

Susan Glaspell



Susan Glaspell  
New Directions in Critical Inquiry

Edited and Introduction by

Martha C. Carpentier



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# INTRODUCTION

## MARTHA C. CARPENTIER

The rediscovery of Susan Glaspell's *oeuvre* has been somewhat like that of Tutankhamen's tomb: one is astounded to find such riches buried so effectively for so long. Linda Ben-Zvi describes the moment of stunned revelation that most Glaspell scholars have experienced:

I can still clearly remember my shock and anger when ... [while] preparing a book on Samuel Beckett, I wandered over to the stacks that contained Glaspell material and realized for the first time the extent of her writings—over fifty short stories, nine novels, and fourteen plays—and the extent of her erasure from the American dramatic and literary canons.<sup>1</sup>

Paul Lauter has given some answers to the inevitable question of why—one being gender, of course. From the 1920s through the 1950s, in America women were systematically excluded from academia, while the American canon was sanctified by male literary critics trained in formalism, and seeking to establish an assertive national identity through an indigenous literature reflecting “the professoriat’s concern that a truly American art be attractive to, embody the values of, masculine culture.”<sup>2</sup> Naturally such values would be imparted through narratives of war, not love; the plains, not the kitchen; and the father, not the mother. Since Glaspell wrote about *all* of these themes over the course of a nearly fifty-year commitment to her art, it was only by some straining that her body of work could be effectively excluded, but so it was.

Generic and aesthetic biases came into play as well. Since American formalism derived, via T.S. Eliot, from modernism, the major stylistic components of American fiction, realism and naturalism, were shunted aside in

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<sup>1</sup> Linda Ben-Zvi, *Susan Glaspell: Her Life and Times* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), x.

<sup>2</sup> Paul Lauter, “Race and Gender in the Shaping of the American Literary Canon: A Case Study from the Twenties,” in *Canons and Contexts* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 34.

favor of a highly allusive, experimental aesthetic—the famous New Critical “complexity, ambiguity, tension, irony,” all conveniently affirming “the status of the literary critic”<sup>3</sup> as interpreter. Since, as we now know, Glaspell effectively mastered both realist and expressionist styles, again the attempt to marginalize her was put to the test. The first step had already worked well with other American women writers: a derogation of her fiction aided by superficial reading as regional, sentimental, written for pay, and to please female audiences.<sup>4</sup> And then, fortuitously, Eugene O’Neill came along to eclipse the overtly modernist aesthetic of Glaspell’s significant contribution to the origins of American drama.

But somehow these answers no longer seem sufficient to explain the magnitude of the cover-up. American writers tend to mythologize themselves, the most paradigmatic twentieth-century (male) myth being that of the peripatetic, expatriate, alcoholic, generally angst-ridden, and preferably suicidal, rebel. Although Glaspell could never be called suicidal—she always had too much passion for life and work for that—ironically, she lived most of the myths of the American writer, too, in her fifty-year career. Always a rebel, she broke from gender-norms to attend Drake University at the turn-of-the-century, became a journalist, and by 1901 had dedicated herself to a life of writing. Feminist theatre and cultural historians and biographers have resurrected the pivotal role Glaspell played in the most important innovative moment in American theatre, with the Provincetown Players, 1915-1922. And, as Glaspell biographers Barbara Ozieblo and Linda Ben-Zvi have shown, far from being confined to the region of her birth, many years of Glaspell’s life were peripatetic, as she moved with the waves of modernist migration, first to Chicago, visiting Paris and later London, and settling in New York and Provincetown.<sup>5</sup> As for being expatriate, her years in Greece were short—1922 to 1924—but I have argued that they were as significant to her artistic development as Paris for Hemingway or London for Eliot.<sup>6</sup> Ben-Zvi charts Glaspell’s battle with alcoholism,<sup>7</sup> and while perhaps not angst-ridden, Glaspell was a deeply philosophical writer, who, as Mary E. Papke has done much to

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<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 35.

<sup>4</sup> See Judith Fetterley, Introduction to *Provisions: A Reader from 19th-Century American Women Writers* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985), 1-40; also see my “The Burial and Resurrection of a Writer,” *The Major Novels of Susan Glaspell* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2001), 3-5.

<sup>5</sup> See Barbara Ozieblo, *Susan Glaspell: A Critical Biography* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000); also see Ben-Zvi, *Susan Glaspell: Her Life and Times*.

<sup>6</sup> See my “Greece/Greek as Mother’s Body in *The Road to the Temple*,” *The Major Novels of Susan Glaspell*, 26-42.

<sup>7</sup> Ben-Zvi, *Susan Glaspell: Her Life and Times*, 359-72.

elucidate, ameliorates a naturalist despair with a determined belief in the capacity of human transcendence.<sup>8</sup> However, while Glaspell may have lived the myth of the American writer, not being a man, she could not, or did not want to, dramatize it as a contribution to her legacy. Her last decades, the 1930s and 40s, express, rather, some of the myths of the female American writer, living and writing in Provincetown hidden in solitary Dickinsonian domesticity, with some of the eccentric genius of a Flannery O'Connor raising peacocks in Milledgeville thrown in, capped after her death by the complete erasure of a Zora Neale Hurston.

What, then, is the myth Glaspell constructed of herself and how might it have contributed to her own erasure? As Barbara Ozieblo comments in her essay for this volume, Glaspell “did not leave much in the way of diaries, letters or theoretical essays on the theatre of her times, but she has given us *The Road to the Temple*, the biography that she wrote of her husband [George Cram Cook] to bestow on him the immortality he craved.” The defining moment in that enigmatic book is one that has haunted every Glaspell scholar, many of whom have discussed it and continue to revisit it:

If a reader is familiar with any story about Susan Glaspell, it is the one about her knowing nothing whatsoever about writing a play until her husband Jig Cook demanded that she do so nevertheless because he needed a play for his theater, out of which demand was born *Trifles*. The story was promoted in her paean to her dead husband, *The Road to the Temple*, a book in which Glaspell does a spectacular job of effacing herself to the point of nearly complete self-erasure so as to reserve center stage for the glorified account of her husband's life and contributions to American art.<sup>9</sup>

It is a paradigmatic moment, not only in a woman writer's conscious deconstruction of herself as an artist, but also in American modernism, because it portrays the instant of Glaspell's ambivalent commitment to playwriting and the consequent birth of *Trifles*, now commonly acknowledged as one of the greatest works of the modern American theatre. To quote it in full:

“Now, Susan,” he said to me, briskly, “I have announced a play of yours for the next bill.”

“But I have no play!”

“Then you will have to sit down to-morrow and begin one.”

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<sup>8</sup> Mary E. Papke, “Susan Glaspell's Naturalist Scenarios of Determinism and Blind Faith,” in *Disclosing Intertextualities: The Stories, Plays, and Novels of Susan Glaspell*, eds. Martha C. Carpentier and Barbara Ozieblo (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2006), 19-34.

<sup>9</sup> Mary E. Papke, “Susan Glaspell's Naturalist Scenarios of Determinism and Blind Faith,” 20. My italics.

