

# A Jury of Her Peers



## INTRODUCTION

### BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF SUSAN GLASPELL

Born in 1876 in Davenport, Iowa, Susan Glaspell grew up in a community that did not believe in women's rights to education and employment. Glaspell rejected these ideas, and attended college at Drake University where she excelled at debate competitions among a primarily male student body. After graduating, Glaspell took a position as a journalist. Through this job, Glaspell was exposed to the historical case on which *A Jury of Her Peers*, and her similar play *Trifles*, are based. After seeing the woman in this case convicted for murdering a cruel husband, Glaspell abandoned her interests in journalism. She turned her attention to theater. Through her involvement in Davenport's theater group, Glaspell met George Cook, her future husband. After their marriage, the pair moved to New York. Cook, like Glaspell, was an artist and activist, and in New York City the pair became an integral part of America's avant-garde movement. The pair also spent time on Cape Cod where they began the Provincetown Players theater organization. Glaspell wrote plays for the company and acted in several productions. During this time, she wrote the play *Trifles* (1916), which was later followed by the story *A Jury of Her Peers* (1917) on the same topic. Her other innovative and forward-thinking work includes *Inheritors* (1921), which is often considered America's first modern historical drama, and *The Verge* (1921), one of the earliest American expressionist pieces. When Glaspell and Cook's theater company became "too successful," the pair left the project behind to seek new spaces for their innovative work. They moved to Delphi, Greece, but Glaspell moved back to Cape Cod in 1924 after Cook's death. Glaspell never fully recovered from this loss, struggling with alcoholism and depression until she died on July 27, 1948.

### HISTORICAL CONTEXT

First-Wave Feminism is the term for the origins of the movement in the early 20th century, a time when, in America, Feminism was strongly associated with the avocation for women's suffrage. This was accompanied by other political agendas, such as the fight for equal employment opportunities for women. These political-based Feminist agendas made the movement "main-stream" for the first time in history. First-Wave Feminism often took the form of marches, protest, and artistic and literary productions. Susan Glaspell's work is ahead of its time compared to the Feminist agenda of her day. She focused on more diverse aspects of social inequality than these primary political issues. As a result, Feminists revived Glaspell's work in the 1970s when her discussions of inequalities in the

private and political spheres again gained the interest and admiration of Feminists.

### RELATED LITERARY WORKS

America's avant-garde movement began in the 1910s in New York City and Susan Glaspell is considered one of the forerunners of the movement. The thinkers and artists in the movement emphasized the importance of experimentation in art, breaking away from traditional rules and expectations across multiple artistic genres. Other American avant-garde artists included Upton Sinclair (*The Jungle* (1906) and *The Brass Check* (1919)), Emma Goldman (anarchist writer and political activist), and John Reed (*Ten Days That Shook The World* (1919)). These other artists were Glaspell's friends and colleagues who shared and read each other's works. Later on, Glaspell separated from the avant-garde artists in New York City when she co-founded the Provincetown Players. She led this group, which formed a new social and intellectual circle with her at the forefront. She is credited with discovering other playwrights through her leadership of this theater company, including the famous playwright Eugene O'Neill (*Anna Christie* (1920), *Strange Interlude* (1928), and *Long Day's Journey Into Night* (1941)). Other friends and colleagues in Provincetown included Edna St. Vincent Millay (Pulitzer Prize for Poetry (1923)) and Theodore Dreiser (*Sister Carrie* (1900) and *An American Tragedy* (1925)). These writers directly influenced and encouraged each other, and so their work continues to exist in conversation with their peers' work.

### KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** *A Jury of Her Peers*
- **When Written:** 1917
- **Where Written:** New York City
- **When Published:** 1917
- **Literary Period:** Modernism, First Wave Feminism
- **Genre:** Feminist Short Story
- **Setting:** The Wrights' farmhouse, Dickinson County, Iowa
- **Climax:** Two female neighbors of Minnie Wright uncover the evidence of this woman's motive for killing her husband, and elect to conceal this evidence from the authorities.
- **Antagonist:** Sexism and unjust gender roles

### EXTRA CREDIT

**Historical Truth behind A Jury of Her Peers.** The story *A Jury of Her Peers* was inspired by a case Glaspell covered as a young journalist: the 1900 murder of John Hossack. In the historical

case, the convicted woman murdered her husband with an ax, not a noose, while he slept.

**Return from Obscurity.** For years after her death, Glaspell's work was largely overlooked. Until, in the 1970s, Glaspell's work was admired by Feminists who identified her forward-thinking viewpoint. Since then, Glaspell's work has been considered popular and recommended reading.



## PLOT SUMMARY

The story begins with Martha Hale's hasty departure from her farmhouse kitchen. She looks around, hating to leave her workspace in disarray, but her husband impatiently tells her to hurry. Mrs. Hale joins the group of people in the buggy outside. The party includes: the county attorney, George Henderson, the local sheriff, Henry Peters, his wife, Mrs. Peters, and Mrs. Hale's husband, Lewis Hale. The small group arrives at a neighboring farmhouse and enters the kitchen. Mrs. Hale reflects that she has never set foot in the farmhouse, but wishes she had called on the inhabitants: John Wright and Minnie Wright. Mrs. Hale knew Minnie Wright as a young woman, but she has been caught up in her own busy life, and has not made the effort to visit Minnie in the past twenty years.

George Henderson calls upon Mr. Hale to tell his story of the events of the previous day at the farmhouse. Mrs. Hale looks on nervously as her husband speaks, aware of his tendency to mix up stories or to share unnecessary information. She reflects that this could make things worse for Minnie. Mr. Hale explains how he was driving by the Wrights' farmhouse the previous day when he stopped to call on his neighbor. He had hoped to install a party line telephone for both their houses, but Wright hadn't been interested, and Mr. Hale decided to try asking him in front of his wife. Although, Mr. Hale reflects, he doesn't know that his wife's opinion would have made much difference to John Wright. Mr. Hale entered the house to find Minnie Wright in her rocking chair. He asked after her husband and she calmly told him that he was there, but Mr. Hale couldn't speak with him because he was dead. Mr. Hale went upstairs and found John Wright's body in his bed. He has been strangled to death. Minnie Wright said she did not wake up, although she slept next to him, when this murder occurred.

Minnie Wright was then arrested and taken to jail. She is being held while the county attorney and the local sheriff search her home for any clues regarding the murder. They are particularly looking for any evidence that would point to a motive for the crime. The men dismiss the items in the kitchen as womanly concerns that will not provide any evidence. But before they move upstairs to examine the scene of the crime, Minnie Wright's ruined **canning jars of fruit** are discovered. The recently completed canning project has been ruined by the cold weather because the contents have frozen and the jars burst

open. Mrs. Peters says that Minnie had been worrying about just this possibility. Henry Peters immediately laughs, joking about a woman who could be so worried about something trivial when faced with a charge of murder. Mr. Hale acknowledges, "women are used to worrying over **trifles.**" Mr. Henderson criticizes Minnie's messy kitchen and poor housekeeping, and Mrs. Hale immediately defends Minnie, reminding the attorney of how much work there is to be done around a farmhouse.

