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Davenport, Iowa, in the early part of the century, was a surprising city. Though situated in a conservative part of the country and reflecting that fact in a stern and unforgiving moralism, it also retained something of the radicalism of its own past. In the words of Floyd Dell, who was raised there and who later became an influential figure in the literary world first of Chicago and then New York, it was ‘largely German and Jewish, with an 1848 European revolutionary foundation, and a liberal and socialist superstructure. There was also some native American mysticism in the picture, a mysticism which blossomed in the 30s and 40s, a curious religious expression of romantic libertarian ideas.’ The town had ‘the bravado of an old Mississippi river-port, and the liberal “cosmopolitan” atmosphere of a place that is in touch with European influences. It had its nose not too closely pressed against the grindstone of “practical” fact. It had an intelligentsia, who knew books and ideas. It even had some live authors.’

A curious mixture of small town prejudice and intellectual sophistication, Davenport proved both liberating and oppressive to those who challenged its conservative mores in terms of its radical tradition. The contradictions went deep, in its rebels no less than in its leading citizens.

Those writers which it produced, if scarcely fostered, people such as Floyd Dell, George Cram Cook and, perhaps most significantly, Susan Glaspell, never entirely lost their attachment to pioneer virtues, though they were disposed to translate these variously into a spiritual equality of opportunity (which at times they incautiously described as socialism), a radical anarchism (by which the individual chose to explore the frontiers of experience), or a Nietzschian egotism (which, particularly in the case of George Cram Cook, might be rooted in recognisably American notions of intellectual, moral and physical self-sufficiency but which pulled him constantly towards rather older models of the relationship between the self and its setting).

The fact is that during the first decades of the century, when these three writers were maturing, America itself was changing rapidly. Like so many other Americans, they moved from the small town to the large city and experienced there social and artistic influences which changed them profoundly. As much as any other figures they recognised this process as being of critical significance, as signalling, in particular, a renaissance in the arts of which they were at first simply reporters (all three writing for the newspapers) but eventually major figures. Inlanders, raised in the very heart of a nation which had prided itself for so long on its sturdy independence of
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Europe, they found themselves eventually on the very edge of the continent, alert to the new developments from overseas but at the same time creating their own intensely American art.

Susan Glaspell was born in Davenport in 1876 (though, somewhat less plausibly, a later date – 1882 – has also been proposed). She came from pioneer stock, her family arriving with the first settlers in 1835. After graduating from Drake University, in Des Moines, she became a reporter on the Des Moines Daily News, but in her own mind was already a writer. Her first stories, several of which she wrote while still at university, were published in Youth’s Companion, and in 1901 she abandoned newspaper work to return to Davenport and become a full-time writer, producing stories for such magazines as Harper’s Bazaar.

For the most part trite and sentimental, these suggested little of the originality and power which were to mark her work in the theatre. Much the same could be said of many of her novels. The first, The Glory of the Conquered, which appeared in 1909, concerned the tragic love affair of an artist and a scientist. When he goes blind, infected by a laboratory organism, she struggles to master the techniques which will enable her to act as his eyes and thus forward his work. When he dies, before her scheme can be put into practice, she realises that the real memorial to him will be her own paintings which express precisely that sense of life to which he, too, had wished to bear witness. Glaspell’s own unease with the book is apparent in what must surely be the most bizarre publisher’s note ever to appear. In reprinting the novel, the English publisher prefaced it with a note which observes that: ‘Although “The Glory of the Conquered” is, in the author’s opinion, a less finished and mature work than “Fidelity”, its reception in America – measured, at least, by sales – has been even more enthusiastic than that of some of her subsequent work. Without committing themselves either, on the one hand, to the author’s or, on the other, to the public, judgement on this work, the Publishers feel that it is only fair to point out that it was Susan Glaspell’s first novel.’ In one go, it seems, they succeeded in undermining both her first novel and her later books.

