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Reading the Kitchen: Domestic Architecture and Gendered Knowledge in Susan Glaspell's *A Jury of Her Peers*

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Abstract:

Feminist critics have established that the kitchen in Susan Glaspell's *A Jury of Her Peers* is crucial to the story's gender critique. However, they have not fully theorised how the kitchen produces the epistemological difference that enables two farmwives to solve a murder that professional investigators cannot. The paper addresses that gap through spatial analysis, applying Bachelard's vertical polarity, Foucault's heterotopia, and Ahmed's affective economies to demonstrate that the kitchen is not merely symbolic but materially productive of alternative knowledge. These spatial mechanisms reveal that gendered knowledge does not simply emerge from social positioning alone but through material engagement with space and objects. This reveals how contemporary institutions continue to devalue domestic knowledge, which is embedded in spatial hierarchies.

Keywords: Susan Glaspell, spatial epistemology, heterotopia, affective circulation, feminist justice, domestic knowledge, gendered space.

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Introduction

Written in 1917, shortly before American women gained the right to vote and at a time when women were barred from jury service in most U.S. states, Susan Glaspell's *A Jury of Her Peers* reimagines the legal procedure and judgement. The narrative follows two women, Mrs Hale and Mrs Peters, who accompany male officials to the Wright farmhouse to investigate the murder of John Wright. The women were initially excluded from the official murder investigation owing to the assumed inferiority of their sex. Additionally, the investigators ignore the kitchen and dismiss its contents as mere domestic "trifles" unworthy of serious inquiry. While the kitchen is acknowledged as women's domain and hence trivial, the male investigators constantly belittle any insights the women offer from that space. Nevertheless, it is precisely in this devalued space that Mrs Hale and Mrs Peters uncover both motive and evidence. The women, towards the end, gain or rather, reconstruct agency of their own as they save Minnie, the prime suspect of John Wright's murder. They succeed in constructing an alternative narrative that diverges from the official one. The kitchen of the Wright farmhouse becomes an informal alternative courtroom in which the accused's peers take up the responsibility of the jury. The story critiques the structural injustice present in the legal system, which is designed to fail the whole female population. However, it also highlights how such structural injustice is produced and maintained through spatial and epistemological exclusions that render women's experiential knowledge illegible as evidence.

Glaspell's story has generated substantial feminist scholarship examining how gender, power and knowledge intersect within the patriarchal structure. Feminist readings often treat the kitchen as a sociological metaphor for gender segregation. Benko (2008) employs Linda K. Kerber's concept of "separate spheres" and analyses the kitchen as a representation of the private female province, contrary to the public male world. This approach exposes how the women's ability to interpret domestic space stems from their social positioning within it.

Similarly, Zhou (2024) reads the kitchen symbolically as a "cage" that represents women's submissive position and spatial confinement under patriarchy, and argues that the division of space functions as a site of patriarchal authority. While these analyses establish the kitchen's significance in gender politics, they tend to treat space primarily as a symbolic backdrop rather than as an active producer of the narrative's epistemological and political outcomes.

Building on feminist approaches, Moskop and Weiss (2025) propose an intersectional epistemological reading that transcends simple gender binaries. They argue that the kitchen functions as a "social space where a feminist standpoint community can be developed". This epistemological approach illuminates how systems of inequality outline what constitutes knowledge. However, it remains primarily focused on discourse and standpoint theory rather than on the material dimensions of the space itself.

While these scholarships establish the kitchen's significance in gender politics and epistemology, what remains unexamined is the domestic space not as a passive container for action but as the architect of the narrative epistemological and political work. Hence, the paper addresses the gap by applying complementary frameworks of spatial theory to *A Jury of Her Peers*. By employing three theoretical frameworks, namely, Bachelard's phenomenology of domestic space, Foucault's concept of heterotopia and Ahmed's theory of affective economies and sticky objects, the analysis reveals how Glaspell's architectural choices are not casual, but integral to her feminist critique. The space itself becomes the medium through which she challenges patriarchal systems of knowledge and law.