George Henderson gives Mrs. Peters permission to take some clothes and things to Minnie in jail. He tells her to keep an eye out for any evidence, and Mr. Hale immediately questions whether the women would know a piece of evidence if they found one. Once the men go upstairs, Martha Hale expresses her unhappiness that they would criticize Minnie's kitchen in her absence. Mrs. Peters says that the men are just doing their duty in coming into the space and searching for evidence. The women gather together the items they will bring to Minnie and they notice the poor quality of her clothes, which reveals her husband's stinginess. Mrs. Hale suddenly asks Mrs. Peters if she thinks that Minnie is guilty, and the two women discuss the strange manner of John Wright's death. Mrs. Hale shares that Mr. Hale said there was a gun in the house, and yet this was overlooked in favor of the more brutal act of strangling John Wright.

The women discover an in-progress **quilt**, and as the men return downstairs they overhear Mrs. Hale wondering whether Minnie was planning to finish the quilt by the regular technique or by knotting it. The men again laugh at the women's trivial interests. The men then leave to go out to the barn. As Mrs. Peters and Martha Hale examine the quilt, they observe an area of the stitching that is messy and crooked, unlike the rest. They suppose that Minnie was anxious or tired or otherwise upset when she was sewing.

As they collect the items to take to Minnie, the two women comment on an empty birdcage they find. The birdcage is notable for its broken door. Martha Hale expresses her concerns about not having visited Minnie in twenty years because she was aware of John Wright's unsocial and stern character. She imagines the lonely life Minnie must have had with John Wright. The women look for Minnie's quilting materials, open a red box, and are instantly repulsed by the smell from inside: it is **a dead bird**, its neck twisted to one side as if strangled.

The men reenter suddenly and Martha Hale conceals the box the women have just discovered. After the men leave, Mrs. Peters and Martha Hale reflect on stillness and loneliness. Mrs. Peters recalls a traumatic childhood memory of a neighboring boy who killed her pet kitten. Mrs. Peters acknowledges that she wished to hurt this boy in that instant. Martha Hale's reflections are self-critical. She repeats how much she wishes she had visited Minnie and speaks of her own actions as a crime

that went unpunished.

The men wrap up their investigation with no evidence to point to a motive. George Henderson starts to look through the things Mrs. Peters is taking to Minnie at the jail, but then stops, laughing that the things are only harmless, womanly things. Hidden among these things is the box with the dead bird inside. The men have failed in their search for evidence, but at least, George Henderson jokes, they found out about Minnie's quilting project. He asks Martha Hale to remind him what the term was for how Minnie might finish her quilt, and Mrs. Hale replies, with certainty, that Minnie Wright was going to "knot it."



## CHARACTERS

### MAJOR CHARACTERS

**Lewis Hale** – A middle-aged local farmer who visited the Wrights' home and discovered Minnie calmly pleating her apron as her husband lay murdered in his bed. He accompanies Henderson and Peters, although not a legal authority, because of his firsthand account of the case. Mrs. Hale worries that her husband will reveal his tendency to "say unnecessary things" and make things more difficult for Minnie when telling the story of his discovery.

**Mrs. Peters** – The wife of the sheriff who, in Mrs. Hale's mind, does not look the part because she is "small and thin." Mrs. Peters's physical characteristics are reflected in her subservience to her husband, and to the law, which she struggles to overcome. Mrs. Peters reminds Mrs. Hale of the men's duties and their own responsibilities to the law, but she, ultimately, actively participates in the attempt to conceal the evidence of Minnie Wright's guilt.

**Martha Hale** – The wife of Mr. Hale and resident of the nearest farm to the Wrights' home. Due to this proximity, as well as her acquaintance with the young Minnie Wright ([when her name was Minnie Foster](#)), Mrs. Hale feels immense responsibility for not having visited the married Minnie Wright in twenty years. Martha Hale is established as the protagonist of the story from the first few paragraphs. She is more strong-willed than Mrs. Peters (and is given a first name, unlike the other woman). She defies her husband and the law by concealing the evidence against Minnie Wright, ultimately choosing to ally herself with a fellow woman against the patriarchal society in which they live.

**John Wright** – The murdered man, and husband of Minnie Wright, whose death forms the backdrop for the events of the story. In the eyes of society, John Wright was respectable. He did not exhibit any of the traits that other men would frown upon such as drinking excessively or failing to pay his debts. Martha Hale, on the other hand, acknowledges the difficult aspects of John Wright's personality, telling Mrs. Peters of his hardness, quietness, and the lonely life he would have given his

wife. John Wright's cruelty to Minnie is revealed even further over the course of the story.

**Minnie Wright** – The woman accused of killing her husband by strangling him in his sleep, she is held at the jail through the course of the story. Minnie Wright lived a life of isolation in her farmhouse. **The dead bird** found by Mrs. Hale and Mrs. Peters was her only companion, one well suited to a once lively girl who had loved to sing. The dead bird was strangled and the parallel between this act and John Wright's death demonstrates that Minnie had a motive for killing her husband: he removed her one source of happiness, and otherwise mistreated and silenced her throughout their marriage.

### MINOR CHARACTERS

**George Henderson** – A young man who holds the position of county attorney overseeing the investigation of John Wright's murder. Henderson is self-confident in his ability to build a case against Minnie Wright and particularly sarcastic in his belittling of the female characters.

**Henry Peters** – A middle-aged man who is the local sheriff. He assists George Henderson in his investigation, and, although genial compared to Henderson, he is as clear about his prejudice against Minnie Wright. He is also dismissive of his wife and what he sees as her womanly concerns.



## THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.



### THE SUBJUGATION OF WOMEN

In "A Jury of Her Peers," men and women have distinctly different gender roles and the story portrays the different opportunities available to men and women both in terms of the division of labor and in society as a whole. This world is controlled by men because social rules restrict women's ability to move about, to choose their own interests, or to exist as separate beings from their husbands. Minnie Wright and Martha Hale are continuously defined as housekeepers. The responsibilities of caring for a house, and a kitchen in particular, are linked only to women. Martha Hale still thinks of Minnie Wright as Minnie Foster, emphasizing the identity change each woman undergoes when she marries and takes her husband's name as her own, when she becomes defined by her husband's identity and her own separate personality is lost. One aspect of this social subjugation of women explored in the story is the loneliness that results from being stuck in the home. Men have each

other's company, but women must remain at home, alone. A childless woman, like Minnie Wright, would have felt this loneliness even more poignantly.

The subjugation of women in the story is not confined to the economic and the social. The male characters add to these social rules and expectations with a more personalized form of oppression: by belittling individual women for their weaknesses and their interests. Mr. Peters mocks his own wife's fear of traveling to the home that is the scene of a murder. The men repeatedly say that the items in the kitchen, or the items Mrs. Wright has requested in prison, are below their notice. In this way, the men devalue the women by devaluing the only things that have been left to the control of women.

