Public and private space in Alison's House: the culture of the early twentieth century and the plays of Susan Glaspell

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Public and private space in *Alison’s House:*

The culture of the early twentieth century and the plays of Susan Glaspell

by

Kimberly Ann Miller

A Thesis Submitted to the
Graduate Faculty in Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for the Degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

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I think part of the educational value of a project like this is in realizing the support required to finish it. While I cannot list the names of everyone who inquired about the progress of my work, I certainly could not have completed this thesis without the assistance and guidance of the following people.

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CHAPTER 1 LITERATURE REVIEW AND CRITICAL APPROACH

Introduction

The year 1915 saw the formation of a theatre in Provincetown, Massachusetts. "Without money, without any known playwrights, without an audience, or a favorable critical attitude, but with an ideal it would not sacrifice, that theater did succeed. This happens rarely. . . ." (Waterman 65). This group was called the Provincetown Players and the ideal Arthur Waterman refers to is a commitment to supporting American playwrights who produced more experimental fare than the formula offerings that dominated Broadway at that time. This smaller and less commercial theatre would provoke thought as well as provide entertainment. Susan Glaspell and her husband, George "Jig" Cram Cook, both originally from the Midwest, were among the founding members of the Provincetown theatre and became two of the leading figures of Bohemian life.

The radical and unprecedented work of the Provincetown Players was not an altogether uncommon blossom to emerge from the socially conservative roots Glaspell (and Cook) had received growing up in Davenport, Iowa. Pioneers themselves, Glaspell's family had been among the first to settle the area of Davenport, near the Mississippi River. The act and art of pioneering, according to C.W.E. Bigsby, Linda Ben-Zvi, and others, became an important theme in Glaspell's work. Late in her life, Glaspell admitted, "I live by the sea, but the body of water I have the most feeling for is the Mississippi River . . . ." (Noe 13). So it's not surprising that while Glaspell pioneered the beginnings of the Provincetown Players and American experimental theatre in a fish house on the Lewis Wharf, facing the Atlantic Ocean, the setting of the stage inside was often the Midwest and the characters on that stage were pushing the boundaries society had ordained.

Glaspell wrote for the Provincetown Players since the group's earliest beginnings, but she was already an established writer by this time. Before she

1 Glaspell's first play was written with Jig Cook in 1914 and was performed in a neighbor's living room. The play was called "Suppressed Desires" and spoofed the growing interest in psychoanalysis, and it was enacted again during the Provincetown's first season.
had married Cook in 1913, she had published two novels, *The Glory of the Conquered* (1909) and *The Visioning* (1911), and a volume of short stories, "Lifted Masks" (1912), while she lived in Davenport where she had grown up. Before becoming a full-time writer, she lived in Des Moines, Iowa, to attend Drake University and complete a Ph.B. and then to work as a newspaper reporter, covering society news and later state politics. Because of her records at Drake there is some question over the year Glaspell was born. It is generally stated as 1882, but as Waterman points out, if she was twenty-one when she attended Drake in 1897, she would have been born in 1876 (Waterman 13).

I came to study Glaspell's work because of her presentations of and ties to the Midwest. Having grown up in the Davenport area, I at first was curious about her as a local celebrity of whom I had learned very little. I continued to study Glaspell because she used silence in her characters as a means of articulating their experiences, and in three of her plays, used a character's absence to drive the plot forward. Like other readers before me, I became intrigued by the silences that spoke as clearly as dialogue. Glaspell's final work for the stage, *Alison's House*, whose absent character is the fictional poet, Alison Stanhope, was awarded the 1931 Pulitzer Prize for Drama. During my study it became clear that while many critics will praise, or at least commend, Glaspell's earlier works for the stage,2 *Alison's House* was not widely accepted by the theatre critics of 1930. J. Brooks Atkinson called it "the most unsatisfactory dramatic award made during the past few years" ("Pulitzer" VIII:1). Likewise, the scholars studying Glaspell now remain reluctant to give as much attention to the prize-winning work as they do to the works of the Provincetown period.