I protested. I did not know how to write a play. I had never “studied it.” “Nonsense,” said Jig. “You’ve got a stage, haven’t you?”<sup>10</sup>

How Glaspell scholars have read this moment has shifted over time, from anger at him (for being a bully), bafflement at her (for betraying herself and all women) to an understanding of the ambivalence imbedded in the passage,<sup>11</sup> and—where I believe we are arriving today—a dawning appreciation for the supremely self-conscious artistry of everything Glaspell wrote, including this. For it is a self-consciousness parody that cries to be read through a post-structuralist lense, a truly Derridaian moment in its complex play. While she appears to grant all the power to him, she nevertheless undoes what she simultaneously does by portraying the beloved as midwife to her own genius (on a par, if we dare to say it, with Pound’s midwifery of Eliot’s *Waste Land* or of H.D. as “imagiste”), and she reverses, while seeming to affirm, the gendered order of male as creator and female as muse.

This volume of essays is entitled “New Directions in Critical Inquiry” for this reason: Glaspell scholarship now *begins* from an awareness of the supremely self-conscious artistry that characterizes all her work. Thus, Barbara Ozieblo looks beyond the ostensible “hagiography” of *The Road to the Temple*, to revisit sections of it as “a testament to their creative thinking on the theatre—the theory and the practice,” and she discusses Glaspell’s unpublished play, *Chains of Dew*, in light of Shavian “realism” and “idealism,” as a conscious effort to join O’Neill on the Broadway stage. Ignoring Cook’s role entirely in the birth of *Trifles*, Lucia V. Sander focuses on the proceeding moment in *The Road to the Temple*, perhaps one more deserving of fame, in which Glaspell “sat alone on one of our wooden benches without a back, and looked a long time at that bare little stage,”<sup>12</sup> until she saw the stage become a kitchen and the talkative men and two silent women, her characters, enter. Glaspell might have said then, in the words of Virginia Woolf’s artist Lily Briscoe, “I have had my vision,”<sup>13</sup> and Sander goes on to explore the ways in which “dreams and the theatre are the two places where that which is dead can be revived, where that

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<sup>10</sup> Susan Glaspell, *The Road to the Temple* (New York: Frederick A. Stokes Company, 1941), 255.

<sup>11</sup> J. Ellen Gainor combines the passage with a “testier account” Glaspell wrote much later in her life suggesting “resistance to her husband, despite her acquiescence,” a “paradox” she feels Glaspell “inscribes into the play’s subject, form, and composition.” See J. Ellen Gainor, *Susan Glaspell in Context: American Theater, Culture, and Politics 1915-48* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2001), 38.

<sup>12</sup> Glaspell, *The Road to the Temple*, 255-6.

<sup>13</sup> Virginia Woolf, *To the Lighthouse*, (New York: Harcourt, Brace Jovanovich, 1927), 209.

which seems to have disappeared can reveal itself.” Glaspell’s modernism is further explored by Marie Molnar, who reads *Antigone* as the consciously chosen classical subtext for Glaspell’s heroic tragedy of self versus state, *Inheritors*.

That *Trifles* was far from being a solitary birth, is established by both legal scholar Patricia L. Bryan, and cultural historian, J. Ellen Gainor. Just as Glaspell based *Trifles* on the Hossack murder case and used it to challenge traditional ideas of legal jurisprudence based solely on the “‘higher’... abstract principles” rendered by the symbolic, Bryan shows how, in an earlier story, “The Plea,” she used another actual case, this time involving a child, John Wesley Elkins, who murdered his mother and stepfather, to portray “new ideas of reform, focusing on the necessity of positive environmental changes,” and to advocate as she does in *Trifles* and “Jury of Her Peers” that “empathic understanding ... might well be an essential part of achieving justice.” In a similar vein, Gainor establishes that Glaspell’s witty one-act play, *Woman’s Honor*, may have been inspired by the murder trial of Joe Hill, in which he refused to provide an alibi, purportedly, to protect a woman’s honor, as well as intended to critique the “Slander Per Se” laws which legitimized and perpetuated the ideology of female virtue.

Mary E. Papke discusses Glaspell’s roots in American pragmatism and transcendentalism, as expressed in her lifelong “obsession with war as both destroyer and possibility,” focusing particularly on her fiction of the Great War and the 1945 novel, *Judd Rankin’s Daughter*, her “last word on America and war.” Kristina Hinz-Bode, too, discusses *Judd Rankin’s Daughter*, comparing it to other novels from early and late in Glaspell’s career, to show her “continuous engagement with the implications of ... the epistemological crisis of modernity” and, despite Glaspell’s participation in the modernist presentation of reality as fragmented and uncertain, her consistent affirmation of the quest for truth.

There is another way in which Susan Glaspell inadvertently contributed to her own erasure from the canon. As Linda Ben-Zvi comments in her introduction to the first collection of critical essays on Susan Glaspell, her writing “assiduously works to evade categorization” and as such, it requires particular kinds of criticism “attuned to the nuances between the lines” and an ability to read with “a sense of the historical forces that the works were attempting to deconstruct.”<sup>14</sup> In the post-war era of canon formation based upon establishing singular “masterpieces” and dividing literary works into “major,” “minor,” and other value-laden categories, Glaspell’s very fertility and freedom from generic constraints worked against her. Was she a playwright or a

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<sup>14</sup> Linda Ben-Zvi, Introduction to *Susan Glaspell: Essays on Her Theater and Fiction*, ed. Linda Ben-Zvi (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1995), 6.

novelist? Was she an expressionist or a realist? Was she satirical or sentimental? Neither she nor her work could be pigeon-holed. She was, and is, all of these, resulting in an *oeuvre* that today continues to challenge and excite students, theatre professionals, and literary critics around the world. As this collection illustrates, scholars now bring nuanced textual readings to elucidate Glaspell's modernist rendering of the human psyche, as well historically informed readings to elucidate Glaspell's lifelong commitment to issues of social justice, grounded in the events and philosophical debates of her day.

# SUSAN GLASPELL AND THE MODERNIST EXPERIMENT OF *CHAINS OF DEW*

BARBARA OZIEBLO

The pure theatrical spectacle, as envisioned by modernism, is problematical and has led to a questioning of its very possibility. All the same, theatre partook of the modernist determination to propel art into the future, and to remove the stage from the quotidian, reinforcing its theatricality and creating a harmonious presentation for an elite audience that would be witness to the manifestation of beauty, a beauty that, as Susan Glaspell's Claire Archer predicts, "has opened as the sea" onto "immensity."<sup>1</sup> Glaspell, one of America's most underestimated modernist playwrights, wrought plays that exemplify the various routes that modernism took in the theatre: on the one hand, she sought the beauty and "otherness" advocated by Edward Gordon Craig or Wyndham Lewis; on the other hand, she held a Shavian conviction that the theatre could do more than offer an aesthetic experience and, having established an intellectual relationship with her audience, sought to reform society through her plays.

The contrast between the last two pieces by Susan Glaspell that the Provincetown Players performed, *The Verge* in 1921 and *Chains of Dew* in 1922, reflects this polarity of her theatrical ambition: *The Verge* literally seeks to create an "otherness" that will be a "gorgeous chance" to know the "humility" of success,<sup>2</sup> while *Chains of Dew* grapples more realistically with a number of dilemmas that result from the hypocritical social mores of the period. The reception given the two plays responds to their differences: *Chains of Dew* tends to be rejected as heavily reliant on obvious symbolism and written in too great a hurry. *The Verge*, on the other hand, has either been praised extravagantly or declared to be an incomprehensible depiction of an insane woman.

