

PAL: Perspectives in American Literature - A Research and Reference Guide - An Ongoing Project

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Chapter 8: Susan Glaspell (1876-1948)

Outside Links: | [The SG Society](#) | [Papers of SG](#) |

Page Links: | [Primary Works](#) | [Selected Bibliography 1980-Present](#) | [Study Questions](#) | [MLA Style Citation of this Web Page](#) |

| [A Brief Biography](#) |

Site Links: | [Chap. 8: Index](#) | [Alphabetical List](#) | [Table Of Contents](#) | [Home Page](#) | February 2, 2008 |



Susan Glaspell

Source: [Biography of SG](#)

As one of the founders of the Playwright's Theatre, also known as the Provincetown Players, Susan Glaspell led a revolution in American theater. Between 1916 and 1922, the Provincetown Players produced new plays by young playwrights like her and EO'N. Glaspell's subject matter includes regionalism (Iowa), sexual tensions between women and men, and characters in search of life's meaning.

Primary Works

| [The SG Society Bibliography](#) |

Suppressed Desires (with Cook), 1915; *Trifles*, 1916; *Close the Book*, 1917; *The People*, 1917; *The Outside*, 1917; *Woman's Honor*, 1918; *Tickless Time* (with Cook), 1918; *Bernice*, 1919; *Inheritors*, 1921; *The Verge*, 1921; *Chains of Dew*, 1922; *The Comic Artist; a Play in Three Acts*, 1927; *Brook Evans* (fiction), 1928; *Alison's House*, 1930; *Ambrose Holt and Family* (fiction), 1931; *The Morning is Near Us* (fiction), 1940; *The Road to the Temple* (autobiography), 1941; *Judd Rankin's Daughter* (fiction), 1945.

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Susan Glaspell: A Brief Biography

A Student Project by Krystal Nies

On July 1, 1876, Susan Keating Glaspell was born to Elmer S. Glaspell and Alice Keating in Davenport, Iowa (Waterman 13). She was welcomed into a conservative, middle-class home and became a part of a family that was not well-off. This conservative lifestyle in Davenport would have an intense influence on Glaspell's work and would give her a voice that is unique from any other American writer or playwright at the time. Her successful career spans the fields of journalism, writing novels, writing short stories, and writing plays, but "it is her drama more than her fiction . . . that will ensure her a lasting place in modern American literature" (McMichael, et al. 1109).

Little is known about Glaspell's early life or her parents. One point that remains clear, however, is the fact that "she kept many of the staunch virtues she had acquired from her family and her birthplace" (Waterman 53). These virtues would have reflections in her work, in both positive and negative aspects, for her entire literary career. What is known is that Glaspell attended public schools in Davenport, and in 1897, she enrolled in Drake University in Des Moines (France 216). While in college, her desire to be a writer was fostered, and she began submitting stories to magazines. After two years of work, she graduated from the university with her B.A. and went to be a reporter for the *Des Moines News* in 1899 (France 216). After another two years, however, Glaspell decided to give up her job and go back to Davenport to "give all of my time to my own writing," as she recalls (France 216). It is at this point that, like other educated women at this time, Glaspell "grew restless with the numerous restrictions on women and became inspired by the avant-garde social, political, and cultural movements happening in the United States and Europe" (McMichael, et al. 1108). Spurred by this restlessness, in 1903, Glaspell enrolled in the University of Chicago to do graduate work in English (Waterman 13). It is unknown how far she got into her work at the university, but it is known that she did not achieve any degrees higher than her B.A. that she received from Drake.

It seems that Glaspell's life until this point is partially hidden in shadow. She was introduced to George Cram Cook one day at the Monist Society in Davenport, and from that point on, he was "the most meaningful influence on her life" (France 216). After being introduced to Cook, Glaspell continued to grow restless and "traveled abroad to explore new personal and professional possibilities" for herself (McMichael, et al. 1108). Shortly after returning to America, Glaspell settled down on the east coast and soon, she and Cook were married in Weehawken, New Jersey, on April 14, 1913 (Waterman 13). After they were married, the couple moved to Provincetown, Massachusetts, where they lived during the summers, and they spent their winters in Greenwich Village in New York. Their migration between the two locations was a result of being involved with the Liberal Club, "a group of writers, artists, and itinerant thinkers" who moved between the two places (France 216). This group of people would help the Cooks to create the Provincetown Players, the group of actors that would produce Glaspell's plays and bring her among the forerunners of American drama at the time.

Through 1915 and 1916, Glaspell spent her first formal season with the Provincetown Players, who produced two of her one-act plays: in 1915, *Suppressed Desires*, which was co-written with her husband, and in 1916, *Trifles*, her most anthologized play (Waterman 13). Though not an award winner, *Trifles* is one of the most commonly-taught plays in American Literature classes across the nation and is widely anthologized. Glaspell wrote *Trifles* while in Provincetown and was inspired by what they christened to be the Wharf Theatre. She recalls her inspiration:

I went to the wharf, sat alone on one of our wooden benches without a back, and looked for a long time at that bare little stage. After a time, the stage became a kitchen. . . . Then the door at the back opened, and people all bundled up came in—two or three men, I wasn't sure which, but sure enough about the two women, who hung back, reluctant to enter that kitchen. When I was a newspaper reporter out in Iowa, I was sent down-state to do a murder trial, and I never forgot going to the kitchen of a woman who had been locked up in town (France 217).

