is the main trigger behind homicide, but she affirms that living with an authoritarian husband accentuates the dramatic events in the play. Mrs. Hale informs her husband and the audience: 'No, I don't mean anything. But I don't think a place'd be any cheerfuller for John Wright's being in it' (Glaspell 11). The sheriff's lady seems to be hesitant while expressing her ideas and she uses abstract connotations to deliver some messages about female confinement. She does not rely on direct statements because she is convinced that her codes are not going to be transmitted via male discourse. Mrs. Hale uses negation to draw an atmosphere of bleakness and to prove that the conventional and harsh husband failed to keep the cheerful mode of the home. In another occasion, Hale uses abstract notions to criticize the patriarchal mindset and to condemn spousal abuse of female rights. She uses an ironic tone while depicting the profile of Mr. Wright: ' Yes—good; he didn't drink, and kept his word as well as most, I guess, and paid his debts. But he was a hard man, Mrs Peters. Just to pass the time of day with him—(*shivers*) Like a raw wind that gets to the bone' (Glaspell 19). Mrs. Hale discusses the notion of goodness and she ironically declares that 'a good' husband is not someone who abides by the duty to pay and to respect moral ethics, but he is rather

someone who respects the rights of his partner and provides her with a space of freedom. The amplification suggested by the image of the wind allows Mrs. Hale to introduce her views about the role of emotional sterility and coldness in widening spousal conflicts. Mrs. Hale is standing by Minnie, but she is implicitly raging against the patriarchal norms which stifle female freedom.

Mrs. Hale is also affected by male authority and she is denied certain individuality because she is presented from the beginning of the play as a wife and her proper individual name is not mentioned throughout the play. She is described in the following opening stage directions: 'the SHERIFF's wife first; she is a slight wiry woman, a thin nervous face. MRS HALE is larger and would ordinarily be called more comfortable looking, but she is disturbed now and looks fearfully about as she enters' (Glaspell 1). The women are detected through their facial expressions and not by the words they utter. The two ladies are clearly socially presented as socially prestigious women but, both of them are irritated because of the mysterious atmosphere and the misrepresentation of women. They share with Minnie the denial of rights and the absence of individuality in a society where women are assigned domestic, social and educational rights. Parler femme reacts to the social domination of men and it 'may be translated as both to speak woman and speaking as a woman and indicated its link to women-only social contexts and solutions through a homonymic pun (pour les femmes) on women's agency' (Ince 96). Parler femme is applicable to Glaspell's *Trifles* because the female playwright employs puns to satirize male authority. Her selection of Mr. Wright and Minnie's names indicates her rejection of the social norms which give the right to male characters to minimize women. Mr. Wright believes that he has the right to manipulate and to minimize Minnie, but Glaspell creates a subversive woman who does not appear on stage, but her silence speaks louder than her words and her physical presence.

Female longing for freedom can be interpreted through the symbolic dimension of fire. The three female characters of the play enjoy the warm flames of the fire and the country Attorney invites them '(rubbing his hands) This feels good. Come up to the fire, ladies' (Glaspell 5). From a French feminist perspective, fire stands for female desire and repressed wishes for liberation. 'Irigaray does associate fire with female desire in speculum because the capacity of the burning glass to enflame the cool of platonic reason. Yet the burning glass is principally the place of the mystic for Irigaray' (Martin 165). The burning glass is a sign of female subversion against the conventional mirror as it allows women to rebel against the way she is socially perceived and to open new horizons. Irigaray invites women to have a fresh look at the mirror and to be active members instead of being mere objects in their patriarchal societies. : 'For Irigaray a woman's place is through the looking glass and beyond a different conceptual realm,

rather than a reflection of masculine realms' (Jackson 95). In other words, women are expected to go beyond male domination, to have a confident view on the mirror and to rely on female discourse as a means of revolutionizing male discourse which does not represent female preoccupations. Glaspell breaks the mirror through the voice of Mrs. Hale and Minnie Wright and she gives them the floor to have a voice of their own and to create their own modes of expression.