In many ways, Mrs. Peters and Martha Hale accept the treatment they receive from the male characters. In fact, they contribute to the gender roles by believing certain things are only the men's responsibility, such as finding serious evidence. Over the course of the story, though, the women are able to acknowledge their situation to themselves and to each other. They are united by Minnie's predicament because they see that they each have experienced the loneliness, isolation, and mistreatment that led her to kill her husband. In recognizing their shared experience through Minnie's tragic dilemma, the women begin to see themselves as part of a group of all women, and they are unwilling to judge another woman who experienced the same subjugation. In concealing the evidence of Minnie's motive, **the dead bird**, the women stand up against the oppression they've experienced by creating a different sphere in which Minnie's actions are judged and pardoned: a jury of united women.



### MALE OBLIVIOUSNESS TO WOMEN'S IMPORTANCE

While society and individual men oppress women throughout this short story, another theme in the text is the unexpected power the women have within the domestic sphere. This power is unexpected because the male characters repeatedly overlook the potential of the "trifles" that concern women. Ironically, the two women discover the evidence the men seek among the domestic items that the men dismiss. The men are unable to see the importance of the domestic sphere because they are unable to see the importance and intelligence of the women in their lives. By placing the solution to the murder mystery within the domestic sphere, Glaspell empowers the women with the very information the men unsuccessfully seek.

The male characters are oblivious to the domestic sphere because they take for granted their own self-importance. A society with distinct gender roles that oppresses women has also taught men to value and trust their own opinions and

minds without question. The men cannot recognize their need to consider the potential, or the threat, of the women near them, as when the county attorney assumes that anything Mrs. Peters would take to Minnie Wright must necessarily be harmless, simply because she's a woman.



### LEGAL OBLIGATIONS VS. GENDER LOYALTY

The two female characters in the story, Mrs. Peters and Martha Hale, have conflicting commitments to Minnie Wright and the male-dominated legal system. Their commitment to Minnie Wright is due to their realization that all women have experienced isolation because of oppressive gender roles. Their commitment to the law is due to their status as citizens, but also, at a time when women could not vote, due to their position as wives subjected to their husbands' wills. Mrs. Peters, the Sheriff's wife, is told that she is "married to the law," which shows that her responsibility to the law and to her husband are the same in the minds of men.

The male characters feel a strong responsibility to uphold the law. Yet because the law is controlled, designed, and enforced by men, the law also gives men power. Men control institutions like the legal system, which means that Minnie Wright will not have the opportunity to be judged, in a legal court, by a jury of her peers, as the title of the short story explains. A jury of her peers, other women, can only exist in the domestic sphere where Mrs. Peters and Martha Hale conceal the evidence of her crime. In the official legal system, men, not women, will judge Minnie Wright's crime and assign her punishment, without ever understanding or even caring about her situation. The women, at first, also feel this same responsibility, yet over the course of the story they come to see how the male-dominated law has failed Minnie—and, by extension, themselves. When Mrs. Peters and Martha Hale make the active choice to hide **the dead bird**, they are restricting this evidence from appearing in the legal court controlled and judged by men. Therefore, this act is a rebellion against the power of the male-dominated institution.



### CRIME AND PUNISHMENT

The story begins like a murder mystery, in which evidence is sought to convict a culprit. A murder mystery examines a crime, which, when the criminal is caught, is appropriately answered with a punishment. However, in this story, the ideas about what constitutes a crime and how a punishment can or cannot account for a crime are made more complicated. The jury of Minnie Wright's peers—Mrs. Peters and Martha Hale—judges her to have been justified in her "crime." Mrs. Peters and Martha Hale conceal **the dead bird** because they do not believe the legal system will be able to adequately judge and punish the "crime" that was

committed. In their eyes, this was not a murder, not the crime one might assume based on that word, but instead was Minnie Foster's only option given the long standing oppression and isolation she was forced into by her husband and by the social and economic subjugation that defines all the characters' lives. The women are able to recognize that Minnie Foster's situation is a special case because, as women, they have experienced these same crimes committed against themselves. Martha Hale says, "we all go through the same things—it's all just a different kind of the same thing."

Martha Hale further recognizes that many actions can be crimes that are not acknowledged by a legal system. Therefore, these crimes go unpunished. When she feels guilty for not having visited and assisted Minnie Wright for the last twenty years, she asks, "who's going to punish that?" While Martha directs this question at herself, her quote also subtly points out that the many crimes of the men in the play also go unpunished because the legal system is blind to the crimes that arise from a system of gender-based oppression and injustice.



## SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.



### TRIFLES

Mr. Hale says that women are "used to worrying over trifles." This significant quote identifies the way the men in this short story perceive the interests and concerns of the women. The men see women as engaged only with insignificant things, such as the **canning jars of fruit** that Minnie Wright is worried will have been ruined in her absence after her arrest, and **the quilt** that Mrs. Peters and Mrs. Hale decide to bring to Minnie at the jail to keep her busy. Trifles, a term misapplied by the men to everything that interests women, symbolize the blindness of the men to the importance of these very things. It is the "trifles" that reveal the motive behind Minnie's crime, the piece of important evidence that the men seek. Because the men discount both the women and the women's interests as "trifles," they overlook the things that could reveal the truth about Minnie, her situation, and her actions, as well as the truth about sexism in their society.



### CANNING JARS OF FRUIT

Minnie Wright's concern over the canning jars of fruit symbolizes her parallel concerns about her gender role in society as a wife and housekeeper. Minnie is concerned about correctly fulfilling her role as a wife and housekeeper because she has been conditioned by a society that gives men power over their wives. Minnie's concern is

justified by the actions of the men in the story who feel, and are, able to criticize and correct the women without any repercussions. The men criticize Minnie's messy kitchen, but also criticize Martha Hale and Mrs. Peters for their concern with the "trifles" in the kitchen. Because the men hold all the social power, they are able to criticize the women according to their whims.

When Mrs. Peters and Martha Hale find that the canning jars have been broken when left unattended, Martha Hale proposes lying to Minnie to protect her from the painful truth. The broken jars are linked to the brokenness of Minnie's situation. Her fear has been actualized, just as it will be when she is tried and found guilty, as she surely will be. The lie of the other two women shows that these peers are willing to protect Minnie, even if their husbands are not. Further, this first, smaller lie foreshadows the larger act of subterfuge in which the women hide the evidence of Minnie's motive for murder.



### THE QUILT

The quilt that the women wish to bring to Minnie Wright in jail takes on symbolic meaning through repeated discussion of two types of quilting styles: regular quilting and knotting. At first, Mrs. Peters and Martha Hale discuss these quilting techniques literally, but the story concludes with George Henderson asking about which quilting technique Minnie was planning to use to finish the quilt. In this scene, Martha Hale's statement that she was planning to "knot it" symbolizes the act of killing by tying a rope around another's neck. At the end of the story, the two women are sure of Minnie's guilt and also understand why Minnie killed her cruel husband, but they have not further discussed the making of the quilt. Therefore, the certainty in Martha Hale's statement shows that the act of "knotting the quilt" is a symbolic one. The men, of course, overlook the metaphorical implications of this action, dismissing it as just another **trifle**.