Glaspell understood the risks she was running in *The Verge*; she knew the Playwrights' Theatre audience well and she knew that at least one sector, her

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<sup>1</sup> Susan Glaspell, *The Verge*, in *Plays by Susan Glaspell*, ed. C.W.E. Bigsby (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 87.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 70, 98.

radical friends of the Heterodoxy Club, would respond to Claire Archer's predicament. When writing *Chains of Dew*, however, she had no such clear picture of her possible spectators; she was led by her ambition to reach a larger audience and to awaken them to the injustices of society caused by the double standard applied to class and gender issues. Set in the early 1900s, the play shows how Diantha, the wife of a mediocre Midwestern poet, attempts to transform their social life in order to allow Seymore to devote himself to his poetry. Seymore leads a double life, dividing his time between a bohemian New York crowd and the staid duties of a bank director in their small Midwestern town. His New York friend, Nora, a dedicated campaigner in Margaret Sanger's efforts to legalize birth control, erupts into his home life, determined to either transform his wife or free him from her. She soon realizes that it is Diantha that needs to be freed from Seymore's manipulative tactics. Both Diantha and Seymore's mother are eager to become involved in the birth control movement until they realize that Seymore has built his sense of identity on their dependence: without them, he is a rag doll with no stuffing. Both Diantha and Mother consciously sacrifice their longings for an independent interest in life in order to boost Seymore's ego, so giving the lie to Zarathustra's "The man's happiness is: I will. The woman's happiness is: He will."<sup>3</sup> While in *The Verge* Glaspell would create a protagonist willing to sacrifice life in order to maintain her independence and creativity, in *Chains of Dew*, the protagonist, however unwillingly, submits to the demands of her husband. Although written for different audiences, both plays are modernist dramas with protagonists that qualify as New Women—and as such, *Chains of Dew* and *The Verge* exemplify the complex and plural nature of theatrical modernism and early twentieth-century feminism.

Frequently bewildered by Glaspell's modernity, contemporary reviewers, in their attempt to place her within a recognizable theatrical context, compared her work to that of the great European dramatists of the turn-of-the-century; English critics in particular saw her as the founder of "the purely intellectual school of American drama"<sup>4</sup> in the tradition of Chekhov, Strindberg, Ibsen and Shaw. According to A. D. Peters, for Glaspell, "the play is a means to an end. Her main interests are psychology and sociology. She has the soul of a reformer." R. Ellis Roberts, on the other hand, insisted that "Miss Susan Glaspell is the

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<sup>3</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, trans. and intro. R.J. Hollingdale, (Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin, 1987), 92. See Margit Sichert's "Claire Archer—a 'Nietzscheanna' in Susan Glaspell's *The Verge* (in ed. Herbert Grabes, *REAL: Yearbook of Research in English and American Literature*, Tübingen: Gunter Narr Verlag, 1977, vol. 13, 271-97) for Glaspell and Nietzsche.

<sup>4</sup> A.D. Peters, "Susan Glaspell, New American Dramatist," *Daily Telegraph* (London), 19? June 1924.

greatest playwright we have writing in English since Mr. Shaw began. I am not sure that she is not the greatest dramatist since Ibsen.”<sup>5</sup> Glaspell, as was George Bernard Shaw, would have been delighted to find that she had managed to administer a “sudden earthquake shock to the foundations of morality” with her plays.<sup>6</sup> Her well-known refusal to participate actively in political and social movements other than by her pen only heightens the political value of her writing and emphasizes her need to stir the audience to action.<sup>7</sup>

The relationship between the audience and the play vexed modernist playwrights in their crusade to renew the theatre; the most extreme exponents of modernism saw the actor as an unnecessary intermediary and advocated the use of marionettes, while others pursued the tantalizing vision of a theatre without an audience. Glaspell did not go to the lengths of Craig or Wyndham Lewis; neither was she led by the influence of the Japanese *noh* drama to strive for an alliance of all the arts on the stage as was W. B. Yeats. She was more attuned to the modernist desire to express the individual conscience and, in *The Verge*, she made use of expressionistic devices to render Claire Archer’s mind. However, in most of her plays, as in *Chains of Dew*, Glaspell’s experimentation with theatrical forms was less extreme, and therefore more performable and readily comprehensible to her audiences. She worked in the mode of Shaw, using her intellect to present issues of personal and political significance to the audience—and so gained for herself the reputation of a “talky” playwright, and a reformer.

From her very initiation into writing for the theatre, Glaspell was aware of her audience as much as she was aware of the physical space that the stage and the theatre implied. When she wrote her first play, *Trifles*, she wrote literally from the stage and for a very specific audience.<sup>8</sup> All the Provincetown Players playwrights necessarily had a special, pragmatic relationship with their audience—subscribers who made their very existence possible. Edna Kenton, in an article for the *Boston Evening Transcript* in 1918, admits the close relationship that the Provincetown Players had with their frequently “bewildered” spectators who “shift[ed] uncomfortably” on the hard benches, and yet continued paying their subscriptions and coming to see the plays.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> R. Ellis Roberts, “A Great Playwright,” *Guardian*, 17 July 1925.

<sup>6</sup> George Bernard Shaw, 1902 Preface to *Mrs. Warren’s Profession*, in *The Bedford Introduction to Drama*, ed. Lee A. Jacobus, 4th Edition (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin’s, 2001), 867.

<sup>7</sup> Alice Rohe, “The Story of Susan Glaspell,” *New York Morning Telegraph*, 18 December 1921, 4.

<sup>8</sup> See Susan Glaspell, *The Road to the Temple* (New York: Stokes, 1927), 256.

<sup>9</sup> Edna Kenton, “Unorganized, Amateur, Purely Experimental,” *Boston Evening Transcript*, 27 April 1918, Part 2, 9-10.

Alfred Kreymborg's account of the Players also testifies to audience fidelity: "No matter how the group tried their patience, Provincetown audiences were loyal down to the last subscriber," he wrote.<sup>10</sup>

The Provincetown Announcements frequently made direct mention of the audience, sometimes recalling Cook's statements as quoted by Glaspell in *The Road to the Temple*. Cook, co-founder of the Provincetown Players and Susan Glaspell's husband, a visionary who was convinced that the teachings of Wagner, d'Annunzio, Kipling, Whitman, and Nietzsche could, interfused, be put to use in a socialist democracy, believed that he had been selected to inspire an "American Renaissance of the Twentieth Century" by stimulating a chosen "one hundred" to kindle "communal intellectual passion."<sup>11</sup> Thus, in the announcement for the seventh season, that of 1920-21, we read:

There exist today in New York City perhaps a thousand men and women who, as individuals, are the spiritual equals of those who saw the first performances of Aristophanes, Molière, or Shakespeare. . . . For six years this group [the Provincetown Players] has shown enough power in developing new playwrights to justify a chosen thousand in forming themselves into an audience of inspiration. . . . The future art of [the Provincetown] writers should not be left to be shaped by the vulgarity and dullness of the ubiquitous amusement-seeker of the city. . . . What playwright and actor need is not to look down on an audience, nor up to it, but to be one with it.<sup>12</sup>

The Provincetown Players' audience was, as were all Little Theatre audiences, a select group made up of enthusiastic friends and supporters, adept at appreciating the attempts at innovation and self-expression. As Dorothy Chansky argues, the Little Theatres not only gave "opportunities for training in production" but also taught the audience how it "should perform its role." Moreover, "Along with this technical, functionalist education comes the less overt message that to know these things is the mark of a superior, minority population."<sup>13</sup> This evaluation of audience training supports Cook's scheme of

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<sup>10</sup> Alfred Kreymborg, *Troubadour: An Autobiography* (New York: Boni & Liveright, 1925), 310.