But the direction of Susan Glaspell’s thought, and, indeed, life was in for a change. In 1909 she met first George Cram Cook and later Floyd Dell who had together started the Monist Club in Davenport. Both men were radical, though in different ways, and the Monist Club a forum for a grab bag of assorted ideas: both were also united in their conviction that things were changing, culturally and socially. Though scarcely free of their own romantic absurdities, they set out to rescue Susan from her sentimentalities and certainly her second novel, The Visioning (1911), touches on the issue of feminist socialism. But the critical change in her life came as a result of her love affair with Cook, a married man with two children. In a way such an affair was of a piece with her new views. The love which she had previously
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sanctified in her stories as the symbol of human selflessness and spiritual completion now acquired a radical tinge. Davenport society was shocked and, to judge by the frequency with which she herself dealt with the subject of adultery in novels and plays, she was not untouched by a sense of guilt. But the right, indeed in some sense the responsibility, to challenge convention and insist on a freedom of thought, emotion and action, was in tune with a society now finally turning its back on the old century. When the divorce came through she married Cook, in 1913, and they moved first to Greenwich Village and then Provincetown. Her third novel, ironically called Fidelity (1915), in many ways stood as a justification of her own actions, telling the story, as it does, of a woman who has an affair with a married man but whose fidelity is ultimately neither to marriage nor to her new relationship but to a sense of integrity which she will not surrender.

The marriage was Cook's third. The son of a wealthy Davenport family, he was, from their point of view, wildly eccentric. Not only did he develop radical views (in fact not wholly out of place in a town with a history of radical thought) but he turned his back on the family wealth in an attempt to be a subsistence farmer -- a Midwestern Thoreau. He was frequently drunk and a womaniser for much of his life. But he had an energy and an enthusiasm which was compelling and a talent for recognising the potential of others. Working as a reviewer for the Chicago Evening Post he observed and helped underwrite the Chicago Renaissance. In New York he and Susan Glaspell played midwife to the American theatre.

In some sense Cook seems to have been the fulfilment of his own romantic dreams. His diaries offer an account of a man who saw himself as a cross between Thoreau and Byron, itemising the crops on his farm but seeking to transform a prosaic reality with his imagination. An admirer of Nietzsche -- an enthusiasm which he shared with Eugene O'Neill -- he had moved from Harvard and Heidelberg to selling vegetables; Davenport was not amused. At thirty-two, his first wife left him after three years of quarrels and he seems to have reached the point of mental breakdown; indeed the fierce energy which drove him throughout his life was not always easily distinguishable from madness. A second marriage gave him a family but scarcely peace of mind. That came, at least in some limited degree, in his relationship with a woman whose own life was already being transformed by travel to Europe and by the new forces at large in American society.

When Susan Glaspell moved to Chicago it was fast becoming the literary capital of America. Still, then, hog butcher to the world, as Carl Sandburg hailed it in his poem called 'Chicago', it had the crude energy of a city on the make. It attracted talent from all over the Midwest and, coming together at a time when literary no less than social values were in a state of flux, such young writers saw themselves as part of a new spirit in American writing. For Edna Ferber, born in Kalamazoo, Michigan, the city seemed full of
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talent and Susan Glaspell was among the names she recited with a sense of awe. ‘Carl Sandburg was writing his powerful lusty Chicago poems. Ben Hecht was living there, trying hard to be Rabelaisian . . . Charlie MacArthur, brought up as a missionary’s son, showing his rebellion by a series of puckish pranks; Floyd Dell, living his moon-calf days; Susan Glaspell, Llewellyn Jones, Sherwood Anderson; and Harriet Monroe with the face of a New England school teacher; Maxwell “Bogie” Bodenheim, striding along Michigan Avenue . . . a chap called Ring Lardner . . . ’3 Add to that list Theodore Dreiser, Sherwood Anderson, Edgar Lee Masters and Vachel Lindsay and claims for a Chicago Renaissance seem legitimate enough. Some of those figures were Chicago born and bred; others, like Cook and Glaspell, came from small-town America. Sherwood Anderson was from Camden, Ohio, Vachel Lindsay from Springfield, Illinois, Edgar Lee Masters from Garnett, Kansas, Dreiser from Terre Haute, Indiana, Ring Lardner from Niles, Michigan and Sandburg from Galesburg, Illinois. Some came from even further afield. Maurice Brown, who founded the Little Theatre, came from England and Francis Hackett, editor of the Friday Literary Review (a section of the Chicago Evening Post), which first appeared in 1909, from Ireland. But Harriet Monroe, whose Poetry magazine, founded in 1912, was a central feature of the Chicago Renaissance, was actually born in the city whose literary reputation she did so much to establish, and it was the second issue of that magazine which included a poem by John Reed (himself from Portland, Oregon), who was later to emerge as a crucial figure in New York cultural life and a friend and colleague of Cook and Glaspell.