Further study gave birth to a larger controversy. While many scholars, as I shall soon discuss, tie Glaspell's work to her life and connect her early plays to the radical climate of the 1910's, *Alison's House* does not receive the same cultural critique. It has often been noted that the character of Minnie Wright from Glaspell's first Provincetown one-act, *Trifles,* reflects woman's isolation in rural

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2 The other two plays with an absent character are *Bernice* and *Trifles.* *Bernice* is about family and friends who gather to mourn the death of the title character, a relatively young woman who was full of life and inspiration. Conversation in the play reveals to her best friend that while Bernice actually died of an illness, she staged her death to look like a suicide because of her husband's extra-marital affairs. Believing for the first time that he had been important to his wife, causing her to commit suicide, Bernice's husband resolves to live a better life. I will discuss *Trifles* in Chapter 3.
life of the time and Claire of The Verge, a full-length Provincetown work, depicts the tragedy that occurs when women are not allowed to choose their own destinies. Both were themes important to women's suffrage movement of the time. But Alison's self-imposed seclusion in Alison's House is considered to be an indication of problems in Glaspell's personal life, not a reflection of the time in which she wrote. It is as if Glaspell's connection with history stopped with the death of Jig Cook in 1924 and Glaspell was to remain in the climate of the "new," the world of the American 1910's and early 1920's. Much time and energy has been spent demonstrating why this is a poor Glaspell play instead of researching possible influences that may have led to any changes in Glaspell's style or interests. Here is where my study begins. I will attempt to fill the cultural or historical potholes left in the discussion of Alison's House by looking at social and theatrical changes between 1915 and 1930.

I will first review the major criticism surrounding Susan Glaspell and Alison's House and outline some of the discrepancies I discovered the current conversation. My second chapter will look at the assumed and possible sources for the play and Glaspell's adaptation of them to the stage. Finally in my third chapter I will look at changing themes in three of Glaspell's representative plays and parallel them to the society and the development of realism in American theatre during this period. My goal is to determine if Glaspell was influenced by more than her own life and to what extent American society did play a part in the writing of Alison's House.

Critical Background

Susan Glaspell's name has appeared in critical work almost annually since she began writing, yet many times all that is written is her name, a brief mention on the way to a discussion of the Provincetown Players or Eugene O'Neill, Provincetown's most celebrated playwright. But the last thirty years have seen an increased interest in Glaspell as a writer of her own merit and the most critical investigations have been conducted in the last twelve years. Alison's House can lay claim to only a small segment of this criticism. The much-anthologized "Trifles" and The Verge have received more attention, and I will be reviewing works which represent this trend in some depth to indicate
differences in critical approaches to the Provincetown works and Alison's House. Three headings help me to organize the material I will cover: theatre history, biographical/historical criticism and feminist criticism. I have divided the articles and books according to the context in which they were written, if it could be determined, and by the author's stated intent for studying and writing about Glaspel. As will soon become apparent, there are a few authors whose work would fit into more than one section.

**Theatre history**

I have gained additional appreciation for Susan Glaspell's plays and see a greater role for Alison's House than I had first considered after reading Brenda Murphy's arguments in her book, *American Realism and American Drama, 1880-1940*. In this "study of literary realism as it evolved in American drama" (ix) Murphy's purpose is to discover a theatrical definition of realism, based on the plays themselves, and to trace any influence the earlier realists of the nineteenth century may have had on the playwrights working between World Wars I and II. Glaspell's plays, "Trifles," "The Outside," Bernice, The Inheritors, and The Verge are discussed, mainly as plot summaries, to support Murphy's definition of realism. I wish to take her discussion one step further in Chapter 3 and add Alison's House to the list of realistic plays. This may not be as simple to do as it would at first seem because Alison's House does not easily fit any theatrical definition, except its classification as a Pulitzer Prize play. In this role, the play has found an entrance into the critical arena.