2. Feminist stylistics:

The French feminist reading of female discourse correlates with the arguments of feminist stylisticians who believe that male and female discourses are different. Deborah Tannen develops feminist stylistics and argues that patriarchal culture is responsible for gender miscommunication and gap. In her *You Just Don't Understand*, Tannen writes, 'the male is seen as normative, the female as departing from the norm. And it is only a short step maybe or inevitable one from different to worse' (15). She confirms that women are compelled to follow the social norm in a society which misrepresents them and that women's use of language should be better understood. Tannen cites the example of a husband and a wife who do not use the same syntactic structures or the same lexis. In a spontaneous dialogue between a husband and his wife, the wife asks 'you would like to stop for a drink?' (qtd. in Tannen 15). The wife gives priority to the wishes of the husband because she is raised in a patriarchal culture where men are given priority. The wife is implicitly tired and she wants to have a pause and to have a drink to change the pace of the long journey. The husband misunderstands the wife and he accuses her of being playful with words. He asks: 'Why didn't she just say what she wanted? Why did she play games with me' (qtd in. Tannen 15). The husband fails to understand that his wife is a passive agent within the patriarchal society and that she relies on implicit meaning rather than direct statements. The wife has another interpretation and 'from her point of view, she had shown concern for her husband's wishes, but he had shown no concerns for hers' (Tannen 15). She had not shown self-interest because she uses a male dominated language which gives prominence to men. Tannen's argument is in line with the views of 'Genderlect researchers in the 1970's [who] discovered that women habitually used less powerful forms of speech than men such as permitting interruptions, using qualifying words, adding softeners and appending tag questions' (Johnson et al 67). According to genderlect theoreticians, women's speech is softer, more poetic and indirect than male speech because women are socially trained to be inferior

Genderlect theory is applicable to Glaspell's text because gender differences are echoed through the conversation between male and female characters. The prominent genderlect feminist

theoretician ‘Tannen engages the concept of culture to bolster her central proposition. She has linked the impact of male-female differences in language codes to the challenges of intercultural communication by introducing opposing key concepts that guide women’s and men’s production and interpretation of language’ (Foss et al 433). While male characters ignore the harshness of Mr. Wright and its role in bringing about domestic violence, female characters believe that disharmony and male repression are the major triggers of the murder. In this respect, the country Attorney interrupts Mrs. Peters when she comments on the cold relationship between Mr. and Mrs. Wright and he accuses her of focusing on uninteresting details: ‘I’d like to talk more of that a little later. I want to get the lay of things upstairs now’ (Glaspell 12). The repetitive use of the first person pronoun ‘I’ shows male dominance and the minimization of female views. Mrs. Peter is silenced by the male investigators, but she relies on silence as a source of power. She speaks freely to Mrs. Hale and both of them succeed at creating a female bond and at interpreting the murder in their own way. They start from hesitation to confirmation and they fuse emotions and logic to investigate over the murder.

Rapport talking or women’s reliance on interactions and relationships is conveyed through their skillful use of the canary bird image as the clearest evidence for the murder. The ladies ponder over Minnie’s wish to bring a canary bird to her home and they observe that there are many affinities between the bird and the situation of Minnie. Mrs. Hale asks a torrent of questions and from a genderlect feminist view, ‘women ask questions returning to points made by earlier speakers and attempt to bring others to the conversation’ (Allen 55). Mrs. Hale brings Mrs. Peters and the audience to her speech when she invites them to contemplate over Minnie’s motivations behind getting the canary. She asks: ‘Why, I don’t know whether she did or not—I’ve not been here for so long. There was a man around last year selling canaries cheap, but I don’t know as she took one; maybe she did. She used to sing real pretty herself.’ (Glaspell 17). This rapport- talk is punctuated with the use of cause- and effect questions, a tone of hesitation and the presence of indirect statements. In her private talk, Hale implicitly believes that Minnie buys a canary to Alice attenuate the feelings of seclusion, to recomonpensate for the absence of kids and to find a warm companion, The same style is used by Mrs. Peters’ female discourse is marked by the use of wh questions which are meant to look for the reasons of the murder and to elaborate on the role of gender inequality in bringing about disbalanced female psyches. The lady asks: ‘(*glancing around*) Seems funny to think of a bird here. But she must have had one, or why would she have a cage? I wonder what happened to it.’ (Glaspell 18). This tendency of asking deep questions recalls the genderlect theory’s arguments about the differences between male and

female discourses. Unlike 'men [who are] using more questions that expressed their own opinions, women [are] asking questions that sought elaboration' (Freed and Ehrlich 280).