<sup>11</sup> Glaspell, *The Road to the Temple*, 224-25.

<sup>12</sup> Announcement for seventh season, 1920-1921, Provincetown Scrapbook, Hutchins Hapgood and Neith Boyce Papers, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University.

<sup>13</sup> Dorothy Chansky, *Composing Ourselves: the Little Theatre Movement and the American Audience*, (Carbondale, Ill.: Southern Illinois Press, 2004), 24-25.

awakening his chosen one hundred to what Shaw had called the “unbearable face of the truth.”<sup>14</sup>

Glaspell shared Cook’s thoughts on the significance of the audience; or perhaps she had led him to them during those long conversations on what the theatre “might be” that she relives in *The Road to the Temple*—after the entrancing experience of *Jephthah’s Daughter* at the Neighborhood Playhouse, or over intoxicating bottles of wine drained on the sand dunes in Provincetown.<sup>15</sup> Unfortunately, she did not leave much in the way of diaries, letters or theoretical essays on the theatre of her times, but she has given us *The Road to the Temple*, the biography that she wrote of her husband to bestow on him the immortality he craved. The volume, frequently considered a hagiography, is a collage of scraps of Cook’s writing, interwoven with Glaspell’s authorial comments. Although Glaspell presents herself as an insignificant shadow trailing in Cook’s wake, her selection of his fragmented thoughts achieves order and coherence and becomes a testament to their creative thinking on the theatre—the theory and the practice. Read together with the announcements for the Provincetowners’ seasons, *The Road to the Temple*, in its middle section, shows not only that the Provincetown Players were aware of European theatrical innovations, but also that they were willing to adapt them to the artistic needs of their Little Theatre and to train their audiences to accept the modern and to think critically. Glaspell, a spectator herself, respected the participation of the audience in the communal endeavor of every performance, thus rejecting the empathetic model of the Wagnerian enthralled but passive onlooker. She wrote:

The people who had seen the plays, and the people who gave them, were *adventurers together*. The spectators were part of the Players, for how could it have been done without the feeling that came from them, without that sense of them there, waiting, ready to share, giving—finding the deep level where audience and writer and player are one.<sup>16</sup>

Glaspell’s optimism was not always shared by Cook—as, for example, when he scribbled the following lines, which she recovered to emphasize the role of the audience: “we need a public like [Aristophanes’]” he pleaded, “which itself has the habit of thinking and talking frankly of life. We need the sympathy of such a public, the fundamental oneness with the public, which Aristophanes

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<sup>14</sup> George Bernard Shaw, “The Quintessence of Ibsenism,” *Major Critical Essays*, ed. Michael Holroyd (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1986), 50.

<sup>15</sup> Glaspell, *The Road to the Temple*, 249-56.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 254. My italics.

had.”<sup>17</sup> The audience that saw the plays of Aristophanes and other Athenian dramatists was trained to interpret “signal-information” as “semantic information,” and was thus able to produce meaning.<sup>18</sup> Aston and Savona see in such “operations of conventionalism” an invitation to the spectator “to work, in a creative collusion with dramatist and actor, towards a more complete realisation of the enacted text,” participating in “the construction and operation of imaginative space, and [learning] such conventions as will facilitate effective participation.”<sup>19</sup> Such a spectator was superseded by the bourgeois audience of the Renaissance “illusionistic” theatre that had become passive as it learned to “identify unproblematically with the character”<sup>20</sup> and to accept what Glaspell called the “patterned” plays of Broadway that “did not open out to—where it surprised or thrilled your spirit to follow.”<sup>21</sup>

The third model of the historical development of theatre that Aston and Savona posit is that of “contestation of illusionism” and the Provincetown Players, as both a modernist and avant-garde theatrical venture, sought an audience willing to assume an “active role in the processes of meaning-production.”<sup>22</sup> Although it is true that their New York theatres were equipped with the traditional proscenium arch, Glaspell assures readers that Cook did not want an arena, as did Max Reinhardt, nor a simple hall as Vsevolod Meyerhold planned for his proletarian spectators: as she writes, Cook dreamed of a “theatre of domes,” that, in his words, would restore “to drama its Elizabethan power of story-telling,” and Glaspell asserts emphatically, “I did know what he meant.” What they both wanted for the theatre was to “begin new. Do it because we want to see what it is we can do,” so echoing Ezra Pound’s modernist credo.<sup>23</sup>

Glaspell’s notion of a re-beginning, given her reformist and social agenda, did not lead her to radical experiments with theatrical illusionism except in *The Verge*; rather, it inevitably involved a reevaluation of mores and convictions, in particular as these applied to women, but also to the potential of personal and artistic development of both men and women within society. Glaspell’s theatrically most innovative play has been both performed and written about in the last two decades, but *Chains of Dew*, which Glaspell never published, still

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 249.

<sup>18</sup> Keir Elam, *The Semiotics of Theatre and Drama* (London: Routledge, 1994), 41.

<sup>19</sup> Elaine Aston and George Savona, *Theatre as Sign-System: A Semiotics of Text and Performance* (London: Routledge, 1994), 91, 160.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 160.

<sup>21</sup> Glaspell, *The Road to the Temple*, 248.

<sup>22</sup> Aston and Savona, *Theatre as Sign-System*, 93, 161. See also my “Avant-Garde and Modernist Women Dramatists of the Provincetown Players: Bryant, Davies and Millay,” *Journal of American Drama and Theatre* 16:2 (Spring 2004):1-16.

<sup>23</sup> Glaspell, *The Road to the Temple*, 307-09.

awaits critical reinterpretation. The history of the writing and production of this play is crucial to an understanding of Glaspell's ambition as a playwright and explains why she chose to people it with women who betray the feminist principles of independence and inner strength that generally characterize her protagonists.

Glaspell had spent the fall of 1919 in Provincetown working on *Chains of Dew* and in January 1920 she confided to Agnes Boulton, Eugene O'Neill's wife, that: "she didn't quite know what to do with it."<sup>24</sup> A little miffed by O'Neill's successes and contacts outside the Provincetown Players, she too wanted to try for a wider audience and greater recognition; after all, she had been selflessly influential in getting O'Neill's first play performed, and had continued to support him.<sup>25</sup> Glaspell's role in O'Neill's intellectual development as a playwright has not received sufficient attention, in spite of Linda Ben-Zvi's early articles on this subject. More recently, Joel Pfister, in his study of O'Neill, is categorical as to the significance of Glaspell's influence on his writing, stating that she "taught O'Neill . . . about the pervasive effects of discourse on subjectivity."<sup>26</sup> Although, according to Cook's daughter, Nilla Cook,<sup>27</sup> Glaspell always gave herself generously to the protégés she adopted, she did not lack ambition for herself, and if O'Neill offered to help get her onto Broadway, she must have been happy to accept—even if perhaps she did wonder what a Broadway success would do to her relationship with her husband, who, at that time, still categorically rejected its commercialism.