There is a body of scholars who are interested in the view of the theatre through the Pulitzer Prize plays. One of the most recent authors is Thomas P. Adler who maintains that "the Pulitzer plays provide a far more reliable accounting of the nature and development of serious American drama than the equivalent novels do of classic American fiction" (x). He studied winners from the years 1918 to 1985 "to understand [the prize's] dominant focus" (xii). Alison's House, with its hopeful acceptance of a daughter who brought disgrace

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3 The most recent book published on Susan Glaspell is Mary E. Papke's *Susan Glaspell, A Research and Production Sourcebook*. While it does not provide any interpretation of Glaspell's work, the annotated bibliography of criticism about Glaspell has been a useful tool in preparing to research the critical works. I would like to emphasize that I base my discussion of the critical background on my own readings and research. I have relied on Papke's summaries only when I have been unable to secure the source myself and note this in my discussion.
on the family and its gift of poetry to the coming century, comes under the topic of "The Idea of Progress," but on the whole, Adler remains unimpressed by Glaspell's work and believes it would have been stronger as a one-act play. Perhaps what is most valuable to me from Adler's study is his observation that *Alison's House* is

> noteworthy . . . [because] so many of the subjects pursued in the Pulitzer plays over the decades here converge: the new woman whose values are a beacon for the future; the artist as quasi-mystical singer for society; and the tempering of harsh paternalism through compassion, often learned from the child. Adler 134

The value of embodying so many themes, perhaps too many themes, has yet to be discussed.

Judith Louise Stephens studied the women in Pulitzer plays awarded between 1918 and 1949 for her dissertation from Kent State in 1977. Basing her reading on several personal qualities, Stephens was able to conclude that as the years progressed, female characters were more likely to be dependent on others, concerned mostly with their homes and families, and less likely to have the protagonist role (Chinoy 249). Stephens shows that the absence of strong female characters in the 1930's was not a characteristic of Glaspell's writing alone, but a trend that held through 1949. The study of the next scholar, Judith Olauson, provides more information on why this may have been so.

Most likely because of the Pulitzer Prize status of *Alison's House*, Glaspell was included in Olauson's study of American women playwrights writing between 1930 and 1970. Olauson's intent is to discover if female playwrights defined their female characters through a male or traditional standard or through their own experiences (Olauson 21). She refers to *Alison's House* as a "traditional historical romance" (139) in which the heroine, Elsa, who has run away with a married man, finds censure from society and family but

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4 Stephens uses four characteristics (a preoccupation with love, irrationality and emotionality, selfishness or selflessness, and passivity) from fictional heroines and "integrates" them with four aspects for understanding theatrical characters (motivation, deliberation, decision and action). She summarizes her findings according to the decade in which the Pulitzer was won.

5 This will become an important point later on during my discussion of the feminist criticism of Glaspell's work.
a kind of acceptance in Alison's poetry which centers on a dominant theme of loneliness. Olauson concludes that while the female playwrights of the 1930's based their heroines on traditional models, they explored the confusion women felt in redefining their role in society. I believe Olauson makes a good point when she reminds her readers that women had recently earned the right to vote (in 1920 with the passing of the Nineteenth Amendment), so female playwrights did not seem to be writing plays in protest for certain rights . . . However, the subsiding of the feminist movement was no indication that the social problems of women had been alleviated, and woman writers at least seemed aware of the unresolved questions which remained for women in American society. Olauson 140

According to Olauson's study, Glaspell, who has been criticized for blunting the edge of her attacks on social injustice in Alison's House, is part of a larger trend resulting from the passage of women's right to vote. The issues had changed since 1915 and Glaspell had changed with them.