### THE DEAD BIRD



This crucial piece of evidence uncovered by Martha Hale and Mrs. Peters reveals Minnie Wright's guilt, but also shows the cruelty of which John Wright was capable. Although John Wright's act of strangling the songbird was a single cruel act, it symbolizes the way he has treated Minnie throughout their marriage. This symbol is developed over the course of the story as Martha Hale, who knew Minnie as the unmarried Minnie Foster, repeatedly equates Minnie with a bird, emphasizing her love of singing and her lively and bright personality. While the songbird was literally strangled by John Wright, Minnie Foster was figuratively strangled by life with a man who was cold, unkind, poor company, and kept her isolated. Trapped in her marriage, like a bird in a cage, Minnie desperately needed a companion, which she found in the bird.

The act of killing the bird also “killed” Minnie’s remaining hope, causing her to retaliate in response to years, rather than one single act, of mistreatment.

female characters.

“I’d hate to have men comin’ into my kitchen...snoopin’ round and criticizin’.” “Of course it’s no more than their duty.”

**Related Characters:** Lewis Hale, Mrs. Peters (speaker), George Henderson, Henry Peters

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 89

### Explanation and Analysis

The kitchen in the Wrights' house is messy, and George Henderson comments on this, mocking Mrs. Wright's poor housekeeping abilities. As soon as the men leave the room, Mrs. Hale makes her frustration at Henderson's comments clear. She explains how unhappy she'd be to be treated in this way because she knows much labor goes into caring for a household. Men, who have not done this type of work, should not belittle the effort involved in running a farming household single-handedly. Mrs. Hale is willing to be critical of Henderson, but Mrs. Peters is not (at this point). She is quick to excuse her husband's behavior, whether or not she thinks it is unfair to Minnie Wright.

The women in this society face a strict set of expectations for their behavior. They resent this to varying degrees, but cannot fully escape from it. This passage shows how the women's thinking has been shaped by the way society has always treated them. Mrs. Hale sees the kitchen as the domain of a woman. She sees her kitchen as *hers*, and not the joint space of herself and her husband. Also, Mrs. Peters sees an investigation for evidence as the duty of the men. Their process is beyond her reproach. Early in the story, the women are not inclined to stand up against the men, their own gender roles, and the expectations of society. Over the course of the story, however, they reach mental and emotional states that allow them to rebel and defy their husbands.

“They think it was such a—funny way to kill a man.”  
“That’s just what Mr. Hale said....There was a gun in the house. He says that’s what he can’t understand.”

**Related Characters:** Mrs. Peters, Martha Hale (speaker), Minnie Wright, Lewis Hale





## QUOTES



Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the University of Iowa Press edition of *Her America* published in 2010.

### A Jury of Her Peers Quotes

“Oh, well, women are used to worrying over trifles.”

**Related Characters:** Lewis Hale (speaker), Mrs. Peters, Martha Hale, Minnie Wright

**Related Themes:**  



**Related Symbols:**  

**Page Number:** 87

### Explanation and Analysis

The local attorney, the sheriff, and a primary witness search a farmhouse for evidence in a murder trial. The sheriff, Mr. Peters, and the witness, Mr. Hale, both bring along their wives who know Mrs. Wright, the murdered man's husband and the primary suspect in the case. The group looks quickly around the kitchen and discovers a mess from exploded jars of fruit Mrs. Wright had been working on canning. Mrs. Hale explains that Mrs. Wright was worried about just this very thing, and her husband jokes that women are “used to worrying over trifles” like this canning project. Mr. Hale's dismissal of the concerns of women as “trifles” shows the subjugation of women in this society (and this phrase also gives the title to one of Glaspell's other famous works, *Trifles*).

Women are expected to be wives, mothers, and caretakers: their work focuses on the domestic sphere. Men, on the other hand, work outside the home and fill all intellectual roles. Because these gender roles assign women to tasks and responsibilities that men view as less important, men are quick to dismiss and overlook what they consider to be women's concerns. In this story, the men ignore the domestic things in the house, despite the fact that Minnie Wright is their primary suspect. They cannot imagine that women's things could yield evidence about their murder investigation. This story shows the men's ignorance because so-called women's concerns and “trifles” are actually key in solving the murder mystery, which is decoded by the two

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 91

### Explanation and Analysis

John Wright's murder was unusual because he was strangled with a rope, as Mrs. Hale and Mrs. Peters quietly discuss out of earshot of the men. Mr. Wright might, more logically, have been shot with the nearby gun in the house, and the method of murder raises many questions. This discussion between the women highlights the unusual nature of this murder. It is followed quickly in the women's conversation with the discussion of motive. This foreshadows that the mysterious nature of the crime will be important in understanding the motive behind it.

This passage presents a society in which women are accustomed to being considered less important than men. At first glance, this passage is a less explicit discussion of sexism, but its casual references to inequality are perhaps more disturbing. Notably, the women discuss and repeat important information from their husbands as unquestionable. Mrs. Hale directly quotes her husband, which shows her trust in his words and opinions. Men are the ones with access to information and with that information comes the opportunity to decide crimes and punishments. Women are only told second-hand about the important work of investigating the murder. Information is power in this story, and the established inequality in society is challenged when the two wives acquire the very information the men seek. In choosing to conceal this information, the women challenge the structure of a society that they subconsciously accept in this early scene of the story.

☞ “Mr. Henderson said, coming out, that what was needed for the case was a motive. Something to show anger—or sudden feeling.”

**Related Characters:** Mrs. Peters (speaker), George Henderson, Minnie Wright, John Wright

**Related Themes:** 

**Page Number:** 92

### Explanation and Analysis

By sharing what George Henderson said, Ms. Peters foreshadows the climax of the story: the discovery of the

critical evidence in the case against Mrs. Wright. This critical evidence shows “motive,” the murder's reasons for committing her crime, which Henderson assumes must be “anger” or “sudden feeling.” Henderson's statement that the killer acted out of passion, rather than cold calculation, might hint at his premature assumption of Mrs. Wright's guilt. In this unequal society, men attribute passion and emotion, rather than intellect and rationality, to women.

Motive is key in a murder investigation because it can decisively sway the opinion of the jury. This is established early in the story when it is clear that Mrs. Wright is already the primary suspect. Evidence of her motive is presented as the necessary piece to seal the case against her, so it is clear how important this evidence is when Mrs. Hale and Mrs. Peters discover it.

This passage uses a legalistic understanding of crime and punishment. Punishment allocated by the American legal system is supposed to target the guilty, and the system is designed to protect the innocent. In order to do this, those running the legal system need evidence to delineate between the guilty and the not-guilty. This story asks the question: can the legal system effectively delineate between the guilty and the not-guilty? There is not always convincing evidence of a crime and some crimes (such as domestic emotional abuse) are not acknowledged by the legal system.

☞ “A person gets discouraged—and loses heart.”