That O'Neill did try to help, we know from his letters to Boulton who, after reading *Chains of Dew*, and liking it, sent it on to him. Although there is no mention of the title of the play in the O'Neill correspondence, it is identified in similarly dated letters from Glaspell to her friend Lucy Huffaker and, from comments on the play by Boulton we can infer that it was certainly not *Inheritors* nor *The Verge*, as Bogard and Bryer suggest in a note in the *Selected Letters of Eugene O'Neill*.<sup>28</sup> O'Neill wrote to Boulton from New York asking her to "Tell Susan I spoke to [the Broadway producer George C.] Tyler and that he is genuinely eager to have a look at it." O'Neill went on to say: "I like her

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<sup>24</sup> Agnes Boulton to Eugene O'Neill, n.d., Agnes Boulton Papers, Houghton Theatre Collection, Harvard University.

<sup>25</sup> See my *Susan Glaspell: A Critical Biography* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000), 84-87.

<sup>26</sup> Joel Pfister, Joel, *Staging Depth: Eugene O'Neill and the Politics of Psychological Discourse* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1995), 194.

<sup>27</sup> Quoted in Marcia Noe, *Susan Glaspell: Voice from the Heartland* (Macomb, Ill.: Western Illinois University, 1983), 10.

<sup>28</sup> Travis Bogard and Jackson R. Bryer, eds., *Selected Letters of Eugene O'Neill* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988), 103.

play tremendously and think it has a fine chance with him—or anyone else.”<sup>29</sup> However, the play was rejected by Tyler, and also by John D. Williams. Glaspell then sent it to the Theatre Guild and, in February 1920, was impatient to know “the great world’s attitude to *Chains of Dew*,” as she confided to Huffaker.<sup>30</sup>

*Chains of Dew* was eventually performed for a Provincetown audience and the legend that has been built up around that production has done the play a considerable disservice. This legend, as most of the Provincetown legends, originates in Edna Kenton’s history of the Players<sup>31</sup> in which she, unwittingly, set the example for future reception and analysis of *Chains of Dew*. Although the decision to perform the play as the sixth and last bill of that season was taken before Glaspell and Cook left for Greece, Kenton reported in a letter to Glaspell on 5 May 1922 that “*Chains of Dew* was to have been swept out of the back door,” and it was only her decisive action that prevented an O’Neill revival in its stead. As discussions to sabotage the production of Glaspell’s play were under way, Kenton writes that she “just quietly and without taking any counsel announced in the public press that ‘Chains of Dew’ was going on. We were committed and the gang[?] was out.” It is impossible to know whether her determination to see that “The season goes through as planned before Jig [Cook] sailed” was due to sheer stubbornness, fidelity to Glaspell and Cook’s plans in general or, specifically, to Glaspell’s desire to have her play performed. The long letter of 5 May recounts Kenton’s struggles to find a director, cast the play, and minimize the cuts, and she was far from pleased with the result; she assured her friend that, “If you had been there, subtleties and ironies would have stayed in that went.” It is clear from Kenton’s letter that she had received, and incorporated into the script, some changes that Glaspell had made while revising her play on the journey to Greece. However, Kenton also says that “Your script has never come,”<sup>32</sup> implying that Glaspell had sent a revised text that has been lost. The text that we have of *Chains of Dew* is the original, so far unpublished text, meant for a Broadway production, which Glaspell filed at the Library of Congress in 1920.

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<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>30</sup> Susan Glaspell to Lucy Huffaker, n.d., Edward Goodman Papers, Billy Rose Theatre Collection, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.

<sup>31</sup> Edna Kenton’s *The Provincetown Players and the Playwrights’ Theatre 1915-1922* was available only in manuscript form till 1997 when it was edited and published by Travis Bogard and Jackson R. Bryer in the *Eugene O’Neill Review* 21:1 & 2 (Spring/Fall 1997), 1-160.

<sup>32</sup> Edna Kenton to Susan Glaspell, 5 May 1922. Edna Kenton Papers, Harvard Theatre Collection, Houghton Library, Harvard University.

In her history, Kenton, her trials with the Players uppermost in her mind, transferred her sense of having been cast to the lions after the departure of Glaspell and Cook onto her friend, and allowed herself to be influenced by the critical reception of the weak production of the play in her assessment:

Susan had made the last sacrifice in letting *Chains*, an immature play, go on the last bill. As the young Roman threw himself into the gulf to save Rome, Susan cast her play into the chasm, narrow but fraught with a thousand dangers, that yawned between *The Hairy Ape* and the close of the season.<sup>33</sup>

Critics have echoed Kenton and exonerated Glaspell by saying that she reluctantly handed over an unfinished piece of work to the Players just before she left for Greece. Even Linda Ben-Zvi is satisfied with such an approach, although she comments that “the surprise is how well much of the play works.”<sup>34</sup> It is unlikely that Kenton would have fought so determinedly for the production of the play if she thought Glaspell was in any way reluctant to have it performed. She herself clearly admired the play, which had so many good female parts. As she wrote to Glaspell on 5 May, bemoaning the difficulty of finding good actresses: “That part [the Mother] could make an actress.”<sup>35</sup>

Boulton, when she forwarded the typescript of *Chains of Dew* to O’Neill, had insisted on the “good fun” of the piece which, she thought, would appeal to the more open-minded Broadway directors. This “good fun” is reminiscent of the arch humor we find in plays by Shaw or Noel Coward, but also of the feminist reforming spirit of Rachel Crothers. The *Theatre Magazine* reviewer of Crothers’s *Young Wisdom* (1914) had praised her for having turned the so-called problem play into light comedy, creating a “clever satire of modern ideas” that was, however, “imbued with feminine delicacy.”<sup>36</sup> With *Chains of Dew*, Glaspell was clearly attempting something similar but, accustomed to the easy tolerance of the Provincetown subscribers and not as familiar as was Crothers with the Broadway audience, she chose to eschew “feminine delicacy” when she brought the topic of birth control into the play. However, when *Chains of Dew* was finally performed at the Playwrights’ Theatre in 1922, reviewers tended to reject this topic as merely redundant, but if the play had been performed on Broadway in 1920, it might well have garnered comments similar to those bestowed on Shaw’s *Mrs. Warren’s Profession* in New York in 1905:

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<sup>33</sup> Edna Kenton, *The Provincetown Players and the Playwrights’ Theatre 1915-1922*, 156.

<sup>34</sup> Linda Ben-Zvi, *Susan Glaspell: Her Life and Times*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2005, 257.

<sup>35</sup> Edna Kenton to Susan Glaspell, 5 May 1922.

<sup>36</sup> Review of Rachel Crothers’ *Young Wisdom* in *Theatre Magazine* (February 1914): 60.

“revolting, indecent, and nauseating where it was not boring.”<sup>37</sup> Although revived in New York by the Washington Square Players in 1918 (with Diantha Pattison in the role of Vivie, a possible inspiration for Glaspell’s central character, Diantha, in *Chains of Dew*), Shaw’s play was not cleared of charges of indecency in England till 1925, when it was performed in Birmingham.

