

## Northland Pioneer College Presentation April 22, 2006 Martha C. Carpentier

### Introduction

Prof. Solomonson has asked me to contextualize Glaspell's novel *Brook Evans* for you. Next week you will hear Linda Ben-Zvi, Glaspell's most recent biographer and a wonderful scholar, who no doubt will provide biographical and historical context, so this evening I will discuss the critical context – happily since it's my preferred area of expertise.

Mike Solomonson and I are the only professors who have ever taught *Brook Evans* thus far. We are brave pioneers who have been rewarded by our students' overwhelmingly enthusiastic reactions to this novel, which is amply testified to by the very reason we are gathered here tonight. On reading *Brook Evans*, my students asked the inevitable question anyone must ask – Why haven't we ever heard of this book before? Maybe they'd heard of Susan Glaspell because they read her one-act play *Trifles* in high school, but who knew she wrote some fifty short stories, fourteen plays, and nine novels? Why didn't we know that she won the Pulitzer Prize in 1931 and that her novels were bestsellers? Why isn't *Brook Evans* even in print here in the U.S.? Well, this is all the entrée a professor needs . . .

### Canon

As historical critic Paul Lauter wrote in his influential 1983 article, "Race and Gender in the Shaping of the American Literary Canon," the progressive exclusion of literature by women from the canon was initiated by historical, institutional, and aesthetic processes set in motion in the 1920's because the concerns of women were "of lesser value than those inscribed in canonical books and authors." Lauter further states that "the literary canon is, in short, a means by which culture validates social power" (23).

Virginia Woolf understood in 1928, the very year Glaspell published *Brook Evans*, that the devaluation of literature by women was determined by a value system that privileged men, as she told the second generation of female undergraduates at Newnham College, Cambridge, in her lecture, later published as *A Room of One's Own*: "Speaking crudely, football and sport are 'important'; and the worship of fashion, the buying of clothes 'trivial.'" [As an aside here, I need only point out the importance of the golden dress in *Brook Evans*, as a sign of the mother's sexuality

passed on to her daughter, to see how a woman's value system functions in her fiction] "And these values, [Woolf continues] are inevitably transferred from life to fiction. This is an important book, the critic assumes, because it deals with war. This is an insignificant book because it deals with the feelings of women in a drawing-room" (77).

Glaspell herself was part of the first generation of women to go to college, graduating from Drake University in 1899. Paul Lauter shows that thereafter, from the 1920s through the 1950s, in America women were systematically excluded from academia, with ratios of both women professors and graduates declining in those years. It was also during those years, after the First World War when America was flush with the dawning realization of its hegemonic power on the world stage, that the American canon was sanctified by male literary critics seeking to establish an assertive national identity through an indigenous literature that reflected, as Lauter writes, "the concern that a truly American art be attractive to, embody the values of, masculine culture" (34).

The critics and professors of this period who were defining the canon through their anthologies of American literature and their scholarship, as well as their college lectures, were influenced by formalism, an aesthetic theory which dominated the academy right through the 1960's. Since American formalism derived, via T.S. Eliot, from modernism, a highly allusive, experimental, metaphoric aesthetic was favored – the famous New Critical "complexity, ambiguity, tension, irony" were prized, all conveniently affirming "the status of the literary critic" (Lauter 35) as interpreter. At the same time, some important stylistic components of American fiction – realism and naturalism – were shunted aside. Formalism insisted on isolating texts totally from any external contexts, whether historical, biographical, or generic, putting those styles grounded in historical actuality, such as naturalism, at a disadvantage. For formalists, only the "verbal icon" itself exists as a solitary, ingenious birth.

Lauter further shows another factor leading to a narrowed canon derived from the critical emphasis upon "masterpieces" and the division of literary works into the value-laden categories of "major" and "minor," as anthologies "began to reflect the narrowing focus to fewer 'major' works by fewer 'major' writers" (35). I need only quote to you Arthur Waterman's 1966 death knell rung over Glaspell – "when everything else has been said, we must agree that Susan Glaspell is a minor writer"

(120) – to illustrate the profound impact these prevailing critical attitudes had on the reception of Glaspell’s work.