**Related Characters:** Mrs. Peters (speaker), Minnie Wright

**Related Themes:** 

**Page Number:** 92

### Explanation and Analysis

Mrs. Peters and Mrs. Hale seem sympathetic towards Minnie early in the story because her kitchen is left in disarray, and the kitchen shows the poverty and hardship she lived in. When Mrs. Hale discovers the stove doesn't work, Mrs. Peters responds, “a person gets discouraged--and loses heart.” This cryptic remark points out how discouraging and hopeless it is to live every day struggling with basic, thankless tasks. Mrs. Peters's remark is cryptic because she refers to “a person” rather than Minnie directly. Is she universalizing Minnie's experience, pointing out something that could have happened to Minnie, or herself, or any person? She does not refer specifically to women growing discouraged and losing heart in the face of

hardship. She seems to comment more generally about the suffering and hopelessness that arises when one lives perpetually on the edge of poverty or breakdown.

Another interpretation of Mrs. Peters' comment is that she is intentionally avoiding naming Minnie Wright in her comment by saying "a person." Does she feel that she might come too close to an accusation if she says that Minnie lost heart? Is she wondering if Minnie's hopelessness could have led her to kill her husband? Mrs. Peters is reluctant early in the story to express controversial, or even unique, opinions. She prefers to quote her husband. So, in this moment, she may be struggling to express sympathy with Minnie without this being explicit.

“But he was a hard man, Mrs. Peters. Just to pass the time of day with him—’She stopped, shivered a little. ‘Like a raw wind that gets to the bone.”

**Related Characters:** Martha Hale (speaker), Mrs. Peters, John Wright

**Related Themes:**   

**Page Number:** 96

### Explanation and Analysis

Initially, it seems that Minnie must be her husband's killer and that nothing could possibly excuse such a horrendous crime. Yet, this moment begins to demonstrate that John Wright is not so innocent either. Mrs. Hale is critical of his coldness and harshness, and she shudders when imagining herself in Mrs. Wright's shoes. Mrs. Hale has no reason to unfairly criticize Mr. Wright, and her words turn the reader's sympathy away from John Wright, who was unkind and difficult. Questions begin to arise: what did John Wright do to Minnie before his death? Mrs. Hale's evocative metaphor—that being near John Wright was like being in a “raw wind that gets to the bone”—works on the reader on an emotional level. The experience is relatable, haunting, and even physically effective. By using this figurative language, Mrs. Hale persuasively makes her point that John Wright's past treatment of his wife is worthy of suspicion—even if he's not “guilty” of any specific crime that the male-dominated law would convict.

In this moment, Mrs. Hale self-identifies with Mrs. Wright because she sees similarities between their experiences. By relating to the other woman in this way, Mrs. Hale is growing more sympathetic and understanding of Minnie's

situation, and starting to build up a feeling of solidarity with all women. Because she understands what Minnie went through, she will be inclined to support her rather than the murdered John Wright. She chooses to lie to defend Minnie because she sees that her husband will not be criticized for his cruelty in a society that subjugates women.

“When I was a girl...my kitten—there was a boy took a hatchet, and before my eyes—and before I could get there—’ She covered her face an instant. ‘If they hadn't held me back I would have’—she caught herself, looked upward where footsteps were heard, and finished weakly—‘hurt him.”

**Related Characters:** Mrs. Peters (speaker)

**Related Themes:** 

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** 98

### Explanation and Analysis



The women discover Mrs. Wright's strangled song bird, and Mrs. Peters immediately recalls a similar experience in her past when her kitten was killed by a neighborhood boy. This traumatic memory creates a link between Mrs. Peters and Minnie Wright because Mrs. Peters is able imagine the pain Minnie would have felt when her pet was ruthlessly killed (presumably by Mr. Wright). Furthermore, Mrs. Peters knows how she reacted to this pain: she wanted to lash out at the perpetrator and punish him. Minnie's reaction, it is implied, could very easily have been the same. When Mrs. Peters “catches herself, looks upstairs where steps are heard, falters weakly,” it is as if she is confessing to the very crime the men are seeking to punish. She knows that she too would be capable of violence if she was hurt as Minnie was hurt.

Early in the story, the two women differ in their understanding of their traditional roles as women. Mrs. Peters is more subdued and subservient, refusing to speak out against the actions of the men. On the other hand, Mrs. Hale criticizes Mr. Wright and the men, although not within their hearing. It seems to take Mrs. Peters extra time to side with Minnie Wright over Minnie's husband and her own husband. She has more of a hurdle to overcome when defying her husband's wishes (particularly because he's the sheriff), but in this moment she finds that she has strong empathy for Minnie because of their shared experience of suffering at the hands of men.



“Oh, I wish I’d come over here once in a while!’ She cried. ‘That was a crime! That was a crime! Who’s going to punish that?’”

**Related Characters:** Martha Hale (speaker), Mrs. Peters, Minnie Wright

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 99



### Explanation and Analysis

Mrs. Hale feels guilty when she realizes that she wasn’t aware of how much Minnie Wright suffered without the support of friends and neighbors. She sees Minnie’s isolation as having contributed to the situation she faces today. With the support of other women experiencing similar inequality and mistreatment, she might not have lashed out at her husband so drastically. Mrs. Hale might have protected Minnie from a court case and sentencing by providing her with emotional support and friendship, even if she couldn’t have rectified the larger societal issues of inequality leading to Minnie’s unhappiness.

Mrs. Hale uses the language of the legal system to categorizing her actions as a “crime.” This repeated term shows that Mrs. Hale is intentionally referring to her behavior as an illegal action, punishable by the law, rather than referring to her behavior as “wrong” or “immoral.” This repurposing of the legal term “crime” expands what qualifies as a crime in the story. Mrs. Hale sees Minnie’s loneliness and presumed abuse as a “crime” committed against her, and thus there are many other “crimes” which are not understood or acknowledged as crimes. Instead, crime and punishment are defined by a male-dominated legal system, which will not consider the variety of “crimes” that Mrs. Hale considers when they judge Minnie’s case. By referring to Minnie’s loneliness and mistreatment at her husband’s hands as “crimes,” Mrs. Hale is arguing that these factors ought to be considered in judging Minnie’s case.

“We all go through the same things—it’s all just a different kind of the same thing!”

**Related Characters:** Martha Hale (speaker), Mrs. Peters, Minnie Wright

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 99

### Explanation and Analysis

Mrs. Hale universalizes Minnie’s, Mrs. Peters’s, and her own experiences as she realizes that all these examples of suffering have the same source: the subjugation of women. She includes herself in the same group as Minnie Wright, and the “we” she uses encompasses all women. There are differences among the specific examples of suffering that women face, but these experiences are “different kinds of the same thing” because they are the result of inequality. Minnie Wright was deeply lonely and the one thing that mattered most to her (her pet bird) was taken from her. Mrs. Peters suffered at the whim of a cruel boy. Mrs. Hale works tirelessly without appreciation, while facing constant belittlement of her work as “trifles.” But all three women are suffering for the same reason: the oppression placed on them by a patriarchal society.

This is a key moment in the story, because here the women make a decisive choice between their legal obligation to present any evidence pertaining to the crime and their loyalty to another woman who has suffered as they have suffered. They choose the latter. When they acknowledge that all women are subjugated and that their various experiences of abuse, neglect, and belittlement stem from this inequality, they feel they must stand together. They see themselves as having more in common with Minnie Wright, an aggrieved murderer, than with their husbands, who believe, however kindly or subconsciously, in the inferiority of women.