In directing attention specifically to Susan Glaspell, C.W.E. Bigsby exemplifies the confusion Alison's House has created in criticism. A Critical Introduction to Twentieth-Century American Drama, a three volume work written by Bigsby, and a collection of Glaspell's plays, edited by Bigsby, stand as proof that he has dedicated no small amount of time writing about Susan Glaspell and American theatre. Volume One of A Critical Introduction to Twentieth-Century American Drama covers the years 1900 to 1940 and is dedicated to discussion of the little theatre movement which the Provincetown Players were a part of. I found this an important work because it provided a broad placement of Glaspell in the theatrical world, but because it is so broad, and necessarily so, Bigsby doesn't address cultural movements that also may have played a role in Glaspell's work. The theatre, of course, is the primary focus. Glaspell's personal cultural background is discussed in depth in the introduction to Plays

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6 Besides Glaspell, Olauson bases her thesis on the work of Rose Franken (Another Language), Zoe Akins (The Old Maid), Clare Booth (The Women), Rachel Crothers (Susan and God), and Lillian Hellman (The Children's Hour and The Little Foxes). At times Olauson refers to other works by these playwrights to clarify minor points.

7 This is a three volume work and the entire set was published in 1982.
by Susan Glaspell. Here Bigsby draws on details from Glaspell's life and Jig Cook's vision of the theatre to show how Glaspell developed the themes of pioneering and of the struggle between life and death in her work. Because he is thorough in his discussion of the Provincetown plays, I trust Bigsby's scholarship, yet he does create confusion in discussing Alison's House because his opinion of its value changes from A Critical Introduction, published in 1982, to Plays by Susan Glaspell, published in 1987.

The first chapter of Bigsby's A Critical Introduction to Twentieth Century American Drama, Volume One 1900-1940 is dedicated to the Provincetown Players, and Glaspell receives her own section within the chapter. Writing this in the early 1980's, Bigsby declares that "Alison's House is a lyrical celebration of the human spirit ... " (Bigsby Critical 34), and that "[a]t a time when art was required to engage the brutal social and economic realities of American life, she [Glaspell] was in effect proposing an intensely personal art" (Bigsby Critical 34). Bigsby praises Glaspell's originality and even seems to mourn the fact that Glaspell did not write for the theatre after Alison's House, so promising did the play appear. Five years later, in 1987, when Bigsby published Plays, the collection of Glaspell's best Provincetown works, he states that "Alison's House is not a good play. In attacking social conventions it remains in thrall to theatrical convention." (Bigsby Plays 27). Bigsby feels that Glaspell controlled the tone and the pace of the play too much and this led to poor character development, while other critics, such as Waterman below, see these same characteristics as a sign of Glaspell maturing as a playwright. Of all the critics I've had the opportunity to study, Bigsby will continue to be the most intriguing, yet he doesn't acknowledge that within a space of five years he has given two different opinions about the same play. With my own study of the changes in culture and theatre between 1922 and 1930, I hope to make some sense in the shifts in tone and character evident in Alison's House.

Biographical and historical criticism

Arthur Waterman's work, Susan Glaspell, was published for the Twayne's United States Authors Series, and remains in my opinion the most complete look at Glaspell's life and works. Even though it was published almost thirty years ago, in 1966, and at times seems more biographical than critical,
Waterman's text is still quoted in and found on the source lists of many works pertaining to Susan Glaspell and the Provincetown Players. His critical stance is to support Glaspell as a "minor" American author, one deserving more attention than she has been given, by discussing how her short stories, novels, and plays fulfill the conventions of the genres she worked in. To build his case, Waterman divides and traces Glaspell's work through three major periods of her life: the reporter and local-colorist in Des Moines, Iowa, the regional novelist in Davenport, and the radical playwright of Provincetown.

Of *Alison's House*, Waterman, unlike Bigsby, praises Glaspell's control of her tone and characters. He establishes that the play is based on Genevieve Taggard's *The Life and Mind of Emily Dickinson* (1930), but does so only to point out that ED (Emily Dickinson) would be a difficult character to stage, so Glaspell deserves further praise and literary merit for using the device of never bringing the ED character of Alison on stage. Waterman doesn't pursue the importance of ED to this time period, the 1920's. He acknowledges in his conclusion that Glaspell should only be considered a minor American author, but he says that *Alison's House* "is generally recognized as one of the highlights of the American theater in the 1930's" (Waterman 89). He doesn't expand on this point and no other critic of Glaspell's has been willing to test his assertion.