Since Glaspell had effectively mastered both realist and expressionist styles, the attempt to devalue her work was put to the test. The first step, which had already worked well to marginalize most 19<sup>th</sup>-century American women writers – a derogation of their realistic or “domestic” fiction, aided by superficial readings, as regional, sentimental, written for pay, or to please female audiences.<sup>1</sup> – effectively consigned Glaspell’s nine novels to the dust heap (or, in fact, to the scrap metal pile, since, during WW II the printers’ plates of her novels were melted for ore). And then, fortuitously, Eugene O’Neill came along [well, actually, he was discovered by Glaspell, which was regarded for years as her major contribution to American letters] to affirm the solitary “masterpiece” ideology and eclipse the overtly modernist, expressionistic aesthetic of Glaspell’s Provincetown plays. Even among feminist critics who have re-established Glaspell’s significant contributions to the origins of American drama, her fiction to this day suffers from the formalist bias against what is perceived as its realism and conventionality. Only myself, Prof. Solomonson, and our lucky students know, that this double-standard is itself a fiction.

### **Criticism**

Despite this “divide and conquer” approach to Glaspell’s writing, it evades such easy categorization. It is just a fact that formalism as a method of reading is inadequate to address her works, whether fiction or drama, both of which require nuanced textual readings that can elucidate her modernist renderings of the human psyche, AND historically informed readings to elucidate her lifelong commitment to issues of gender and social justice. The forms of criticism needed to appreciate the depth and richness of Glaspell’s work arose only with the impact of the political movements of the 1960’s on the academy, the subsequent advent of feminist criticism in the 1970’s and the gradual dominance of post-structuralism throughout the 1980’s and 90’s – all forms of criticism that, contrary to formalism, see both writing and reading as practices deeply imbedded in, and determined by, cultural contexts.

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<sup>1</sup> See Judith Fetterley, Introduction to *Provisions: A Reader from 19th-Century American Women Writers* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985), 1-40.

What are the critical theories we need to appreciate *Brook Evans* in particular? Feminist obviously, but feminist theory is not just one monolithic thing. Elaine Showalter long ago denominated at least two main branches: 1) “gynocriticism” which is largely Anglo-American, pragmatic, historical, and cultural – much needed to appreciate the sweep of generations in Glaspell’s work, the changes she portrays in American culture and the evolving position of women; and 2) “gynesis,” largely French in origin, emphasizing the linguistic differences of women’s writing and its psychoanalytic subplots, also necessary to appreciate Glaspell’s inter-generational portrayal of what Freud termed the “family romance,” but instead of the father/mother/son triad of the Freudian paradigm, Glaspell gives us the mother/father/daughter story that determines women’s lives.

Psychoanalytic criticism of course must begin with Freudian theory. For Freud it is the castrated, disempowered mother who stands as the cautionary icon through which both boys and girls assimilate their gender and thus move into adulthood under patriarchal culture. For both little boys and girls, mother is the first love object. At a certain age, when the boy sees his mother’s lack of penis, he fears for his own castration; henceforth he must give up any identification with the female, dissociating himself from mother, and he must also give up his desire for her and the competitive relation with his father over her possession. In doing so, he transfers his desire to other women, and is successfully socialized into a heterosexual norm in which he ultimately achieves his “manhood,” i.e., the phallus and all it signifies. For the little girl, the castrated mother prefigures her own destiny, and in her rage at her mother, she transfers her affections, longings, and ideals to her father, and thus, like the boy, becomes socialized into a heterosexual norm, but unlike the boy, a norm in which, rather than evading her castration, she per force accepts it. As Adrienne Rich writes, “a mother’s victimization does not merely humiliate her, it mutilates the daughter who watches her for clues as to what it means to be a woman” (243).