“No, Mrs. Peters doesn’t need supervising. For that matter, a sheriff’s wife is married to the law.”

**Related Characters:** George Henderson (speaker), Mrs. Peters, Henry Peters

**Related Themes:**   

**Page Number:** 101

### Explanation and Analysis

Mr. Peters asks the county attorney if he would like to look through the items that his wife and Mrs. Hale have selected to deliver to Minnie Wright at the court house. Henderson dismisses this idea, because he cannot imagine that Mrs. Peters and Mrs. Hale would have intentionally selected anything threatening. He doesn’t think they would go against the wishes of their husbands, and he also doesn’t think they’re intelligent enough to do any real damage if


they tried to help Minnie. He doesn't believe them capable of any kind of deception worth noting.

George Henderson also considers Mrs. Peters, in particular, to be a harmless woman because she is the sheriff's wife. This assumption is based on Henderson's understanding that a woman obeys the wishes of her husband in all things, and that a good wife like Mrs. Peters must be particularly law-abiding because she respects and obeys her law-enforcing husband. This shows just how much Mrs. Peters stands to lose in choosing to conceal evidence, which is not only illegal, but against the wishes and ideals of a husband who works for the law. In choosing to support and protect Minnie Wright, Mrs. Peters has prioritized gender loyalty above her commitments as a law-abiding citizen and obedient wife. Together, Mrs. Peters and Mrs. Hale are challenging male authority—their husbands' authority and the authority of the male-dominated legal system.

●● "...at least we found out that she was not going to quilt it. She was going to—what is it you call it, ladies?"  
"We call it—knot it, Mr. Henderson."

**Related Characters:** George Henderson, Martha Hale (speaker), Minnie Wright

**Related Themes:** 

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** 102

### Explanation and Analysis

The story ends with Mrs. Hale and Mrs. Peters's split second decision to hide the evidence (the dead bird) that would seal the case against Minnie Wright. They also take the quilt, which shows Minnie's emotional distress as it shifts from orderly to poor sewing. The men overheard the women discussing the quilt earlier in the story, and they laughed at the women's concern with this feminine pastime. The two methods of quilting—to quilt or to knot—take on metaphorical meaning in the story, however, because "to knot" resembles the way Mr. Wright was killed—strangulation by rope. This metaphor points to the truth that the women now know: Minnie Wright was planning to knot the quilt, just as she knotted the rope around her husband's neck.

When George Henderson asks this question, he only understands it to be a sarcastic literal question about the fate of the quilt, whereas the women see the metaphorical resonances of the term "knotting." Henderson is mocking the two women because they are focused on "trifles" in the face of a murder investigation. Ironically, the women have solved the mystery of the murderer's motive with the quilt and the dead bird in the sewing box. Henderson is asking a critical question when he asks about Minnie's plans for finishing the quilt, but to him it is only a humorous quip at the expense of the women. His obliviousness to the concerns of women in the domestic sphere—which is shared by all the men in this story—causes him to overlook the very evidence he seeks.



## SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

## A JURY OF HER PEERS

The story begins with protagonist Martha Hale's hasty departure from her farmhouse in Dickinson County, Iowa. Martha Hale hates to leave her work undone and her kitchen in disarray, but she has been called upon to accompany a group of her neighbors who wait outside. The group stopped to pick up her husband, Lewis Hale, but the sheriff, Henry Peters, asked that Martha Hale come along as well to accompany his wife, Mrs. Peters, who, he joked, was getting scared and wanted another woman for company.

The group of neighbors includes Mr. Peters and Mrs. Peters and the country attorney George Henderson. Martha Hale doesn't know Mrs. Peters well, but she reflects that Mrs. Peters doesn't look like the stereotypical sheriff's wife. She is small and quiet compared to her jovial and loud husband. The group travels to a neighboring farmhouse, which is a lonesome-looking place. As Martha Hale enters the farmhouse with the group, she reflects that she ought to have come over to this house to visit Minnie Wright whom she'd known as a young girl (when she was Minnie Foster). But Martha Hale had always been busy and in the twenty years of Minnie's marriage to John Wright, Martha Hale had never visited their home.

The group stands in the Wrights' kitchen and Mr. Peters asks Lewis Hale to describe what he witnessed at the farmhouse the day before. Mrs. Hale looks on nervously because she knows her husband is not very good at retelling stories. Additionally, Mrs. Hale is afraid that her husband will include his thoughts and opinions, adding unnecessary information that might hurt Minnie Wright's situation.

Mr. Hale recounts how he had stopped by to visit the Wrights' home the day before. Previously, he had asked John Wright about sharing the expense for a party line telephone, but Wright wasn't interested and Mr. Hale hoped to prevail upon him in front of his wife. But, he admits, he's not sure that John Wright was the type of man who would be persuaded by his wife's desire for a telephone. At the house, Mr. Hale found Minnie Wright looking uncomfortable, but rocking in her rocking chair. Minnie Wright revealed that John was home, but that Mr. Hale could not speak with him because he was dead. When questioned, she explained that he died of "a rope around his neck."

*The first few sentences of the short story establish important setting and context details: Martha Hale is the protagonist, and, as a farmer's wife, she is overworked by domestic tasks. The sexism of the setting and time period is also established. Martha must follow the men's instructions to come along on the trip, and Mrs. Peters is belittled for her request to have Martha's company.*



*Martha Hale participates in the appearance-based judgments that other characters in the story tend to make when she observes Mr. and Mrs. Peters in terms of how she thinks a sheriff and his wife ought to look. The physical differences between Mr. and Mrs. Peters mirror the power differences between the characters: Mr. Peters holds all the power and Mrs. Peters none. Martha's regret over not visiting Minnie eventually develops into her certainty that there are more forms of wrongdoing than are punishable by law.*



*Martha Hale's concern about her husband's retelling of events reflects her awareness that Minnie is in trouble and that the opinion of a man (her husband)—even a not completely competent man—could help or harm Minnie's situation because Mr. Hale's testimony will be taken seriously by the other men.*



*The conversation topic that brought Mr. Hale to the Wrights' house was a party line telephone. A telephone is associated with communication and staying in touch. Minnie Wright lived a lonely life that would have been changed had her husband chosen to install a telephone. Mr. Hale's request is too late to save Minnie or John Wright, an example of situational irony. The strange method of John Wright's murder is significant throughout the story.*



Mr. Hale discovered John Wright's body in his bed upstairs with the rope still in place. Hale returned downstairs, leaving everything untouched, and asked Minnie Wright if she knew who had murdered her husband. Minnie said that she was asleep next to John when he was killed, but that she doesn't know what happened because she didn't wake up. Mr. Hale said he was going to contact the coroner, and Minnie did not respond. However, when he explained that he had come over to their house to propose sharing a party line telephone, Minnie suddenly laughed, abruptly stopped, and looked sacred of Mr. Hale and his reaction to her laughter.

