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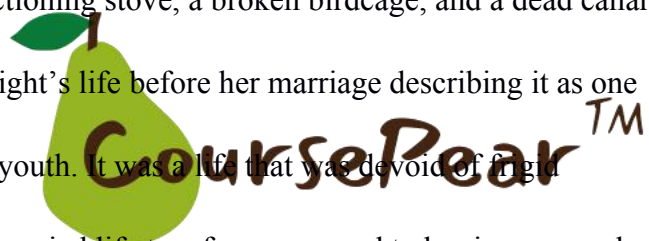
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A Caged Bird

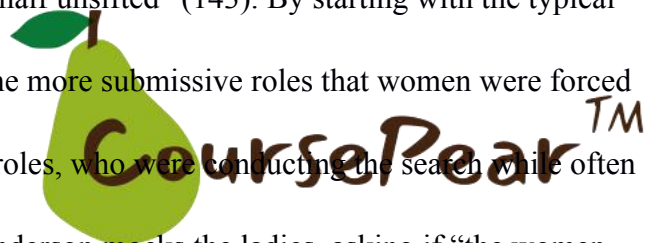
Isolation denotes absence, such as lack of living beings, which can conjure up images of separation and detachment. One could find such imagery in a caged bird, where an otherwise free animal is confined to a small prison. Hence, Susan Glaspell, in her short story “A Jury of Her Peers,” uses isolation to uncover the unhappy life of Mrs. Wright, a woman accused of murdering her husband. Glaspell’s descriptions of the Wrights’ farm, the female characters’ loneliness in silence, and the social spheres between the genders help readers understand the “cages” that are used limit and define the characters.

The setting of the story plays a vital part in the plot. The Wright farm is described to be up a hill and “down in a hollow” of forest (143). Additionally, the freezing weather, along with the distance between neighbors and lack of a telephone, further isolates the Wrights’ “fortress of solitude.” Glaspell brings to light other details of Mrs. Wright’s loneliness: her husband’s tight-lipped nature, the malfunctioning stove, a broken birdcage, and a dead canary. Furthermore, she includes bits of Mrs. Wright’s life before her marriage describing it as one filled with color, nice dresses, music, and youth. It was a life that was devoid of frigid weather and seclusion, which shows that married life to a farmer proved to be rigorous and alienating; just as the bird was caged, so was Mrs. Wright in her home. And ultimately, just as the bird died, she suffered a metaphorical death as well.



Isolation is further stressed with the discovery of the broken cage and later the dead canary. One can infer Mrs. Wright's mindset with her bird's death: when the one living, musical creature in her home died, she seemed to have fallen apart. Hence, the quiet that soon settled in most likely drove her over the edge. Furthermore, with neither a telephone nor a close friend to confide in, the overall atmosphere in the house was less than cheerful. When Mr. Hale is asked to describe Mrs. Wright during his visit, he labels her behavior as "queer," explaining that she was unusually calm, even choking up a nervous laughter once confronted with the whereabouts of her husband (146). Additionally, Mrs. Peters comes across Wright's sewing, noticing that the stitches were lopsided as compared to the ones made earlier, figuring that the quilting reflected "the distracted thoughts of a woman who had perhaps turned to it to try and quiet herself" (155). With the inclusion of the quilting scene, it both shows that the "jury" of fellow women were willing to defend an obviously upset, and lonely neighbor, having understood her plight because of their own experiences.

Glaspell wrote "A Jury of Her Peers" around 1917, when gender spheres were prominent in society. She has Mrs. Peters and Mrs. Hale tied to the kitchen and other "womanly activities" such as quilting. She begins the story with Mrs. Hale leaving her kitchen with "her bread all ready for mixing, half the flour sifted and half unsifted" (143). By starting with the typical "farm lady" chores, Glaspell establishes the more submissive roles that women were forced to take on. It also contrasts with the male roles, who were conducting the search while often belittling the women. County attorney Henderson mocks the ladies, asking if "the women [would] know a clue if they did come upon it" (150). Later, he sarcastically states that at least the search group knew what kind of quilting method Mrs. Wright was using, implying their



“uselessness” in the search. However, while the divide is used to show off the sexism between the male and female characters, it also highlights how understanding the women are of the situation. Mrs. Hale and Mrs. Peters’ ability to backtrack and understand Mrs. Wright’s monotonous everyday routines helps them uncover the motives behind the case. Also, their covering up of evidence left behind shows how sympathetic the women are about the Mrs. Wright’s plight, in comparison to the male characters, who are colder and more methodical when handling the facts. By providing such a drastic contrast between genders, Glaspell shows how capable the women are of understanding the case, regardless of their background as rural housewives.

Overall, the Glaspell’s short story provides a key foundation in early 20th century feminism. Her “caged bird” metaphor is a direct link between the women and their loneliness, allowing one the ability to understand their concealed emotions. Though confined to their “cages” based on social bubbles and physical isolation, the main characters are able to effectively analyze the problem present in the Wright household. By emphasizing the isolation of the women, their abilities to deduce Mrs. Wright’s situation, as well as their willingness to help, are illuminated.