Interestingly, in Freud’s account, the daughter blames her mother for her castration and is blind to the father’s, or rather, patriarchy’s determinative role – and that is precisely Brook Evans’ story, as she rejects her mother and turns adoringly to her father, a rigid man of the Bible, Caleb Evans, and his ally, the virginal mother and missionary, Sylvia Waite. Where we need the further elucidation of feminist psychoanalytic theory, such as Nancy Chodorow’s, is to understand the enduring pre-oedipal mother-daughter connection that Glaspell portrays in *Brook Evans*, and

that Freud, always emphasizing the father, could not see. The pre-oedipal period is a time of primary narcissism in which the infant cannot distinguish between itself and the mother who fills its needs. This is further complicated in girls because of the mother's narcissistic over-identification with her daughter; thus the pre-oedipal attachment of daughter to mother persists into adolescence, sustaining all "the intensity, ambivalence, and boundary confusion" of an earlier period (Chodorow 96-97). As Adrienne Rich writes, "Our personalities seem dangerously to blur and overlap with our mothers'; and, in a desperate attempt to know where mother ends and daughter begins, we perform radical surgery" (236). Brook's bid for autonomy and selfhood requires breaking away from the stifling love of her mother, yet she is torn by guilt and loss at the same time, until she reaches mature adulthood when, as a result of a passionate love affair, she experiences a revelation that allows her to rediscover the mother (and thus herself). Glaspell brilliantly coins the neologism "tensity" to describe the see-sawing love and anxiety between mother and daughter that she portrays so intimately in this novel.

### **Mothering**

In 1922 Susan Glaspell left the Provincetown Players and her Greenwich Village life, and accompanied her husband, George Cram Cook, on a two-year stay in Greece that ended with Cook's death in 1924. During those years and after Glaspell returned frequently to her native Davenport, Iowa, to nurse her increasingly ill mother, who died in 1929. Published in 1928, *Brook Evans* was written during this period and expresses Glaspell's sadness over the loss of her mother, and perhaps her guilt at her necessary abandonment of her mother to pursue a life of writing.

Most of the extant letters from Glaspell to her mother were written from Greece. These letters are caring but read like detailed travelogues, a fact that speaks for itself, but one letter contains a passage that reveals Glaspell's awareness of her mother's sacrifice for her and narcissistic identification with her, significant themes in her portrayal of the mother Naomi in *Brook Evans*:

The thing I do not like about it is that I am so far away from you at home, and I know how hard that is for you .... Yet I know you will be glad for me, at having this chance. You have always been so wonderful in that, taking

pleasure in the thing that was good for me, even when it was most hard for you. Don't think I haven't appreciated that.<sup>2</sup>

There are even fewer letters to Glaspell from her mother, Alice Keating Glaspell, but there is one, written on the publication of Glaspell's first novel in 1909, *The Glory of the Conquered*, where, again, both Alice's support for Glaspell's writing and her narcissistic over-identification with her daughter are clear:

I think it must have been over a minute before I opened it – and thought of all it meant to me. This book born and growing amid great physical pain and labor as a mother suffers at childbirth, so you my dear one many times suffered while bringing this book to life and none knows this better than your mother but now the time of travail is over and we will enjoy the fruit .... Susie dear – I think it is a wonderful book and I don't think this just because it is mine, the product of my girl's brain.<sup>3</sup>

Perhaps Glaspell found this irritating, as any daughter might, but her sensitive portrayal of Naomi shows that she understood the reasons why a Victorian mother, having given up her own teaching career to marry – and, one senses from Prof. Ben-Zvi's biography, not very happily – might want to live vicariously through her much freer, modern daughter. That Alice portrays the book as the birth of a child shows how bound together mother and daughter are in the body and issues of sexuality, also brilliantly portrayed in Glaspell's novel.

Mothering has been the focus of much feminist critical theory, both “gynesis” – where it is central to the work of feminist philosophers Luce Irigaray and Julia Kristeva – and “gynocriticism,” beginning with Virginia Woolf's famous call in *A Room of One's Own* to establish a women's literary tradition, for, she wrote, “a woman writing thinks back through her mothers” (101). Modeling herself on Woolf, her literary foremother, the great American feminist poet Adrienne Rich wrote in her ground-breaking book, *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution*: “the cathexis between mother and daughter – essential, distorted, misused – is the great unwritten story. Probably there is nothing in human nature

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<sup>2</sup> Susan Glaspell to Alice Keating Glaspell, 18 June 1922, Susan Glaspell Papers, The Henry W. Berg and Albert A. Berg Collection of English and American Literature, New York Public Library.