The Comstock Law of 1873 had made it illegal in the U.S. to mail obscene matter such as information on birth control; doctors were forbidden to speak of such practices to their patients and for many people, including the provincial Mrs. MacIntyre of *Chains of Dew*, it was a taboo topic—especially when speaking to women considered social and moral inferiors, such as a laundress. As Mrs. MacIntyre says to Diantha, “One doesn’t like to talk to those people about—things.”<sup>38</sup> The movement to decriminalize birth control had started before World War I and had been headed, in America, by Margaret Sanger and Emma Goldman, the latter related to the Provincetown Players through family and friends; both women attracted notice by jail sentences for their activities. By 1919, the year Glaspell was writing *Chains of Dew*, their radical protests were giving way to more law-abiding tactics; Goldman would be deported in December of that year, and Sanger enlisted the help of the medical profession and the today questionable ideology of eugenics to her cause. This move elicited the help of the affluent, morally correct women in New York and other large cities; as Nora facetiously explains to Mrs. MacIntyre, “Birth control is the smart thing in New York this season. It’s rather a bore—the way they run after us. When suffrage grew so—sort of common—the really exclusive people turned to birth control” (II, i, 26).<sup>39</sup> Also in 1919, Mary Ware Dennett—a member of the Heterodoxy Club whose meetings Glaspell attended—founded the Voluntary Parenthood League whose objective was to legalize the giving out of birth control information. Thus if the play had been produced in 1920 as Glaspell had hoped, it would have been extremely topical even though perhaps offensive to Broadway audiences; by 1922 the subject had faded, and the focus of Greenwich Village protests had moved on to other issues.

*Chains of Dew* exemplifies the tensions of society as depicted by George Bernard Shaw in his essay “The Quintessence of Ibsenism” (1891). In this play

<sup>37</sup> Quoted in *The Bedford Introduction to Drama*, ed. Lee A. Jacobus, 863.

<sup>38</sup> Susan Glaspell, *Chains of Dew*, unpublished typescript, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C. All subsequent references to this play will be cited parenthetically.

<sup>39</sup> Congress passed the Nineteenth Amendment giving women the right to vote in the U.S. in 1919; in August 1920 a sufficient number of states had ratified the Amendment for it to become law. During the years leading up to this moment, the suffrage campaigns had been the dominant political rights movement in the lives of many women and men. By 1922, when *Chains of Dew* was finally staged in the last bill of the Provincetown Players, Nora’s reference to suffrage would have lost its political edge.

Glaspell recreated Shaw's—and Ibsen's—world of Philistines and idealists and examined the difficult role of the realist in a spirit of Shavian humor, reserving Ibsen's tragic approach for *The Verge*. Writing on Ibsen's family dramas—most of Glaspell's plays and novels are also based on family conflicts—Shaw explains his division of society into three categories:

let us imagine a community of a thousand persons, organized for the perpetuation of the species on the basis of the British family as we know it at present. Seven hundred of them [the Philistines], we will suppose, find the British family arrangement quite good enough for them. Two hundred and ninety nine [the idealists] find it a failure, but must put up with it since they are in a minority. The remaining person [the realist, is] . . . the man strong enough to face the truth the idealists are shirking.<sup>40</sup>

Shaw recognized the “verbal ambiguity” of the labels he had attached to his classification and his further definitions attempt to clarify the difference between the idealists and the realist. The idealist “has taken refuge with the ideals because he hates himself,” while the realist (to whom Claire in *The Verge*, Madeline in *Inheritors*, or Bernice in Glaspell's play of that name could be compared) “has come to have a deep respect for [her]self and faith in the validity of [her] own will.”<sup>41</sup> Shaw clarifies still further why he despises the idealist for whom “Realism means egotism; and egotism means depravity,” when he states that:

The realist declares that when a man abnegates the will to live and be free in a world of the living and free, seeking only to conform to ideals for the sake of being, not himself, but ‘a good man’, then he is morally dead and rotten.<sup>42</sup>

The Midwestern town of *Chains of Dew* is inhabited by self-righteous Philistines; Seymore is the idealist who thrives on his sense of “otherness” and therefore does not wish to rebel, while Nora is the courageous realist with a will to transform society. Diantha and Mother have the courage of the realist but they knowingly decide to revert to their previous unsatisfying idealist stance in order to save Seymore from the personal annihilation he dreads, thus proving themselves to be “good women.” Shaw's description, of course, fits Seymore very neatly; but the motives of Diantha and the wise all-comprehending Mother, who both forgo Shavian realism for the good of another, are more complex. These two women are not exemplary modernist, independent New Woman as

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<sup>40</sup> Shaw, “The Quintessence of Ibsenism,” 48-50.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 52.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 53.

are other Glaspellian protagonists; instead, they submit, most unwillingly, to the mold imposed by their established social roles. It would, however, be unjust to consider them “morally dead and rotten.”

When we first see Diantha, she is doing her best to refashion Seymore’s social life, thus re-writing the old Pygmalion story in a Shavian recourse to inversion of accepted social patterns. In order to do this, she is more than willing to refashion herself—something Shaw’s Higgins would never have contemplated for, as he arrogantly states: “I can’t change my nature: and I don’t intend to change my manners.”<sup>43</sup> Eliza of course had expert tutoring from Higgins and Pickering, but Diantha works alone, hoping to surprise her husband; she believes that she should—and that she can—reduce Seymore’s social life in such a way as to give him more time to write, and that she could be the intellectual companion he craves. Although her motives seem totally altruistic, she is, in fact, on a deeper level, seeking to empower herself by pleasing her husband and, ultimately, by controlling his activities. Seymore senses this, and his initial reactions are couched in a patronizing tone of supercilious mockery that Diantha must know well. Ever the traditional patriarch, he resents her overt manipulation, quite unaware, of course, that Diantha is rebelling against the strict control he has always exerted on her life.

In Seymore’s absence, Diantha has started taking literature classes in order to understand his writing and, innocently oblivious of Seymore’s high-handed dismissal of the town’s intellectuals as “frump[s]” and “jays” (II, i, 5), she has sought the company of the high-school English teacher. She also attempts to redecorate their home so as bring it in line with her husband’s artistic pretensions; she wants to remove the print or copy of Raphael’s Sistine Madonna that hangs in their living-room, a picture that Seymore enjoys joking about, but then she realizes that she does not know what to put in its place. This transformation, on which she has already embarked, from the traditional wife to the modern New Woman, educated and independent (and so better able to aid her husband), is furthered by Nora’s arrival. Nora finds both Diantha and Mother tired of being the mirror that reflects Seymore’s magnanimity in allowing his artistic urges to be sacrificed for their well being. Diantha’s search for empowerment is broadened and led into new channels by Nora’s decision to set up a birth control league in the town and to name her its president; this newly-found interest gives her a sense of self-worth not related to Seymore and offers her a way out of the undemanding, but frustrating role of submissive incompetence imposed by her husband.

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<sup>43</sup> Bernard Shaw, *Pygmalion: A Romance in Five Acts*, (Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin, 1951), 132.

It is Seymore's Mother who first understands why her son is so angry at the transformations in his wife and his home and she then decides that "we must leave him his bondage" (III, 29). She sadly accepts what she sees to be the obligations of a mother, and following Freudian psychology, assumes responsibility for her son's weakness: "You see, I knew him as a little boy. . . . Perhaps we could have scaled it out of him in his youth; but to take the yearning away now after he's hid behind it all his life . . . Oh, I'm terribly to blame" (III, 33). She recognizes that her son, in order to be happy, must always be the "alien" or the "other" (III, 29). And so she takes it upon herself to convince Diantha where her duty lies, hoping that she "loves [Seymore] enough to be his cross" (III, 33) and that she will follow her example. Diantha takes in only too quickly what is required of her and why; she immediately recognizes as true her mother-in-law's horrified realization that Seymore needs the limitations he has created for himself. Mother's exclamation is charged with inexpressible consequences: "If at this late date you take away the longing, by giving what he's longed for—forcing him to face what he wants—(*shudders*)" (III, 32). Mother, who amuses herself by making rag dolls—one of the highly symbolic elements in the structure of the play—empties a doll of its stuffing and "*flaps the rag*" (III, 32) to show what Seymore would be like without what he considers to be his sacrifices for the benefit of those he loves.