It is difficult for me to support Waterman's statement about Glaspell's importance to the 1930's because I'm not sure how he would establish the criteria for the status of a "highlight." In terms of critical acclaim or length of run, 41 performances, there is little evidence to support the success of the play. Using Waterman's terminology, though, I would like to discuss *Alison's House* as a cultural "highlight," in the way that Glaspell *did* place the ED character on stage through a presentation of the legend surrounding her. I will discuss this in Chapter 2.

I would like to acknowledge at this point that I am aware, as most literary critics are, that the Twayne Authors Series is not the in-depth criticism that many scholars base their hypotheses on today. Waterman's work gives greatest insight to the development of literary genres and offers very little cultural critique. Yet in this point I feel the book has a strength. *Susan Glaspell* provided a lot of information that served as background material, and I can read
in other critics how Waterman provided the jumping off points for their more recent criticism. One of these critics is Marcia Noe.

Marcia Noe, writing her book, *Susan Glaspell, Voice From The Heartland*, almost twenty years after Waterman, finds Glaspell's life "interesting in the way it parallels the intellectual and cultural patterns that were developing in America from the end of the Civil War until the middle of the twentieth century" (Noe 9). Like Waterman's, Noe's work is highly biographical and she takes a strong interest in spirituality as a theme of Glaspell's work. This spirituality is not that of belief in a God, but in the power that one individual has to influence and leave a legacy for those who follow. Noe relates this back to Glaspell's fidelity to her own visions of artists and individuals creating a change in society.

Waterman and Noe are similar in their belief that Glaspell's writing reflected the times during which she lived. Noe sums it up in saying

When read in order of composition, her [Glaspell's]
works become a microcosm of the literary history of America,
reflecting such literary movements as transcendentalism,
the revolt of the village, the revolution in American drama,
the proletarian novel. Noe 84

Waterman and Noe parallel Glaspell's life to the literary styles prominent during her most prolific years. I would like to expand such efforts to develop further a parallel between the culture and the literature produced. Noe and Waterman only attempt to parallel cultural influences to Glaspell after she has stopped writing for the theatre. For example, both Noe and Waterman use the Great Depression as a metaphor for Glaspell's spouseless and childless state at the end of her life. I wish to take a closer view of the culture during the time Glaspell was writing *Alison's House* and relate the culture to her work, not her life.

**Feminist criticism**

Feminist scholarship is perhaps the main reason that the plays of Susan Glaspell have gained greater attention in the last twelve years. These scholars

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8 This metaphor may be a bit broad and dramatic but is still apt to Glaspell's situation. Her second husband, Norman Matson, left her for a teenager, the daughter of a mutual acquaintance of Matson's and Glaspell's. It was not so much the teenager's youth, but the fact that she was carrying Matson's child, which led to the break with Glaspell.
are drawn to Glaspell because she creates strong female characters fighting their way out of marginalized positions. For example, Claire of *The Verge* is a scientist whose family cannot understand why her work on a new species of plant, The Breath of Life, must take precedence over their concerns. She goes insane, believing herself to be God-like. Madelaine Morton of *The Inheritors* accepts a jail sentence instead of compromising her beliefs about free speech. While these plays, and consequently *Alison's House*, have been rescued from near obscurity, we are not always left with a clear picture of the importance, or even of the events, of *Alison's House*. I will begin with the most recent book-length study dedicated to Glaspell's life and works.

Veronica Makowsky uses her book, *Susan Glaspell's Century of American Women, A Critical Interpretation of Her Work*, to begin where Waterman and Noe have concluded. Drawing on the two previous authors, Makowsky acknowledges the importance of Glaspell's Midwestern roots and her interests in the individual artist struggling in society, yet Makowsky's real interest is in first, why Glaspell has not been canonized and second, how "Glaspell's works depict women's lives over a century of American history, from that of the pioneers of the 1840's to war mothers of the 1940's, and I [Makowsky] wish to examine her use of the maternal metaphor within this context" (Makowsky 11). Makowsky's use of the maternal metaphor to look at Glaspell's work is fitting because she reminds us, as did Waterman and Noe (see footnote 4), that Glaspell lost her second husband to a pregnant teenager while Glaspell herself remained childless (Makowsky 125-126). This metaphor leads Makowsky to look at the changing roles of women during Glaspell's lifetime and the possible effect this had on Glaspell. She begins with the concept of the American Girl of the late 1800's and ends with the importance of maternity and domesticity during the 1930's. This cultural investigation establishes an important frame for looking at Glaspell's works and the society women lived in.