The paper argues that in *A Jury of Her Peers*, domestic space operates as a heterotopic counter-site, where gendered spatial literacy produces epistemological authority that formal legal investigation cannot access. Drawing on Bachelard's phenomenology of inhabited space, the paper examines how the Wright house materialises Minnie's psychological deterioration

through spatial decay and how the house's vertical polarity (attic/cellar) enacts, and inverts, gendered epistemological hierarchies. Using Foucault's concept of heterotopia, the paper analyses how the kitchen's marginalisation from official investigation paradoxically constitutes it as a space where alternative rules of evidence and judgement can operate. Additionally, the paper employs Ahmed's theory of affective economies to demonstrate how domestic objects like the preserves, quilting, the birdcage and canary function as "sticky" sites where affect accumulates, circulates, and produces truth through shared gendered experience. This spatial reading reveals that Glaspell's critique operates not only at the level of content (what women know) but at the level of form (how space itself generates knowledge).

Vertical Polarity: Gendered Epistemologies and Spatial Division

Bachelard, in his Introduction to *The Poetics of Space,* remarks that the physical image of the house becomes a "topography of our intimate being". (Bachelard xxxvi) In line with Bachelard's argument that a house that is once inhabited becomes a phenomenological extension of the self, the Wrights' house turns into an "inhabited space (which) transcends geometrical space". (Bachelard xxxvi) The house is described as situated in "a lonesome looking place" … "down in a hollow" and surrounded by "lonesome-looking trees" all around. (Glaspell 426) The grim and lonely image of the house symbolises Minnie's own life. Glaspell drops multiple symbolic hints at the unhappy conjugal life of Minnie with Mr John Wright, whom Mrs Hale describes as "a hard man". (Glaspell 432) Thus, weary of the emotional abuse and the dysfunctional environment, their loveless marriage deteriorates alongside the house. The house was uncared for, barely maintained, with only broken furniture shabbily scattered around. The house mirrors Minnie's psychological state, thus aligning with Bachelard's idea that physical space acquires a personality of its own through the accumulated experiences of its inhabitants.

However, for the male investigators, the domestic setting is nothing more than an unkempt house with an inadequate homemaker. They assume an air of superiority and mock the house's dilapidated condition. They completely dismiss Minnie's efforts to keep the worn-out house in order. Ignoring the domestic area on the ground floor, the men ascend to the upstairs bedroom, the crime scene, anticipating clues to the motive of the murder. The bedroom acts like the attic according to Bachelard's concept of "vertical polarity" of a house; at the same time, the kitchen on the ground floor mirrors Bachelard's cellar. (Bachelard 17-18) The attic, according to him, embodies clarity, intellect and elevation – "a space of wonders and heights" (Bachelard 17), while the cellar evokes the unconscious, primal fears and darkness, creating a "dramatic tension" (Bachelard 17) along the house's vertical axis. In line with the argument, Glaspell's investigators associate the attic with rational inquiry, legal authority and official knowledge, while dismissing the kitchen as the female arena, with nothing but "the kitchen things". (Glaspell 428) The women remain on the ground floor, examining the kitchen, which functions as Bachelard's cellar space, the repository of the repressed unconscious of the house. However, ironically, Glaspell inverts Bachelard's value system. The men's vertical movement upward represents a movement away from truth, while the women's grounded positioning in the domestic cellar is precisely where revelation occurs. The irrational domestic space contains the real truth of Minnie's psychic and emotional life, while the men's vertical expedition proves unfruitful. The kitchen holds what is buried, repressed and intentionally pushed down into the underworld of women's experience. Bachelard's vertical polarity thus becomes gendered as masculine epistemology moves upward and remains blind, while feminine epistemology stays grounded and perceives.

The Heterotopic Kitchen: Counter-Site and Alternative Rules

Having dismissed the kitchen as a trivial female space, the men effectively constitute it as what Michel Foucault calls a "heterotopia". Foucault defines heterotopia as "real places…which are