A matriarchal chain is thus created through which the injustices of the patriarchy are given continuity and strength by women's voluntary submission motivated by love and a sense of responsibility to others. The need to choose between freedom and duty to those one loves, that is, the dichotomy of freedom and bondage as posed by Hegel, appears in much of Glaspell's writing; she had dealt graphically with this conflict in her early short story, "The Rules of the Institution" (1914), but Diantha, unlike the protagonist of the earlier story, has no doubts as to how she should behave; once Mother points out to her that Seymore "is so made that he must have a burden" (III, 32), and that she is his burden, the "cross he loves" (III, 33), she accepts the fate that her love of Seymore carries with it. Nora, unable to understand or accept this reversal of feminist values, admits her disappointment and Diantha, in tears, accuses her of ignoring the "nice things—the delightful things and the *great* things" about Seymore (note that she speaks in the abstract, unable to give a single concrete example). She then admits that she is disappointed in herself: "I can't help being—the way I am. Oh, I *wanted* to be different!" (III, 34).

Nora, the Shavian realist, but also a realist in the usual sense who perceives "reality," can only accept defeat and leave Diantha to her chosen fate. Her unobtrusive departure prevents any further discussion of Diantha's tragic decision and avoids all confrontation. She is Glaspell's reply to Ibsen's *The Doll's House*; according to Shaw, family life in that play is based on a fiction

“in which they have been playing at ideal husband and father, wife and mother.”<sup>44</sup> With *Chains of Dew*, Glaspell deconstructs this fiction, all the while aware that no amount of door-slamming will transform it. In a previous play, *Bernice*, Glaspell had created a protagonist who was willing to sacrifice herself posthumously to her husband’s need for wifely submission. In that play, Margaret deciphers Bernice’s action through a series of revelations that provoke her to admire her friend’s circuitous maneuvers, but in *Chains of Dew*, perhaps believing that the Broadway audience she was writing for would not tolerate the sober, introspective musings of a Margaret, she eschewed explanations in favor of a tearful reconciliation. The traditional, patriarchal conception of marriage can only result in a fictitious “happy family” in which woman must be prepared to sacrifice her ambitions to the egotism of man—or, at least, make him believe that her happiness and well-being depend entirely on him.

The Broadway directors Glaspell approached with *Chains of Dew* may have been uncomfortable with its taboo theme of birth control, but they must have been even more incommoded by Seymore, its unmanly protagonist, a man who was not convincing as a banker, a vestry man or a poet, the three activities that defined him in society.<sup>45</sup> Boldly, Glaspell created a husband who does not unambiguously uphold the traditional social values of his Midwestern town, thus making Seymore into a problematic character and drawing attention away from the female protagonist. Seymore would be the perfect example of the existentialist “Other” if this condition did not give him the pleasure that it clearly does. He almost boasts that he is as much an alien in the Midwest as in New York where he is surrounded by fellow artists, and wallows in their inability to understand him, clearly considering himself to be somehow superior:

SEYMORE: Dear Babes!—I’m glad you’ve been so gently handled. It is a bit amusing, though, to see you with this pleased sense of having emancipated yourselves. . . . You’ve never been caught by living.

NORA: You don’t have to be caught by living if you don’t want to be.

SEYMORE: Um-hum. All that shows is that you’ve never been caught. (I, 19, 23)

This superiority, however, does not prevent him from peevishly complaining about his loneliness; when Nora teases him, “It must be lonely to the only grown up person in the world,” he reacts “*violently*,” affirming “It *is* lonely” (I, 19).

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<sup>44</sup> Shaw, “The Quintessence of Ibsenism,” 88.

<sup>45</sup> G.B. Shaw was elected vestryman in London, 1897-1903. However, a vestryman in England was not the same as a vestryman in the Midwest, where the position was linked to a church, and not to the government of a town.

Seymore's bondage to social conventions is opposed to Diantha's drive for individual freedom and development, which she eventually stifles for his sake. Seymore and Diantha exemplify what Jessica Benjamin, in "The Bonds of Love: Rational Violence and Erotic Domination," identifies as a stereotypical male/female dichotomy: the traditional male "overemphasizes self boundaries" while the traditional female posture is that of "relinquishing of self."<sup>46</sup> Seymore, however, has constructed his boundaries or his sense of identity in such a way that he is utterly dependent on Mother and on Diantha—a surrogate mother figure for him—for their configuration. At some level, Seymore must know that he is not a great poet and thus he builds his sense of identity not, as Walt Whitman did, on an image of himself as the great American bard, but on the much less demanding role of martyr to the needs of others. He can then take pleasure in being unable to reach the goal of greatness and the role of "other" becomes his only possible identity. His selfhood is defined by the sacrifice of his non-existent, or at best, mediocre, poetic gift and, never having satisfactorily separated from his Mother, his narcissism cannot recognize the selfhood of either Mother or Diantha. For him, they are not subjects in their own right but objects against which he measures himself;<sup>47</sup> thus he refuses to induct them into his world, to teach them to enjoy his poetry or to consider them his equals. Seymore believes that Mother has had a hard life and it is now his obligation/satisfaction to give her the luxuries that she had been denied when he was a child; as for Diantha, she must be pampered and eternally reduced to the level of a spoilt child, so proving his mastery and manhood to society. Seymore, knowing that the source of his power lies in the two women's compliance, uses the patronizing language of the patriarchy to enslave them. The question he frequently puts to Diantha is self-revelatory: "haven't I always been willing to arrange things so you can be happy? Well, then, isn't it a little ungrateful for you not to be?" (III, 40)

Although our interest in act I is centered on Seymore as the poet *manqué* and on the absent, mysterious Diantha (Nora even asks Seymore if his wife is an invalid), it is Nora who sets the tone of the act and the play. Glaspell sympathetically portrays her as the obsessed worker in the campaign for the legalization of birth control and so indicates to her intended Broadway audience that it is about to witness an "improbable farce," as Noel Coward was to subtitle his *Blithe Spirit* twenty years later. But, although Nora is the image of the flippant young woman whose voice Edna St. Vincent Millay captures so

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<sup>46</sup> Jessica Benjamin, "The Bonds of Love: Rational Violence and Erotic Domination," *The Future of Difference*, eds. Hester Eisenstein and Alice Jardine (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1980), 43.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 45.

unequivocally in her “Fig” poems, she is serious in her commitment to the birth control movement. One can imagine that she could well have “gone back and forth all night on the ferry” and been “very tired” and “very merry”<sup>48</sup> but one cannot imagine her leaving a job unfinished. As Glaspell tells us, she is “*young and vital and charming—devotion to a cause really doesn’t hurt her looks in the least*” (I, 2). Her repartee with the three men, Leon Whittaker, James O’Brien and Seymore, is witty and well-paced and just sufficiently flippant, tinged with a knowledgeable irony, to raise conspiratorial laughs.