Ann E. Larabee, Christine Dymkowski, and Cynthia Sutherland are interested in Glaspell's use of women's marginal position in society. Larabee looks at Eugene O'Neill, Djuna Barnes, and Susan Glaspell to discuss how linguistic abilities create social identities, but she mentions *Alison's House* only in passing. While Larabee's article presents some interesting parallels among the three playwrights, it is not a culturally based study. We do not know why
linguistic skill is more important to this group of writers than any other group at a different time in theatre history. Dymkowski discusses how marginalization places women at the edge between life and death, one of Glaspell's common recurring themes. The only mention Alison's House receives is in conjunction with Glaspell's Bernice. Dymkowski emphasizes that both plays are centered on a female character who never appears on stage, and "[i]t is yet another way in which Glaspell makes central the apparently marginal--indeed, in stage terms, the non-existent" (Dymkowski 93). Neither Larabee nor Dymkowski fit Alison's House into their theses about Glaspell's writing.

Also interested in marginalized positions and linguistics is Cynthia Sutherland who studies Glaspell in conjunction with Zona Gale, Zoe Akins, and Rachel Crothers. Like Judith Olauson, Cynthia Sutherland points to a waning aggressiveness in the feminist movement due to the passing of the Nineteenth Amendment in 1920. According to Sutherland, the feminists in the 1920's and 1930's "attempt[ed] to expand popular support [in the movement] through the use of muted political rhetoric which intentionally avoided controversy" (Sutherland 319). In following this trend, Glaspell and others may have reaped commercial rewards, but the plays were "critical failure[s]" (Sutherland 320). Alison's House and The Old Maid, which won playwright Zoe Akins the 1935 Pulitzer Prize, are Sutherland's examples of plays by female writers receiving honors because the main character was "the 'old maid' figure in whom the threat of sex-role is 'neutralized'" (Sutherland 330). Therefore, Glaspell and Akins "safely distanced controversial feminist issues by presenting women tethered by Edwardian proprieties rather than more immediately recognizable topical restraints" (Sutherland 330).

This statement is one I have often returned to in my study of Alison's House. Sutherland and Olauson have made important points in marking the change in the feminist movement after 1920. They show that old themes had to be addressed in new contexts, but my research will argue that Glaspell was not "distancing" her characters from the barriers women faced. She was contextualizing the interest in ED's 100th birthday in 1930 by setting her play in 1899 and this discussion will take place in Chapter 2.9

9 A final recurring theme valued by feminist scholars is the importance of sisterhood in Glaspell's work. Phyllis Mael looks solely at the one-act "Trifles" in her discussion of how sisterhood can be empowering for
Linda Ben-Zvi stands out for doing extensive critical feminist and historical work on Susan Glaspell and her plays. In her article, "'Murder, She Wrote': The Genesis of Susan Glaspell's "Trifles," Ben-Zvi contextualizes the possible source for Glaspell's "Trifles" by following Glaspell's early career as a reporter for the Des Moines Daily News and her final assignment to cover the December 2, 1900, murder of John Hassock. Ben-Zvi's interest in the parallels between "Trifles" and Glaspell's earlier account of the murder is to ascertain how society treats a woman who breaks out of her role as care-giver to become a murderess. Ben-Zvi also outlines changes in Glaspell's personal development based on the contrast between the court case and the stage production. From these investigations she is able to point to changing attitudes in society and in Glaspell from 1900 to 1916. I think a similar approach to Alison's House may be of interest to determine if Glaspell had really "surrendered," (Makowsky 159) from writing about the issues of the time. This is what I wish to do and would like to acknowledge that Ben-Zvi's article provided an important model for my second chapter, although any errors in research are my own.