something like counter-sites, a kind of effectively enacted utopia in which the real sites…are simultaneously represented, contested and inverted." (Foucault 4) The kitchen thus functions as what Foucault calls a crisis heterotopia, a space where Minnie's marital and psychological crises unfolded over years of isolation and silencing. Following Foucault's principle that heterotopias are "reserved for individuals who are, in relation to society and to the human environment in which they live, in a state of crisis" (Foucault 4), the kitchen operates as the spatial container of Minnie's crisis - a crisis the men cannot recognise because they view women's domestic subordination as normalcy rather than trauma. However, the kitchen's heterotopic status shifts during the investigation: what was initially a space reserved for Minnie (as the site of her ongoing crisis) becomes a space reserved by Mrs Hale and Mrs Peters (to protect evidence of both her distress and her act of resistance). The women shield the kitchen from the male investigators by strategically playing along with their assumption that women are incapable of finding "real" clues. They do not challenge the County Attorney's dismissive remark towards their concern with "trifles". They tactically exploit patriarchal blindness to guard the very space that contains incriminating evidence, ensuring it remains beyond the notice of the investigators. Moreover, the kitchen turns heterotopic precisely because of men's exclusionary conduct. By rendering the kitchen secondary to the official investigation, they constitute it as a site that exists outside and beyond the normal order of the rest of the house, reflecting crisis and deviation. They unknowingly constitute a space where alternative forms of knowledge can operate. Here in the kitchen, the domestic literacy of women and female solidarity takes precedence in the process of truth-seeking.

Affective Evidence: Ahmed's Sticky Objects and Reconstruction of Motive

While the men conduct their official search through their logical reasoning and formal legal procedure, the women retrieve the truth through what Sara Ahmed calls "affective economies". These are systems in which the emotions flow between subjects and objects, accumulating

meaning through their association. She argues that certain objects become "saturated with affect, as sites of personal and social tension" where feelings "stick...through a process of accrual" (Ahmed 11, 90). Such stickiness is relational rather than inherent. Objects become affectively charged with encounters with individuals who possess the ability and literacy to read them. The Wrights' kitchen then turns into a similar sticky site that accumulates the affective evidence of Minnie's motive. The women were able to encounter and read them only through shared gendered experience. The first objects to become affectively charged are Minnie's jar of preserves. The women discover that most of the jars have frozen and burst, their contents spilt and wasted. The men find it ridiculous to worry over a jar of preserves when the woman is tried for murder. Despite this, the women, with their shared domestic literacy, understand that preparing the preserves is a labour-intensive task, and its wastage symbolises wasted effort, failed care and domestic futility. Mrs Peters immediately recognises this affect through her own experiences, recalling the discouragement she felt when her own preserves were ruined. Here, affect circulates between Minnie's loss and Mrs Peters' memory, with the broken jars serving as the sticky object mediating this emotional transfer. The broken jar of preserves also reinforces the broader atmosphere of neglect – the house is so cold and abandoned that even preserved things cannot survive, mirroring Minnie's own life frozen by isolation and lovelessness. The Sheriff's dismissive attitude towards the preserves as 'trifles' reveals his inability to read the affective economy that the women immediately recognise.

Mrs Hale and Mrs Peters find a half-done quilt and notice that the last few patches are sewn erratically, not matching the even stitches from earlier. While it symbolises physical evidence of a psychological shift, the women begin to see something even more as affect circulates. They recognise that even stitching means care and control in women's domestic work. The erratic, uneven stitches "stick" to feelings of anxiety, agitation and psychological disturbance. They feel the shift from control to disturbance as they have experienced similar domestic rhythms.

Quilting is part of their shared domestic literacy. Therefore, they notice at once the disruption in stitching as it "sticks" to their own experiences of distress breaking through domestic performance. When Mrs Hale remarks, "It's all over the place" (Glaspell 435), she is not just describing stitching, but recognising affective chaos made. Significantly, she quickly rips out and re-stitches the erratic parts of it as she sees the quilt as dangerous, because of the emotions that accumulate around it, namely, Minnie's state of mind. It is her attempt at "unsticking" the affect, which, if discovered, would incriminate Minnie. At the same time, the men cannot read the affective significance of the quilt because they do not share the gendered domestic framework. The quilt thus becomes a crucial site where affective circulation enables the women to access the truth that rational investigation cannot reach.

The discovery of the empty birdcage intensifies the affective investigation. Mrs Hale recalls the image of a young and cheerful Minnie Foster. Before marriage, she sang in the church choir and had a genial disposition. Thus, the singing bird trapped in the birdcage resonates with Minnie's voice and spirit trapped in marriage with John Wright. While the preserves and the quilt reflect Minnie's psychological disturbance, the birdcage with its door violently wrenched off its hinges signals her suppressed rage. The women immediately recognise this symbolism through their shared understanding of how the patriarchal marriage system functions as imprisonment for women.