Chicago developed its own version of Bohemian life and even its own version of the Latin Quarter where Thorstein Veblen lived and where Floyd Dell, himself editor of the Friday Literary Review after the departure of Francis Hackett, became a major influence. H. L. Mencken praised the city for all aspects of its new-found cultural vitality, including within his praise its new critical establishment. But in fact literary criticism seems to have concerned itself rather less with scrupulous analysis than with a romantic self-exploration. Thus Dell, in offering a book for review, advised, ‘here is a book about China. Now don’t send me an article about China but one about yourself.’4 Cook obliged by offering criticism in which his own experiences were invoked as metaphor and moral exemplar. Thus, he observed that, ‘There is a glow of civilized satisfaction . . . in clearing up a rank, neglected piece of land, converting into serviceable firewood with a sharp axe the fallen trees which lie cluttering the earth, putting a well-wetted scythe through patches of tall weeds, raking the rubbish out of the grass and giving it to clean fire. And so is there a satisfaction in the work of clearing accumulated rubbish from an intellectual field.’5 That process was going on in the culture at large. The populists had shaken the political assumptions of
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late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century America, as the muckrakers challenged the social and economic practices of big business. Political and sexual radicalism were on the agenda, at least for those who saw themselves as playing a central role in ushering in a new era in social and artistic affairs, even if that radicalism was often traced to its roots in national traditions rather than foreign theories: whosoever would be a man must be a non-conformist. In 1913 Dell defined both his own principles and those of Cook and Glaspell when he asserted, in an editorial essay on ‘Literature and Life’, that ‘Science has its own purpose, and so has philosophy; but literature exists to encourage human beings to be human. The masters of prose fiction and of poetry in every age have been those who, while having the highest conception of order afforded by their generation, have nevertheless exalted the individual with his follies, his crimes, and his intractable aspirations above that conception of order. The poets have always preached the gospel of disorder. The novelists from Fielding to Galsworthy have spoken on behalf of the man at odds with society.’ That, essentially, remained Susan Glaspell’s theme throughout her career, and although at that time she and Cook saw themselves primarily as novelists, Chicago was also changing the shape of drama. In 1900 a theatre was founded at Jane Addam’s Hull House. In keeping with an institution whose origins lay in a social concern, it favoured plays which addressed public issues. It also placed an emphasis on Chicago writers (including Kenneth Goodman and Ben Hecht), but it was Maurice Browne’s Little Theatre which most seized Susan Glaspell’s imagination. The declared aim was to create and produce a poetic drama and to provoke a ‘free discussion of life and the arts’ which, provided that the notion of a poetic drama could be distinguished from verse drama, would have appealed to a writer who was drawn equally to the force of dramatic metaphor and to contemplation of life as an abstract force.