George Henderson considers whether anything in the kitchen could be evidence pertaining to the murder of John Wright, but Mr. Peters quickly disagrees, saying that he sees "only kitchen things" there. Before the men head upstairs to examine the scene of the crime, George Henderson finds Minnie Wright's **canning jars of fruit** in the pantry, which have broken and caused a sticky mess. Mrs. Peters exclaims sadly that Minnie was worried about the possibility that her newly canned jars would burst in the cold weather. Mr. Peters is amazed and amused that Minnie could worry about her domestic projects in the face of her serious situation. Mr. Hale responds that "women are used to worrying over **trifles**."

George Henderson washes his hands at the kitchen sink and is disappointed by the dirty towel that is the only thing available to dry his hands. From this, he assumes aloud that Minnie is a poor housekeeper. Mrs. Hale angrily says that a farmer's wife's work is never done and that Minnie must have had a lot to keep her busy. The attorney dismisses Mrs. Hale's comments saying she must be prejudiced in favor of her own sex, or at least in favor of her friend. Mrs. Hale defends her unbiased opinion by pointing out that she has not visited Minnie Wright in years. She begins to say that the Wrights' house was not a place she necessarily wanted to visit, but quickly avoids saying any more about John Wright's personality when George Henderson questions her further.

Mr. Peters asks the county attorney on behalf of his wife if she can bring clothes and items to Minnie at the jail. George Henderson asks the women to keep their eyes open for any clues, but Mr. Hale wonders if the women would know a clue if they found one. The men go upstairs. Mrs. Hale is still frustrated by George Henderson's unfair critique of Minnie's housekeeping, and tells Mrs. Peters that she would not like having strangers snooping around her home. Mrs. Peters says, "the men are only doing their duty." Mrs. Hale revisits the loss of Minnie's **canning jars of fruit** and empathizes with Minnie's hard work going to waste.

*Mr. Hale's story about his encounter with Minnie provides suspicious information. The following details incriminate Minnie: it seems far-fetched that she could sleep through a brutal murder that occurred inches from her, and her emotional reactions (laughter and fear) show her to be agitated. After this account, the investigators assume Minnie's guilt and look, with eyes biased by that assumption, for evidence that defends their idea. Minnie's laugh at the purpose of Hale's visit suggests she recognizes the irony of his desire to join with John Wright to install a party line.*



*Throughout this short story, male characters overlook things, ideas, and actions that they associate with women. Gender roles are clearly delineated, and the men are uninterested in womanly things (domestic tasks and possessions, such as the canning jars of fruit). This attitude reflects the male characters' similar attitudes toward the women themselves. The men suppose that the information they seek could not be among the unimportant womanly things.*



*Mrs. Hale empathizes with Minnie because she has also experienced the difficulties of running a farmhouse and keeping it tidy, as seen in the first sentences of the short story. This "fellow feeling" later leads both Martha Hale and Mrs. Peters to defend Minnie more directly. The women share similar situations and experiences and, because of this, feel they ought to defend each other against the men who do not share these experiences, and yet make judgments based on bias and ignorance.*



*In a moment of foreshadowing, the attorney mentions the possibility of the women finding a clue. However, Mr. Hale's comment makes it apparent that none of the men rely on or even believe in the women's abilities to perform the professional business the men are engaged in. This interaction between the two women shows their differences with respect to male authority: Martha Hale is more likely to speak out against injustice, Mrs. Peters less likely to do so.*



Mrs. Peters asks Mrs. Hale to help her find the items Minnie requested: clothes and an apron, an item that surprises Mrs. Peters, but she supposes Minnie must feel most comfortable in the garments she wore regularly. Minnie's clothes are old and worn and Mrs. Hale comments that John Wright must not have provided Minnie with the financial support to be well dressed. She hasn't seen Minnie join activities with other women recently and wonders if she was ashamed of her poor appearance. This idea of Minnie contrasts strongly with her memory of the unmarried Minnie Foster as a lively and beautiful girl.

Suddenly Mrs. Hale asks Mrs. Peters if she thinks that Minnie is guilty of the crime for which she is being held. Mrs. Hale can't believe that she would be. Mrs. Peters confesses that her husband is certain that Minnie's situation does not look hopeful. The women discuss the odd murder: strangulation by rope. Mrs. Peters says that she has heard the men discussing the importance of finding evidence related to the motive for such a strange and brutal act. The women observe how the kitchen is left in disarray, as if Minnie was interrupted in the middle of her various tasks. Mrs. Hale discovers that the stove doesn't work well, and Mrs. Peters reflects, "a person gets discouraged—and loses heart."

The women find **a quilt** that Minnie Wright was working on. As Mrs. Peters and Mrs. Hale are admiring the quilt, the men return and are amused to hear the women speculating about Minnie's plan for finishing the quilt by traditional methods or by knotting it. The men belittle the women's topic of conversation. The men walk to the barn to check for further evidence. Mrs. Hale is bitter that the men would tease the women for passing the time patiently. But Mrs. Peters excuses their behavior by saying the men "must have a lot on their minds." Mrs. Hale observes that a few squares of the quilt are poorly sewn, as if Minnie was anxious or tired as she worked, and Mrs. Hale then removes the bad stitches and sews tidy ones.

As she searches the cupboard for packing materials for the clothes for Minnie Wright, Mrs. Peters finds an empty birdcage. The women speculate about the fate of the bird that once filled the cage. Mrs. Hale says it might have been killed by the Wrights' cat, but Mrs. Peters reports that she had learned the previous day that Minnie didn't like cats, and so doesn't think the farmhouse had a cat. The door of the cage is broken, as if it was pulled apart.

*Minnie Wright's possessions reveal to the reader the type of situation she lived in with her husband. Because neither John nor Minnie appear directly in the story, their past relationship has been described by other characters and by the physical details of their home. The poor quality of Minnie's clothes and the many work-related possessions show that the couple was poor, or at least John was stingy, and that Minnie worked continuously.*



*The discussion between the women highlights the importance of evidence pointing to a motive for murder, which foreshadows the appearance of this evidence in the text. Repeated allusions to this evidence allow the reader to fully appreciate the drastic step the women later take in hiding it. The broken stove further shows Minnie's poor quality of life, and Mrs. Peters' statement shows that she has begun to empathize and identify with Minnie.*



*Once again, the men belittle something that gender roles associate with women. The quilt is seen as a womanly pastime, which the men see as ridiculous in the face of the more important, male-dominated legal investigation. The women repeat their reactions to this mistreatment: Martha Hale is bitter, but only lets that show in the absence of the men, and Mrs. Peters again attempts to dismiss the unkindness of the men as unavoidable and unimportant compared to the men's duties. Martha's re-stitching of the quilt shows she is not averse to interfering with Minnie's possessions, and that she wishes she could help Minnie now that it is too late to do so.*



*The bird cage connects the absence of the bird and the later discovery of its body. The image of a cage complements a key topic: Minnie's loneliness and her imprisonment in her life. The possibility that a cat got the bird introduces the possibility that the bird was killed, echoing the conflict at the center of the story: a murder. And the immediate fact that Minnie didn't have a cat deepens the mystery of how the bird might have died.*



Mrs. Hale berates herself for her letting her own concerns stop her from visiting Minnie. Mrs. Hale's reasons for not coming, she acknowledges, were her distaste for the lonely farmhouse, but she hid those feelings behind the premise that she was too busy to make the short trip. The two women discuss John Wright, who was considered by many to have been a good man because he was not a drinker or a debtor. Mrs. Hale says that, despite these common virtues, his hard and unhappy personality must have made Minnie's life with him very lonely, a loneliness that would have been alleviated by the company of a songbird.