<sup>3</sup> Alice Keating Glaspell to Susan Glaspell, 24 February 1909, Susan Glaspell Papers, Berg Collection, New York Public Library.

more resonant with charges than the flow of energy between two biologically alike bodies, one of which has lain in amniotic bliss inside the other, one of which has labored to give birth to the other. The materials are there for the deepest mutuality and the most painful estrangement” (225-6).

Rich also wrote that in *To the Lighthouse*, Virginia Woolf created “what is still the most complex and passionate vision of mother-daughter schism in modern literature. It is significantly, one of the very few literary documents in which a woman has portrayed her mother as a central figure” (227). How tragic that *Brook Evans*, another equally “complex and passionate vision of mother-daughter schism,” published by her own countrywoman only one year after *To the Lighthouse*, had been so effectively silenced that in 1972 when Rich began writing *Of Woman Born*, she did not even know of its existence.

### **Structure**

Finally, I would like to say a few words about the importance of generic criticism to an adequate appreciation of Glaspell’s writing – and this is the direction in which my own work is increasingly going. As I’ve said, Glaspell’s creative fertility and freedom from generic constraints worked against her. She could not be pigeon-holed, so the magnitude of her achievement had to be diminished to fit her into pre-existing critical categories. Was she a playwright or a novelist? Was she an expressionist or a realist? Weren’t her short stories just written to pay the rent? How could a woman who wrote prodigiously and successfully in THREE genres, have produced *any* masterpieces at all?

In my 2001 book, *The Major Novels of Susan Glaspell*, I wrote that Glaspell’s novels were “just as radical as her drama” and not “formally conservative” as had been assumed (6), but rather, the novels from 1915 on, and particularly *Brook Evans* and *Fugitive’s Return*, showed Glaspell’s mature ability to “meld . . . fictional realism with the expressionistic playwrighting techniques” (8) she had learned during the Provincetown Players years.

Until now I have been the only person saying this, but Prof. Solomonson and his students’ rendering of Glaspell’s novel *Brook Evans* into a play is PROOF of what I’ve been saying, and it’s a marvelous affirmation for me as a scholar. Mike, you and your students must have sensed that, despite its ostensible division into chapters, *Brook Evans* is dramatically structured just like a three-act play –

beginning in 1888 when Naomi is eighteen, focusing intensely on the period when her daughter Brook is eighteen and Naomi 38; climaxing in Chapters 30-33 (which is two-thirds the way through the novel) when Brook's son, Evans, is eighteen and she herself is 38, with Brook's internal revelation of her mother's meaning to her life; and ending with a denouement that might just as well be termed an epilogue, in which Brook's son comes to terms with his mother and grandmother's past. Glaspell's novels are overtly dramatic because she is primarily interested in people, in the inter-generational, psychological conflicts that form the heart of all great drama, whether it be *Oedipus*, *Hamlet*, or *Long Day's Journey Into Night*.

There are no long passages of omniscient narration, exposition, or lyrical descriptions of scenery in Glaspell's novels; just like her plays, they rely primarily on dialogue, but the novels had the advantage for Glaspell of allowing her to explore the internal monologue more fully, which is very difficult to sustain for any length of time on the stage. Glaspell is not a metaphoric writer in the formalist sense; coming from the expressionistic theater, her use of symbolism even in her novels is invariably related to *things* – to the arts and artifacts that encompass women's lives, and that so readily translate into expressive props and sets: “trifles” such as quilts, clothing, dolls, boxes and trunks, faded letters tied with ribbon, coal scuttles, looms, and rocking chairs.

In conclusion I am very excited to see what you have done here, as I'm sure we all are. As soon as I heard about Prof. Solomonson and his students at Northland Pioneer College rendering Glaspell's novel as a play, I felt there was something eerily fated or destined about it, as if Glaspell's beneficent ghost hovers over all our efforts. You MUST know that she wrote a play, *Inheritors*, about a small mid-western college – okay, it was set in the cornfields of Iowa, not the desert canyons of Arizona, but it was founded by pioneers! Prof. Solomonson, I know your students must have felt what mine did – Glaspell's work speaks directly to their lives and their experiences. In some ways, we have all lived a Glaspell novel or play, and she speaks to us with a voice that is perhaps even more relevant today than in her own time.

Thank you.