For Floyd Dell the signs that things were on the move were clear everywhere. The genteel tradition was a thing of the past; a new energy was apparent in the arts and more especially in poetry and theatre. As he explained in his autobiography:

The year 1912 was really an extraordinary year, in America as well as Europe. It was the year of intense woman-suffragist activity. In the arts it marked a new era. Color was everywhere – even in neckties. The Lyric Year, published in New York, contained Edna St. Vincent Millay’s ‘Renascence’. In Chicago, Harriet Monroe founded Poetry. Vachel Lindsay suddenly came into his own with ‘General William Booth Enters Into Heaven’, and commenced to give back to his land in magnificent chanted poetry its own barbaric music. ‘Hindle Wakes’ startled New York, as it was later to startle
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Chicago. The Irish Players came to America. It was then that plans were made for the Post-Impressionist Show which revolutionized American ideas of art. In Chicago, Maurice Browne started the Little Theatre. One could go on with the evidence of a New Spirit come suddenly to birth in America.7

Just as in New York the young Eugene O'Neill was to make repeated visits to the Irish Players so, in Chicago, Glaspell and Cook were struck by the implications for a native theatre of the visit of the Dublin company to the Little Theatre: ‘Quite possibly there would have been no Provincetown Players had there not been Irish Players. What we saw done for Irish life he wanted for American life – no stage conventions in the way of projecting with the humility of true feeling.’8

Chicago remained an important centre for a good many years after Cook, Glaspell and Dell moved to New York but the exodus to the east was a steady one. Edgar Lee Masters, Sherwood Anderson, Theodore Dreiser, Ring Lardner and Ben Hecht all left between 1919 and 1924. Poetry magazine continued but no longer with the same enthusiasm or effect. Even the Little Theatre closed in 1917, though by then those it inspired had already begun the creation of other more vital centres in New York.

Indeed, by 1912 New York, too, was in a state of ferment. Politically, The Masses and the New Republic were challenging values and assumptions while Mabel Dodge had returned from Europe enthused by the Futurists and determined to preside over a cultural revolution. A year later the Armory Show exposed America to the excitement and innovations of European modernism. 1913 was also the year of Walter Lippmann's A Preface to Politics and of the Paterson strike pageant, a huge drama organised by John Reed to support the striking miners of Paterson, New Jersey. Reed himself was only one year out of Harvard when he reached Greenwich Village which Max Eastman called the American Bohemia or gipsy minded Latin Quarter. He expressed a radical strain in that Bohemia but Greenwich Village represented more than this. In particular it came to stand for the determination of women not to be trapped in the roles offered to them. Sometimes such a concern had a radical edge; sometimes it was studiously apolitical, claiming spiritual rather than social equality.

Cook and Glaspell moved to New York in 1913, to a Greenwich Village alive with every kind of literary and political faction. Apostles of free love, communism, feminism, and anarchism sat in cafés along with artists and writers. Though fiercely divided amongst themselves, they were united against convention. A decade later they would have met in Paris; now they created their Bohemia in lower Manhattan or, when the summer became too oppressive, the seaside cottages on the extreme edge of Massachusetts Bay, in Provincetown. But, to Susan Glaspell, whatever their views on art
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or social organisation, they remained in some degree tied to a model of life which had its origins in other, more simple necessities. As she explained:

We were supposed to be a sort of ‘special’ group – radical, wild. Bohemians, we have been called. But it seems to me we were a particularly simple people, who sought to arrange life for the thing we wanted to do, needing each other as protection against complexities, yet living as we did because of an instinct for the old, old things, to have a garden, and neighbors, to keep up the fire and let the cat in at night. None of us had much money, these were small houses we lived in: they had been fishermen’s before they were ours. Most of us were from families who had other ideas – who wanted to make money, played bridge, voted the republican ticket, went to church, thinking one should be like every one else. And so, drawn together by the thing we really were, we were as a new family; we lent each other money, worried through illnesses, ate together when a cook had left, talked about our work. Each could be himself, that was perhaps the real thing we did for one another.9

This group was by no means homogeneous. It consisted of the aesthetes from Mabel Dodge’s salon together with the more militantly revolutionary who advocated free love and wished to smash the existing social and political system; so Hutchins Hapgood was joined by Louise Bryant and John Reed. But somehow common cause was found not only in resisting the old but in creating the new.