Before I conclude this section, I would like to state that my study has been driven in part by some careless reading Alison's House has been subjected to in a bid to fit it to various definitions of Glaspell's work. Marcia Noe mistakes the author of one of the poems that appears in the play as well as the occasion of the poem's reading. Veronica Makowsky mistakes the birth year of Alison's youngest nephew, Ted. Both Barbara Ozieblo and Judith Olauson base main points of their discussion on the belief that Alison's niece, Elsa, claims the lost poems for her own.10 I do not wish to imply that because of the mistaken women. In the article, "Rebellion and Rejection: The Plays of Susan Glaspell," Barbara Ozieblo claims that in "focusing on those facets of [Glaspell's] work that threaten male authority [through sisterhood], I [Ozieblo] hope to account for Glaspell's exclusion from the dramatic canon" (Ozieblo 66). Other scholars who are studying Glaspell, such as Karen Alkalay-Gut and Leonard Musstaza have been interested in the one-act "Trifles" and the short story Glaspell based on it, "A Jury of Her Peers," and do not relate to what I will be discussing in the following chapters. Current interest in Glaspell's work has drawn more attention to her full-length play, The Verge. In March 1991 Brigham Young University English Department and Theatre and Film Department sponsored a conference on "Susan Glaspell—Rediscovering an American Playwright." This convention took a feminist approach and discussed male and female views on insanity (Bach 94-96) in the play. While I think Glaspell can be studied for the male and female roles she depicts, I feel there is a more historical look we can take.

10 Noe's mistake changes the climax of the play and Makowsky's misreading erases much of the tension between the two brothers, Ted and Eben. The assertion Ozieblo and Olauson make about Elsa disregards the very important theme of gift-giving in the play. The following is an in-depth discussion of the impact of the misreadings. A complete plot summary can be found in Chapter 2.
Noe's mistake is in the line, "Ann, falling in love with the Chicago reporter, walks with him where Alison walked; at the stroke of midnight she reads Alison's poem, 'The House,' to Mr. Stanhope" (Noe 61). This is from a paragraph where Noe demonstrates that most of the characters in the play resemble Alison in some way. Ann does so by walking by the river Alison enjoyed and by making a gift of poetry in the way that Alison made small gifts to the children when they were young. From my several readings of the play, I recognize that Ann, a secretary and child-in-spirit to the Stanhope family, does fall in love with the Chicago reporter, Mr. Knowles, and they do take a walk by the river. The rest of Noe's description is incorrect.

To demonstrate why the error is a grave one, I'll begin with the poem. "The House," is Ralph Waldo Emerson's and it is first read by Mr. Stanhope to Knowles, a reporter and Alison fan, in Act II. We never read Alison's poetry in the play and only hear of the effect it has on people. We are allowed to sample two lines of Knowles' poetry at the beginning of the play and he also reads part of Emerson's "Forbearance" when he is speaking with Mr. Stanhope in Act II. The poem is important to Mr. Stanhope, and to us, because it is from one of Alison's favorite books. Stanhope was going to keep the book for himself but he gives it to Knowles in honor of Alison who enjoyed giving small gifts for no apparent reason (Glaspell Alison's 97). In this way Stanhope could carry on Alison's spirit.

Part of the poem is repeated towards the end of the play when Mr. Stanhope cannot face the idea of publishing the last of Alison's poems which would reveal the depths of the loneliness she felt. As his children try to convince him to allow publication, it is Knowles, not Ann, who recites the final two stanzas, reminding Stanhope that Alison, now belonging to eternity, has gone beyond being a family member, an occupant of definable time and space. Knowles throughout the play stands as reminder of the impact Alison had on her readers.

