Response Paper #4: An Argument about the Meaning of Susan Glaspell’s “Trifles”
Using the Lens of Literary Criticism (just one)

Value: 20 points

Format: Typed, double-spaced, MLA style

Length: 300-500 words

Due Date: See Syllabus or Website

Directions: In one to five paragraphs, present, support, and develop a claim about Susan Glaspell’s play “Trifles.” The claim should present a single, focused argument about the meaning of the play, one which reflects the concerns or questions raised by one of the literary theories. (Do name the literary theory in your intro & also in the assignment line of your heading.) Support your claim with evidence from the play and discussion of that evidence, keeping the literary theory in mind and using it as a lens for your examination of the play and the evidence.

Easiest literary theories to apply: Gender Criticism (& specifically Feminist Criticism), Psychological Criticism, New Criticism, Reader Response Criticism.

Medium difficulty: Marxist Criticism (only because Gender Criticism is so obvious that it can obscure class differences), New Historicism (primarily because of the need to do research correctly and to use it in support of your analysis of the text, including a unified argument about its meaning), & Deconstruction (only because it’s always difficult as the writer must identify conflicting meanings the text makes about the same topic and then create a unified claim reconciling them, possibly by explaining their common purpose, that is, what the text is trying to prove or say through this discrepancy.)

Greatest difficulty: Postcolonial (hard to apply to this particular text).
Sample Questions or Considerations
(to get you started & point you in the right direction – by no means an exhaustive list)

Psychological Criticism
What fears or desires motivated Mrs. Wright to kill Mr. Wright? Did she have a choice? To what extent does the play elicit our sympathy for Mrs. Wright and why (or why not)?

Gender Criticism
According to the play, what traditional or stereotypical roles are women OR men expected to play? OR Who (men or women) has the power, what kind, and how do they use/demonstrate it? OR Who (men or women) is oppressed, what shows the oppression, and how do they react to that oppression? Be specific. What attitude does the play demonstrate toward those roles or power situation? Is it upholding, questioning, challenging, or denouncing (etc.) them or it? What evidence in the play suggests this attitude?

New Criticism
What is the significance of the word “Trifles” to the meaning or argument of the play? What in the play qualifies as trifles? What is the play saying about trifles?

Deconstruction
You might apply this theory to the question from Gender Criticism and examine how, for example, the play both perpetuates the traditional or stereotypical views of women and at the same time it challenges that perspective, of course, pointing out how it does both and ultimately why it includes both, for what purpose or to what effect (your claim). Your claim at least about the purpose or effect of the contradiction must be unified.

Or you might apply it to the question from New Criticism. Just be careful that you are looking at the same thing from the same perspective and noticing a discrepancy or contradiction from that perspective. Looking at the way men and women see trifles is a contrast, not a contradiction as we expect that the men & the women would see trifles differently as they are coming from different perspectives. But do the women (or men) contradict themselves in their perception of trifles? Or does the play set up both the men’s & women’s perspectives as equally true and valid and ask the reader to reconcile them? If so, then you’ve discovered a possible opposition.

Marxist Criticism
To what extent are the characters oppressed by the society they live in and especially the class they belong to? What are the characters’ lives like? How do they live (survive)? What economic class do they belong to? What effect does their economic class have on their lives and choices? What commentary might this play be making about the society it depicts? Use specific characters and descriptions to support your ideas.

New Historicism
What in Glaspell’s life might suggest her purpose for writing this play? How do her particular experiences shed light on what she might be saying about women’s lives, rights, treatment, etc.? In essence, use research to back up a Gender Criticism argument and give it more weight. But still you must make an argument that focuses on the meaning of the text and prove it with analysis of the text, so the research is in addition, not instead of evidence from the text and analysis of it.

Reader Response Criticism
The most effective Reader Response approach is to look at and analyze the text rhetorically to reveal and explore how and why the writer seeks to appeal to the reader’s emotions and to convey a particular meaning to the reader for a particular purpose. Both the meaning and the purpose would need to be argued (presented and proved with evidence and interpretation, etc.). How and why the text involves the reader (in the meaning-making) would also need exploring and explanation. Questions to consider: Whom does the audience/reader identify with? From whose perspective do we see the events and/or characters of the play? Whose side do we
take? Why and for what purpose? Or, are we intended to remain outside the text, looking in objectively? How is this accomplished and why?