The emptiness of the birdcage with its broken door hints at an act of rage and violence. The women continue their unofficial affective investigation until they discover a dead canary wrapped in silk in Minnie's sewing box. The ominous revelation of the dead bird functions as the ultimate sticky object. Every bit of knowledge so amassed by the women converges to form a clear and complete picture. The bird's twisted neck mirrors John Wright's and signals Minnie's motive. Mrs Peters responds knowingly as she recalls a traumatic incident from her own childhood when a boy killed her kitten and her murderous rage that followed it. She

remarks, “If they had not held me back, I would have—”. (Glaspell 439) She cannot finish the sentence, but the affective truth is transmitted. The women immediately discern that this bird was Minnie’s only respite from her isolated and traumatic marital life. It acted like her only true companion. However, when John Wright killed it, he also destroyed the last sign of beauty, song, and life in Minnie’s world. The canary, wrapped carefully in silk, becomes sticky with grief. Consequently, it acts like evidence not merely of John's cruelty but also of Minnie's unbearable loss. Significantly, the women choose to hide this object. They protect Minnie by removing the stickiest piece of evidence. Their decision marks the complete circulation of affect: from Minnie's trauma, through the material evidence, to the women's embodied recognition and the protective response that followed.

Conclusion

Glaspell makes the space testify. The Wright house generates epistemological difference through spatial mechanisms. The house’s deterioration materialises Minnie’s psychological state as a readable text. The vertical relationship between the kitchen and the bedroom inverts gendered hierarchies. The kitchen’s marginalisation from the official investigation renders it a heterotopic space, and paradoxically enables alternative knowledge to emerge from a space patriarchy dismisses as trivial. Finally, domestic objects like the burst jar of preserves, the erratic quilting, the broken birdcage and the dead canary accumulate affective charge that circulates between Minnie’s trauma and the women’s embodied recognition. Through these interconnected spatial mechanisms, Mrs Hale and Mrs Peters access the truth that formal investigation cannot, transforming the devalued domestic sphere into a site of epistemological authority and alternative justice.

By centring spatial analysis, this reading reveals what feminist and epistemological interpretations identify, but do not fully theorise. It argues that knowledge does not exist

differently for men and women; it is produced by a spatial mechanism that is received differently based on one's affective literacy. The knowledge emerges through specific spatial practices. It is by physically inhabiting the space that gives women shared domestic knowledge, and hence, they can read the house's physical deterioration as Minnie's psychological demise. Another is through the heterotopic exclusion of the kitchen from the official investigation process, which allows women to investigate affectively and thereafter protect that knowledge. Finally, these elements come together through affective circulation mediated by domestic objects, contact and association, transforming material evidence into an emotionally legible narrative.

Glaspell's critique resonates beyond its 1917 context. Contemporary legal and institutional systems continue to privilege quantifiable, documentable, "objective" forms of evidence, while dismissing knowledge embedded in emotional intelligence and embodied experience. It is as if emotional abuse, psychological control, and the accumulated weight of daily subordination cannot constitute legitimate testimony because they occur in private space and leave no forensic trace. Glaspell's insight that the kitchen contains crucial evidence the official crime scene lacks speaks to ongoing debates about whose knowledge counts, what forms of evidence are admissible, and which spaces are granted epistemic authority. A spatial literacy approach reveals that these are not merely questions of bias or representation, but structural exclusions embedded in the organisation of space itself. The kitchen's heterotopic function, operating under different rules and accessible only to those with specific literacies, illustrates how marginalised communities develop alternative epistemologies within spaces that dominant systems dismiss or cannot penetrate. Understanding how space produces knowledge, rather than simply reflecting pre-existing social divisions, offers a methodological tool for analysing contemporary struggles over epistemic justice, from whose testimony is believed in courtrooms to whose experiential knowledge is validated in policy-making.

By hiding the dead canary, Mrs Hale and Mrs Peters successfully establish that the kitchen is more than an intimate domestic space. They turn it into a legitimate site of judgement, where affective knowledge takes precedence over legal procedure to constitute valid evidence. With that premise, the jury of her peers means not just sharing gender, but the spatial positioning and literacies it produces.

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