In New York many of them met at the Liberal Club on Macdougall Street which was run by Henrietta Rudman as a meeting place for those of radical persuasion. From time to time they staged self-mocking skits and the popularity of these led to the formation of the Washington Square Players in a bookshop next door to the club. Their first production was Lord Dunsany’s The Glittering Gate. In February, 1915, they moved to the Bandbox Theatre where they staged their first full season, a mixture of European and original American plays.

Jig Cook spoke the first word of the first production: ‘I’ve had enough of this!’ It was an appropriate announcement of the new mood, though when he and Susan wrote a play together which satirised the new vogue for Freudian analysis – Suppressed Desires – the Washington Square Players could find no space for it and as a result an impromptu performance was staged, in 1915, in the Hapgood house – along with Constancy, a barely concealed account of the love affair between John Reed and Mabel Dodge. The author was Neith Boyce and the designer, Robert Edmond Jones. So began the Provincetown Players, a group which effectively changed the direction of American drama. Indeed, in many ways it marked the birth of the American theatre in its modern form, more especially when the plays
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(together with two more: Change your Style by Jig Cook and Contemporaries by Wilber Steele) were repeated in the old wharf at Provincetown, a building owned by Mary Vorse and specially converted as a makeshift theatre. The following spring further new scripts were forthcoming, among them a play by a young writer with a trunkful of unproduced works – Eugene O’Neill. The play was Bound East for Cardiff and Susan Glaspell, after hearing him read it aloud, commented that now ‘we knew what we were for’. At a meeting held in September, 1916, they decided to call the new group the Provincetown Players and, at O’Neill’s suggestion, called the theatre which they planned to open on MacDougal Street in New York, The Playwrights’ Theatre. The announcement of their first New York season was in effect a manifesto.

The present organisation is the outcome of a group of people interested in the theatre, who gathered spontaneously during two summers at Provincetown, Mass., for the purpose of writing, producing and acting their own plays. The impelling desire of the group was to establish a stage where playwrights of sincere, poetic, literary and dramatic purpose could see their plays in action and superintend their production without submitting to the commercial manager’s interpretation of public taste. Equally, it was to afford an opportunity for actors, producers, scenic and costume-designers to experiment with a stage of extremely simple resources – it being the idea of the Players that elaborate settings are unnecessary to bring out the essential qualities of a good play.¹⁰

Floyd Dell welcomed the idea of the literary collaboration between Jig Cook and Susan Glaspell since, as he later wrote, ‘each had something the other tremendously needed. Susan’s humor, story-telling capacity and sheer literary expertness’, he assumed, ‘conjoined with George’s magnificent ideas and brave truthfulness, should make a masterpiece. If Susan could put her remarkable gifts at the service of truth instead of romantic illusion, if George could have at his command words that raced and danced instead of groped and stumbled, that would make a book.’¹¹ In fact most of Cook’s originality and energy went into the creation of the theatre, while Susan Glaspell was less liberated by finding a co-author (Suppressed Desires was an amusing satire of contemporary fads and little more), than by working in a genre whose own assumptions were new to her and which was anyway in a state of flux. Their own discovery of a talent as raw and original as that of Eugene O’Neill, who wandered into their company at precisely the moment when they were looking for new plays, meant that she had the inspiration of working beside someone whose ideas were as original as her own. His subsequent career and manifest importance to the development of American drama has tended to eclipse the reputation of Susan Glaspell. However, not
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merely was she seen at the time as a writer of comparable stature, in some ways her plays were more carefully structured (Trifles being a case in point) and more daringly original (The Outside and The Verge playing dangerous but original games with character, language and plot) than many of O'Neill’s early efforts.

It remains true that Susan Glaspell is unlikely to have turned to the theatre without the influence of her husband but she brought to her new career a freshness of vision and a challenging aesthetic and social perspective absent from her novels and which Cook’s own dramatic efforts never achieved. Following the success of their first season he arbitrarily announced a new play by his wife for the 1916 season. Apart from her collaboration over Suppressed Desires (1915), she had never written a play before and had none to offer; but within ten days Trifles was receiving its first run-through. Rehearsals began the next day. She has explained the process of writing the play in The Road to the Temple:

So I went out on the wharf, sat alone on one of our wooden benches without a back, and looked a long time at that bare little stage.