**Postcolonial Criticism**

It would involve identifying the dominant culture of the community (the colonizer) and what it expects all members to believe, how it expects them to act, and how otherness (the colonized) is perceived and treated. You can do this by looking only at the dominant culture, or you could identify & prove who the “other” is, who is having someone else’s rules, beliefs, or standards imposed upon him/her. But I think this approach will be difficult as it runs the risk of slipping into gender criticism.
Grading Rubric

Score: ___/20  Grade: ___  Percentage: ___%

Late (50%) Deduction: ___  One-Time Late pass used: ___  Incorrect Formatting (5%) Deduction: ___  Turnitin +/- ___ (10%) points

An "A" Essay or Paper (18-20 points) – SUPERIOR
1. Will demonstrate excellence in Critical Thinking, responding effectively, insightfully, and originally to the assignment, fulfilling or exceeding the length, consistently, thoughtfully, and thoroughly analyzing the text, and demonstrating keen understanding of it (and the literary criticism).
2. Will have excellent Focus, presenting a clear, specific, unified claim (thesis) and aptly focused reasons (points) in support of it.
3. Will provide excellent support and development, offering an abundance of relevant, specific reasons (support points), evidence (examples & details from or about the text), warrants, and backing (explanation and discussion of the meaning of the evidence).
4. Will have logical and effective Organization.
5. Will have correct, sophisticated, and effective Integration of Sources, with correct presentation and effective use of quotations, paraphrase, and summary, and correct MLA in-text citation, according to genre.
6. Will have clear, specific, and expressive Writing, effectively communicating the ideas.

A “B” Essay or Paper (16-17 points) – STRONG
1. Will demonstrate good Critical Thinking, responding effectively and originally to the assignment, fulfilling the length, consistently and thoughtfully analyzing the text, and demonstrating good understanding of it (and the literary criticism).
2. Will have good Focus, presenting a clear, specific claim (thesis) and focused reasons (points) in support of it.
3. Will provide good support and development, offering sufficient relevant, specific reasons (support points), evidence (examples & details from or about the text), warrants, and backing (explanation and discussion of the meaning of the evidence).
4. Will have effective Organization.
5. Will have correct and effective Integration of Sources, with correct presentation and effective use of quotations, paraphrase, and summary, and correct MLA in-text citation.
6. Will have clear and specific Writing, effectively communicating the ideas with occasional awkwardness or minor errors that do not detract from the ideas.

A “C” Essay or Paper (14-15 points) – ADEQUATE
1. Will demonstrate adequate Critical Thinking, responding adequately to the assignment, fulfilling the length, demonstrating adequate understanding of the text (and the literary criticism), and presenting some analysis of the text with occasional slips into plot summary, (character) description, judgment, or personal experience that do not derail from the overall analytical purpose.
2. Will have adequate Focus, presenting a vague or general claim and reasons (points).
3. Will provide adequate Support and Development, offering general and often vague evidence, warrants, and backing.
4. Will demonstrate adequate Organization, so that the reader can follow the argument despite occasional lapses.
5. Will have adequate Integration of Sources, clearly distinguishing between the student’s ideas and ideas from the text though presentation or use of quotations, paraphrase, summary, and parenthetical in-text citation may be inconsistent or incorrect.
6. Will have Writing that communicates the ideas but has some serious errors as well as considerable awkwardness, vagueness, and minor errors.

A “D” Essay or Paper (12-13 points) – WEAK
1. Will demonstrate minimal Critical Thinking, responding incompletely or inconsistently to the assignment, failing short of fulfilling the length, failing to stay focused on analysis but instead summarizing or judging the text or its contents or discussing irrelevant material, or demonstrating an oversimplified or incomplete understanding of the text (and/or literary criticism).
2. Will be poorly Focused, having an unclear, unfocused claim and reasons.
3. Will have minimal Support/Development, mostly relying on generalizations without explanation of them or vaguely or minimally supported opinions.
4. Will be poorly Organized, lacking transitions or clear sense of division or progression of ideas.
5. Will have sloppy Integration of Sources, attempting to distinguish others’ ideas from one’s own but often lacking correct or clear attribution and/or citation.
6. Will have poor Writing due to frequent and/or serious errors so that the reader has to work and sometimes guess at the meaning.

An “F” Essay or Paper (0-11 points) – INADEQUATE
1. Will lack Critical Thinking, failing to respond to the assignment, failing to fulfill the length, failing to analyze but instead summarizing or judging the text or its contents or discussing material not in the text, or failing to understand the text (and/or literary criticism).
2. Will lack Focus, having no claim.
3. Will lack Support/Development, listing facts from the text without explanation of them and/or listing opinions without supporting them.
4. Will lack any sense of Organization.
5. Will be plagiarized or contain plagiarism unintentional or intentional.
6. Will have unclear Writing due to numerous and often serious errors that prevent the ideas from being communicated.