Mrs. Peters did not know Minnie before she met the charged woman the previous day. Mrs. Hale tells Mrs. Peters about the Minnie Foster she knew and says that she changed dramatically after she married John Wright. Mrs. Hale proposes the idea of bringing the quilt along with the clothes to the jail, so that Minnie might have something to pass the time. As the women look for Minnie's sewing supplies, Mrs. Hale unearths a fancy red box. She opens it to discover a terrible smell. It contains the wrapped body of **a dead bird**.

The women notice that having its neck wrung must have killed **the dead bird**—its head is twisted to the side. The men return to the kitchen and, in a sudden decision, Mrs. Hale conceals the dead bird's box under the quilt. George Henderson brings up the previous joke of the women's concern with **the quilt**, wanting to know whether Minnie was planning to quilt it or knot it. The women say they believe she meant to knot it. The county attorney looks at the birdcage, but the women say that the bird must have been long-since killed by the cat. The men return for another look at the bedroom.

Mrs. Peters, as if to herself, recalls a childhood trauma in which a boy killed her pet kitten with a hatchet. She remembers her overwhelming anger that would have caused her to hurt the boy if she hadn't been held back by others. Mrs. Hale, caught up in her own train of thought, says that John Wright must have broken the neck of the **songbird**. Mrs. Peters says that they don't know the identity of the murderer. Mrs. Hale reflects on the sudden absence, the sense of loss, and the quietness that the death of the bird must have caused. Mrs. Peters is swept into another memory of her deep loneliness in the quietness after the death of her first baby.

*Mrs. Hale would not feel as upset as she does over her failure to visit Minnie if she did not, on some level, believe she could have prevented this outcome by being a friend and companion to Minnie. She believes Minnie killed her husband and that her reasons for doing so were connected to her isolation and mistreatment. John Wright is considered "a good man," which reminds the reader that these qualities of "goodness" would have been defined by other men, and not by his wife.*



*Minnie changed after her marriage from a lively youth to a reclusive woman. This transformation is mentioned several times and here it is blamed on John Wright. This transformation speaks to the scale of John's impact on Minnie. Whatever happened in their relationship, it was dramatic enough and hurtful enough to change Minnie's personality.*



*The dead bird, the women realize, was killed in a parallel way to John Wright: both injuries to the neck. This convinces the women that John killed the bird and that Minnie killed John in premeditated retribution. Mrs. Hale immediately hides the bird before the women have discussed what to do. This act shows the deeply ingrained distrust Mrs. Hale has for the men. Her instinctual response is to hide from the men something she knows is important, something she knows that they will use as evidence against Minnie without taking the time or care to understand its implications in terms of the awful life Minnie had been forced to live.*



*Mrs. Peters has, until this point in the story, rationalized, pardoned, and explained the unkindness and trivializing treatment of the men. As shown through the story of the kitten, because Mrs. Peters knows how it feels to be deeply hurt by violence committed against an innocent thing one loves, she wants to protect Minnie. Mrs. Hale knows how important this bird would have been to Minnie because of her empathy for Minnie's childlessness.*



Mrs. Peters shakes off her cloud of memory and firmly says, “the law has got to punish crime.” Mrs. Hale responds by calling her own actions crimes, exclaiming that she ought to be punished for her failure to visit her once-friend Minnie, but “who’s going to punish that?” Mrs. Hale expresses her retrospective certainty that Minnie needed help, and that one reason she should have reached out to her neighbor is that all women go through “a different kind of the same thing” in their marriages. After these reflections, Mrs. Hale concludes that they ought to lie to Minnie about her **canning jars of fruit** and reassure her that they survived.

The women overhear the men coming down the stairs and discussing their failure to find evidence that explains a motive for the crime. George Henderson says that everything else is “perfectly clear.” The county attorney says that he plans to stay at the house, as they haven’t yet found the evidence they seek. Mr. Peters reminds the attorney about the items Mrs. Peters has collected, and the attorney starts to look at the pile of clothes and **the quilt**, before quickly dismissing the need to check through the womanly items saying, “a sheriff’s wife is married to the law.” The men walk out of the room.

The moment the men are no longer in the room, Mrs. Peters, in a sudden burst of determination, tries to hide **the dead bird** in her handbag and is flustered as the bag is too small. Mrs. Hale snatches the box and puts it in her pocket. The men reappear, and George Henderson turns to the women, teasingly saying that at least they found out something: the way Minnie was planning to finish her **quilt**. He asks the women to remind him of the term they use, and Mrs. Hale tells him “we call it knot it.”

*Mrs. Peters reacts to finding the dead bird on an emotional and personal level. Yet her mention of the law, even after this, shows how deeply society has ingrained gender roles, duty to one’s husband, and duty to the law. Mrs. Hale condenses a broad idea of the story into a single sentence: all women experience the same subservience and belittlement at the hands of men, which creates loyalty to their fellow women. Mrs. Hale’s comment about her own neglect of Minnie being a crime raises the issue of all of the similar types of crimes that are not punished or even conceived of by the law, and by implication raises all of the crimes of social oppression, belittlement, and other degrading behaviors of men toward women that the law would overlook entirely.*



*Again, the importance of evidence related to motive is highlighted by the overheard conversation of the men. In this instance, directly after the women have found the dead bird, the juxtaposition is an example of situational irony: the men are still searching for what the women have found. George Henderson doesn’t consider whether or not to trust Mrs. Peters. He doesn’t think a woman even worthy of such concerns, which further trivializes her and her potential.*



*Here the story develops the conflicts between gender loyalty and the male-dominated legal system and the importance of evidence of a motive. Therefore, the women’s choice to conceal the evidence they’ve found is a clear act of rebellion against men and the law, a clear effort to help Minnie as best they can. The two women realize that Minnie can never receive a trial from people who will understand or even try to understand her. So they make themselves a jury of her peers who understand Minnie’s actions and judge her as justified. Knotting the quilt is, of course, a metaphor for Minnie’s act of killing her husband with a rope, and the men miss this metaphor entirely.*





## HOW TO CITE

To cite this LitChart:

### MLA

Champlin, Nikola. "A Jury of Her Peers." *LitCharts*. LitCharts LLC, 18 Jun 2015. Web. 21 Apr 2020.

### CHICAGO MANUAL

Champlin, Nikola. "A Jury of Her Peers." LitCharts LLC, June 18, 2015. Retrieved April 21, 2020. <https://www.litcharts.com/lit/a-jury-of-her-peers>.

To cite any of the quotes from *A Jury of Her Peers* covered in the Quotes section of this LitChart:

### MLA

Glaspell, Susan. *A Jury of Her Peers*. University of Iowa Press. 2010.

### CHICAGO MANUAL

Glaspell, Susan. *A Jury of Her Peers*. Iowa City: University of Iowa Press. 2010.