After a time the stage became a kitchen – a kitchen there all by itself. I saw just where the stove was, the table, and the steps going upstairs. Then the door at the back opened, and people all bundled up came in – two or three men, I wasn’t sure which, but sure enough about the two women, who hung back, reluctant to enter that kitchen. When I was a newspaper reporter out in Iowa, I was sent down-state to do a murder trial, and I never forgot going into the kitchen of a woman locked up in town. I had meant to do it as a short story, but the stage took it for its own, so I hurried in from the wharf to write down what I had seen. Whenever I got stuck, I would run across the street to the old wharf, sit in that leaning little theater under which the sea sounded, until the play was ready to continue. Sometimes things written in my room would not form on the stage, and I must go home and cross them out. ‘What playwrights need is a stage,’ said Jig, ‘their own stage.’

In Provincetown they had that stage.

Trifles (1916) is deservedly Susan Glaspell’s best-known play. Indeed, for many people it is the only Glaspell play with which they are familiar. Much reprinted and for many years a favourite with amateur companies, it was also an ideal play for the Provincetown Players. Its small cast and simple set and perhaps even more its hermetic atmosphere (unsurprising given the circumstances of its composition) suited the Wharf Theatre where it opened on August 8, 1916, with Susan Glaspell and George Cram Cook in the cast.

The play begins with a stage bereft of characters. The set, a gloomy disorganised kitchen, offers a compacted image of the lives of those who had
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lived there, its detailed realism representing a cipher to be decoded by the process of the play. Those who first enter this space are men. They carry authority, both in terms of their rank and their manner and they are precisely charged with ‘reading’ the text of the scene which confronts them. As Sheriff and County Attorney they have come to interpret, to explicate the tableau which confronts them. The women who accompany them are assumed to have no role outside their function as wives. They have come to collect a few clothes for the woman who, we learn, is held in jail for the suspected murder of her husband. To the neighbour who had first stumbled on the killing, they are prone to ‘worrying over trifles’. Questions of meaning and significant action are presumed to be the preserve of men, as is the administration of justice and the conduct of business. In a few brief exchanges Glaspell establishes the nature of social power in this community as she does the conventions of social relationships. It is plain that women are granted no insight and no rational capacity as they are conceded no function beyond the merely domestic. They hesitate to communicate their models of social experience rather as the woman writer had historically accepted exclusion from the theatre as though her vision could have no public utility.

The ‘action’ takes place in the kitchen, the presumed preserve of women and as such is discounted by those who investigate the crime as being of no significance, containing no meaning, hinting at no experience of any relevance. It is, however, the very ‘trifles’ of domestic life which the men so casually dismiss that contain the real clues to the despair, the anxiety and the tension which in all probability explain the crime which so baffles them. It is not simply that supposedly trained observers fail to realise the significance of the details which confront them, but that their own male arrogance stands between them and understanding. Their myopia is a product of a more fundamental failure – a failure of human concern and emotional sensitivity. That failure is precisely at the root of the crime which they set out to investigate.

There is in fact very little action in the play in a conventional sense. The crime has already been committed, the discovery effected, the arrest completed. We are presented almost with a painterly tableau and as the play progresses our attention is slowly directed around the picture. For Susan Glaspell, character is action as she slowly creates the identities of two people who never appear – the murdered man and his wife. It is a device which she was later to use in both Bernice (1919) and Alison’s House (1930). In Trifles, the same slow accumulation of detail, which leads the women to understand the motive for the crime, also constitutes Glaspell’s dramatic strategy as she reconstitutes the self-destructive introspection of John Wright which had slowly overwhelmed the youthful vivacity of his wife. And buried within what appears to be a conventional detective story, which itself