Trifles is the play that allows Glaspell to begin refining her technique of one-act plays, but more importantly, "this was the first time that Glaspell employed the device which she would make uniquely her own—that of having the character most central to her narrative never appear on stage" (France 218). This device would be employed numerous times through the span of her work and would become a trademark of Glaspell's plays.

Through a seven-year period with the Provincetown Players, Glaspell contributed ten plays to the theater group. Theirs was the theater where she was able to create a name for herself, but she also helped the theater to grow and began to develop an American drama that is still present today. Glaspell was able to become a successful playwright because of the Provincetown Players, but they were also able to become a successful theater group because of the work of her and other playwrights: "whatever she accomplished in drama, therefore, is largely due to

the influence of the Provincetown; thus, her final stature as a dramatist is a convenient measure of its importance" (Waterman 67). The Provincetown Players held a large role in the development of Glaspell's career and allowed American society to view plays that are truly American.

In March of 1922, Glaspell and Cook left the United States and sailed for Greece. After spending approximately two years there, George Cram Cook died in Delphi and was buried in Greece (Waterman 14). Glaspell continued traveling around Europe, and in 1925, she married Norman Matson. Their marriage was short-lived, however, and they divorced in 1931 (Waterman 14). While they were married, Glaspell and Matson wrote a play together, called *The Comic Artist*. The play was produced in London and a revised version appeared in New York, but like their marriage, the play was not successful: "it received just twenty-one performances" (France 222).

In 1930, Susan Glaspell wrote another play, *Alison's House*, which is "based loosely upon incidents from the life of Emily Dickinson" (France 222). It employed Glaspell's signature device: that of the unseen central character. It is also another full-length play, spanning through three acts. *Alison's House*, although not received well by audiences—it was performed only a mere 42 times by the Civic Repertory Theatre—it was chosen to win the Pulitzer Prize in Drama in 1931 (France 222). After receiving the Pulitzer Prize, *Alison's House* was revived on Broadway for just two weeks before the production died out again. It was the last of Glaspell's plays to be produced, but she is credited with writing another play, "The Big Bozo," which "was never produced, and no known copy of it exists today" (France 223).

During her life, Susan Glaspell was highly aware of her world and tried to join organizations that would push social change. She became involved with early feminist and socialist movements and was thoroughly interested in changing the world she lived in and the world of the future. She was an active member of the radical feminist club, Heterodoxy, "a group of twenty-five women, including writer Charlotte Perkins Gilman, who began meeting in 1912 to discuss ways to promote economic, sexual, political, and professional freedom for women" (McMichael, et al. 1108). Glaspell is quoted as saying, "I am interested in all progressive movements, whether feminist, social, or economic" (McMichael, et al. 1108). Her writing expresses this interest and this development within her own psyche. When she first began writing, her staunch, Midwestern sense of conservatism created a basis for her early stories and novels, which were "about traditional young women seeking marriage and happiness" (McMichael, et al. 1108). However, as she developed, both as an individual and as a writer, she became more and more aware of the reality that she was denying. Her experience as a reporter allowed her to see "a world where women were denied voting rights [and] property rights," among others (McMichael, et al. 1108).

Through the analyzing of social change, Glaspell was able to develop her sense of self and her connection with

her home. She remained "a Midwestern idealist" through her entire literary career and life (Waterman 117). Her roots, her family and birthplace, are ever-present within her work, even when she is showing the faults within the constructs of society: "her concern with the Midwest—its lands, its people, its heritage—and her own fundamental Midwestern attitude unify all her work, including her periods of experimentation and reevaluation" (Waterman 117). Even when she was far away from her home, writing for New York or Massachusetts audiences, her plays, and even more importantly her characters, reflected the life she knew and loved back in the Midwest. Because of these factors, Susan Glaspell is a regionalist: "she took the pulse of her region, probed its past, brought it to life, and gave it significance for contemporary America. From first to last she sought to remind the new age of the meaning of the past" (Waterman 117). She brought to life a part of America that is usually overlooked and created characters that would reflect the way of life that is present in that area. To east coast audiences, she presented her Midwestern values and was able to maintain their significance while placing them in interesting situations.

In 1931, Susan Glaspell left New York and spent a brief period of time in 1934-1935 as the Midwest Director for the Federal Theatre Project (Waterman 14). After that brief time spent in the theater outside of writing plays, she spent the remaining years of her life at her home in Provincetown and wrote novels. It was there that she died, on July 27, 1948, at the age of 66 (France 223). Through her long career, she wrote thirteen plays, fourteen novels, and fifty short stories, articles, and essays. She wrote with an honest voice and tried to show American society and social settings through an honest portrayal. Through this, she and other little theater movement playwrights like Eugene O'Neill were able to create a unique American drama. Susan Glaspell's plays were vital to the development of American drama, and they will continue to be a staple of it as an example of its roots.

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Study Questions

1. In *Trifles* how does the physical location of the characters help develop the theme? Who are more fully developed, the two women or the three men? Indicate several ways Susan Glaspell conditions the audience to accept the final decision.
2. In the play, *Trifles*, women are pitted against their husbands and other men. How are the men and women portrayed?
3. The play has mythic elements: the setting is a bleak landscape; the main characters are never seen on stage; the

struggle between them is echoed by the two women and three men on stage. Do these elements lift the play, from its regionalism, and give it a universal importance?

MLA Style Citation of this Web Page

Reuben, Paul P. "Chapter 8: Susan Glaspell." *PAL: Perspectives in American Literature- A Research and Reference Guide*. URL: <http://www.csustan.edu/english/reuben/pal/chap8/glaspell.html> (provide page date or date of your login).

| [Top](#) |