Glaspell had written comedies before; many of her short plays—*Suppressed Desires*, *Woman’s Honor*, or *Close the Book*—are serious attempts to reform society through a farcical vision of cherished assumptions. She had turned to a more sober treatment in *Bernice* and *Inheritors*, but she took for granted that Broadway required a lighter touch. Although writing for an audience she did not fully understand, Glaspell felt sufficiently confident to end the play on a note of parody—that was, however, totally missed by the Provincetown subscribers who had so enjoyed the tearful “Silly One’s” exaggerated proclamations of love in the short play *Woman’s Honor* (1918). Diantha’s charade of sobbing submission at the end, if overplayed by an insensitive actress/director could easily antagonize a thinking audience; it could also reduce Diantha to a sentimental heroine who unthinkingly obeys the Zarathustran precept “Let woman be a plaything, pure and fine like a precious stone.”<sup>49</sup> Reading the play, however, we can only sympathize with her and acknowledge the power of the social mores that determine her sacrifice.

Diantha is one of Glaspell’s most complex women and she reveals her creator’s ambivalence in the face of an individual’s duties and obligations with regard to others. She is an amalgam of the New Woman who dares to assert herself, and the older model of the True Woman who upholds the conventions of society. When considered within the spectrum of Glaspell’s women, Diantha must fall somewhere between Bernice, who successfully manipulates her husband’s ego, and Claire, who accepts madness in order to free herself of the institutional conventions she despises.

The modernist rebellion at the chains in which society was bound, what Michael Levenson has called the need to “challenge an unfreedom” is most unambiguously expressed in Glaspell’s next play, *The Verge*.<sup>50</sup> But although *Chains of Dew* is written from the restrained stance of the thoughtful reformer, it is, nonetheless, a play that refuses to conform to established models of

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<sup>48</sup> Edna St. Vincent Millay, *Collected Lyrics*, (New York: Harper & Row, 1969), 95.

<sup>49</sup> Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, 92.

<sup>50</sup> Michael Levenson, Introduction, *The Cambridge Companion to Modernism*, ed. Michael Levenson, (Cambridge University Press, 2002), 2.

playwriting. The *New York Herald* reviewer complained that it was “written with a saucy disregard of the necessities of dramaturgy,”<sup>51</sup> a remark that would not have worried Glaspell at all if she had read George Bernard Shaw’s dismissal of such “necessities” in a 1911 preface: “the manufacture of the ‘well-made play’ is not an art: it is an industry.”<sup>52</sup> Indeed, there was no predictable plot, development or denouement in *Chains of Dew*, no discovery of conventional wrong-doing, no mysterious strangers arriving unexpectedly, no letters, no incriminating evidence. Glaspell does subvert some of these conventions however: both Nora, the birth-control advocate and Whittaker and O’Brien from the *New Nation*, a journal that published Seymore’s poetry, arrive somewhat unexpectedly at Seymore’s Midwestern home. But they had announced their trip and so we, the reader/audience, not only expect them but also relish the dramatic irony of their arrival. As in *Bernice*, crucial understanding of the situation is arrived at by dialogue—between Whitaker and Mother and then Mother and Diantha—and not by some spectacular histrionic event designed to please Broadway audiences.

J. Ellen Gainor<sup>53</sup> notes that the lack of sympathetic direction and the editorial cuts to the text made it difficult for reviewers to recognize Glaspell’s voice in this play; however, a few reviewers did seem to have some intimation of what Glaspell was doing, although, on the whole, they focused on the dilemma of the poet, and not that of his wife. Alison Smith felt that Glaspell was “wabbling dangerously” between “hilarious satire” and “grim sincerity,”<sup>54</sup> while the *New York Herald* critic thoughtfully wondered if “perhaps [*Chains of Dew*] could be enjoyed by many of those living above the spiritual dead line of Washington Square,”<sup>55</sup> thus intuiting Glaspell’s intended audience. The short run of *Chains of Dew* and contemporary accounts, such as that of Edna Kenton or Deutsch and Hanau<sup>56</sup> who barely devote a sentence to the play, added to the lack of a published text, have led today’s scholars of Glaspell’s work, with the exception of Gainor, to virtually ignore it.

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<sup>51</sup> Anon. “Susan Glaspell’s ‘Chains of Dew’ is Sharp Satire.” *New York Herald*, 28 April 1922.

<sup>52</sup> George Bernard Shaw, “Against the Well-Made Play,” in *Modern Theories of Drama: A Selection of Writings on Drama and Theatre, 1840-1990*, ed. George W. Brandt (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998), 102.

<sup>53</sup> J. Ellen Gainor, *Susan Glaspell in Context: American Theater, Culture, and Politics 1915-48*. (Ann Arbor: Michigan University Press, 2001), 193.

<sup>54</sup> Alison Smith, “The New Play,” *New York Evening Globe*, 28 April 1922.

<sup>55</sup> Anon. “Susan Glaspell’s ‘Chains of Dew’ is Sharp Satire.” *New York Herald*, 28 April 1922.

<sup>56</sup> Helen Deutsch and Stella Hanau, *The Provincetown: A Story of the Theatre* (1931), New York: Russell and Russell, 1972.

And yet *Chains of Dew* is a theatrical experiment in modernist thought, easily accessible to audiences not familiar with the innovative devices advocated by Gordon Craig or Wyndham Lewis, and presented with the hope of effecting reform in behavior patterns. It offers a comprehensible exploration of both Freudian and Hegelian notions of the creation of identity: of how we establish our “chains” or our “crosses” and try to make the best of our limitations. The modernist concern with the workings of the mind, with evolution, with freedom and with institutional norms, all part of Susan Glaspell’s thought, are brought to the fore in *Chains of Dew* and examined. Although Diantha and Mother’s submission to Seymore’s will in the final act is basically tragic, Glaspell eschewed the sober tones of Ibsen’s dramas and clothed her characters and their actions in the light, flippant language of Shaw’s comedies. That Diantha’s submission to the institution of marriage worried Glaspell, however, is clear from the fact that she returned to the theme in the novel *Ambrose Holt and Family* where a stark realism replaces the farcical turnings of *Chains of Dew*.

Shaw believed that the popular audience did not like to use its brains, and that only a “masterpiece or two” of the New Drama could revive the London theatre and awaken the audience.<sup>57</sup> On the other side of the Atlantic, Glaspell knew that the Broadway audience she aimed for, like Shaw’s London spectator, also preferred the ease of established patterns. She had hoped to shake her audience out of its lethargy by making it laugh at, or with, her characters and so lead it to reconsider accepted behavior, in particular the double standard of morality which still held and the concomitant lack of freedom for women. Unfortunately, the uninformed and unsupervised cuts and the bad acting and direction made it impossible for the text to generate the meanings, moral and political, with which Glaspell had infused it. If Glaspell had been present during the rehearsals of *Chains of Dew*, she would have been able to adjust and fine-tune the dialogue and the action with regard to both audience and actors—and to control the cutting. *Chains of Dew*, in order to be as successful as her other plays, requires a perceptive, sympathetic director who would know, even without Glaspell standing over her shoulder, how to bring out the humor and the personal drama contained in this play, how to find that “deep level” demanded by modernism, “where audience and writer and player are one.”<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> George Bernard Shaw, “Preface: Mainly about Myself,” in *Man and Superman and Three Other Plays*, (New York: Barnes and Noble Classics, 2004), 11-12.

<sup>58</sup> Glaspell, *The Road to the Temple*, 254.

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