Rapport- talk is also conveyed through the female characters' deep focus on the relationship between the bird vs the cage, the past vs the present, the individual vs the social and the longing for freedom vs cultural obligations. Genderlect researchers assert that 'men tend to talk about their accomplishments, using competitive terms, while women may understand their contributors and acknowledge other's assistance' (Allen 55). Mrs. Hale and Mrs. Peters assist Minnie when they understand her desire to have a voice of her own and to rebel against unbearable spousal abuse. In this context, they compare the caged canary's longing for freedom to Minnie's desire to quit the tight attic. The canary is defined as the symbol of delight, joy and freedom: 'Canary: happy, comfortable home, as in singing' (Vollmar 72). The comfortable canary recalls Miss Minnie's balanced psyche and delightful mood before marriage. Like the bird which is imprisoned in the house of Mr. Wright, Minnie is chained by the manacles of patriarchy and her freedom is stifled. Mrs. Hale observes: 'She—come to think of it, she was kind of like a bird herself—real sweet and pretty, but kind of timid and—fluttery. How—she—did—change. (*silence; then as if struck by a happy thought and relieved to get back to everyday things*) Tell you what, Mrs. Peters, why don't you take the quilt in with you? It might take up her mind' (Glaspell 20). Minnie's mood has negatively changed after getting inscribed within the institution of marriage and her reaction to the act of killing the bird shows her rejection of male domination. Minnie kills her husband because he kills the canary which reminds her of the golden old days when she used to be free from social engagements and to sing merry songs about life-celebration.

Female discourse succeeds at subverting gender stereotypes and at creating independent women who support each other and they use silence as a non-verbal language of resistance. They challenge male discourse when they use symbols and rapport talk to investigate over the motivations of the murder and they deploy riddles to hide the identity of the female murderer. For example, the ladies create a harmonious bond and they agree to understand and to support Minnie instead of judging her and defining her as 'a criminal.' They succeed to redefine 'crime' which finds more culpability in their earlier failure to help Minnie than in their "moral choice" to suppress evidence' (Mael 284). Self-revision shows that the ladies are implicitly calling for examining the reasons of the murder before judging the murderer. Male social domination over discourse remains the main factor of female silence in the play. Indeed, 'silence, alone, however is not a self-evident sign of powerlessness nor volubility a self-evident sign of domination' (Tannen 636). Female characters use silence as a source of power when they find

out the identity of the murderer, but they defend her and refuse to confess that Minnie kills her husband because of his violent attitudes. Peters 'subversion of male discourse of dominance is perceived when she informs the other ladies about the dead canary:

MRS PETERS: *(takes the bottle, looks about for something to wrap it in; takes petticoat from the clothes brought from the other room, very nervously begins winding this around the bottle. In a false voice)* My, it's a good thing the men couldn't hear us. Wouldn't they just laugh! Getting all stirred up over a little thing like a—dead canary. As if that could have anything to do with—with—wouldn't they *laugh!* (Glaspell 23)

The repetition of the negative form 'wouldn't they laugh' creates dramatic irony because Mrs. Peters invites the audience to discover the identity of the murderer, but she avoids men and she does not want them to hear about the association between the dead canary, the dead soul of Minnie and the physical death of Mrs. Wright. Glaspell's sarcastic laughter against male dominance is further conveyed through the playful use of language and the metaphor of the knot. While the country Attorney minimizes female ways of thinking, women use figurative language to convince the audience about the role of social repression in accentuating physical and psychological violence. The act of killing the husband is the outcome of psychological malaise.

The final words of the play are significant as they announce the success of female discourse at expressing female needs, intentions, motivations and inner world. In the final scene, the Attorney mocks women's understanding by saying; ' Well, Henry, at least we found out that she was not going to quilt it. She was going to—what is it you call it, ladies?' (Glaspell 24) and Mrs. Hale answers in an assertive tone: 'We call it—knot it, Mr Henderson.' (Glaspell 24). The image of the knot stands for female empowerment as it alludes to female union and the collective decision of going beyond male signs, rules, obligations and strict dictums. Women challenge male discourse and invent a female mode of expression. The knot 'conveys the sense of knotting the rope around the husband's neck. They have discovered the murderess and they will knot tell' (Alkalay 8). They revise female identity when they laugh at male limited investigative ways and they agree to protect Minnie.

Conclusion

The use of French feminism and feminist stylistics reveals the role of female discourse in

challenging the symbolic order and in providing women with means of expression. The paper shows that male characters fail to unveil homicide because they rely on concrete evidence and tangible methods. On the other hand, women succeed at reaching truth and at recognizing the identity of the killer. Silence, symbols and female psychological state are used by female characters to uncover the motivations behind homicide. *Trifles* calls for making female voices more audible and setting modern women free from male repression and authority. This paper shows the role of female sympathy and silence in protecting Mrs. Hale. Future research can focus on silence as a mode of female expression and as a subversive strategy of female resistance.

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