Noe also confuses when the poem is read. Knowles recites the stanzas and leaves the bedroom where the family has read Alison's poems. Within moments of his departure, the only two persons left in the room, and on stage, are Elsa and Stanhope, her father. Because Elsa has run away with a married man, she has been uncertain of her father's acceptance of her in the family home and this is their first chance to talk privately. After what is supposed to be an emotional dialogue between them (critics differ on the impact this scene makes), Stanhope accepts that Elsa should determine the fate of the poetry, and in doing this, he accepts Elsa for who she is. "...He holds her close while distant bells ring in the century" (Glaspell Alison's 155). If the character that Stanhope embraces at the end of the play is Ann as Noe implies, two conflicts in the play remained unresolved. The first is the relationship between Stanhope and Elsa. She would not have been allowed to accept the guilt that is her due for running away with a married man and accepting the guilt in a way lightens it. Second, Stanhope would never have faced the role his sister Alison holds in the public world. By giving Elsa the poetry at midnight and hugging her, he is acknowledging Alison's fame and her ability to be a gift-giver. It is important that Stanhope and Elsa reach resolutions with themselves and each other because they are different versions of Alison, and it could be further argued, versions of Emily Dickinson. I will discuss this further in Chapters 2 and 3.

Makowsky also overlooks important relationships in her discussion that Alison's family has not received any of her greatness. Makowsky points to "Alison's much younger nephew Ted, born after her death [emphasis mine], sees her legacy as ripe for exploitation" (Makowsky 115). Actually, Eben, Ted's older brother, tells us that Ted was born two years before Alison's death which influences what Eben expects from Ted.

EBEN (going to him [Ted], taking him by the collar, lifting him to his feet and shaking him back and forth) You miserable little fool! And you're the baby Alison used to say got through from heaven. . . . Glaspell Alison's 38

This oversight on Makowsky's part eases much of the tension between Eben and Ted and actually erases Eben's chance to wonder why the members of family haven't achieved any success or happiness since they all had contact with her, and in a sense, received her blessing. This is also an important moment to keep in mind because Eben, who has always done what he was supposed to do, loses his control and feels the need to shake sense physically into Ted.

As I have mentioned above, the theme of Alison's gifts is an important one to the play. Almost each character becomes a giver and a receiver. Agatha, who has safe-guarded the last of Alison's poems for almost two decades because she cannot destroy them herself, gives them to Elsa right before she dies. She realizes in the final moments of her life that Elsa, more than anyone else, will understand them and know what to do with them. When Stanhope learns of the poems, he wishes to destroy them immediately, but the family reminds him that they have been given to Elsa which shows their support of her regardless of what she has done. Elsa, aware that she really has no rights in family business, does not claim the poems and

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reading we are to disregard what each critic has had to say, but it is necessary to point out that if accepted, the mistake(s) would create a play different from the one Glaspell wrote. I hope my study can create a clear picture of forces at work in *Alison's House*.

I believe the critical background of Susan Glaspell's works shows that Glaspell was a writer who lived in a world of change and reacted to it through her writing. Feminist scholars have been interested in Glaspell's construction of woman's experience of marginalization, but have not successfully reconciled *Alison's House* to their readings of Glaspell's earlier work from Provincetown. Theatre historians, like the critics of 1930, are uncomfortable with the idea of *Alison's House* as a Pulitzer Prize winner and remain more interested in Glaspell's contributions from the Provincetown bills. The critics who have placed an emphasis on Glaspell's life have proven time and time again that her pioneering background helped her to be the founder of a radical form of theatre, but her personal behavior and views remained conservative. It would then seem that her personal life did have some influence on her work but cannot stand as the definitive guide to understanding it. Ben-Zvi and Makowsky, establishing historical connections to Glaspell's work in order to understand literature and society, have provided me with good examples of where to begin my own study. Because of the number of mistakes that have been made in reading *Alison's House*, I think my study is an important one. My intention in looking at the intersection points between the play and the culture in which it was produced is not to establish this work as a misunderstood masterpiece, but to investigate if there is a smoother path that connects the Provincetown plays and the Pulitzer winner.  

**Critical Approach**

My approach has been contextualized by three "key assumptions"
(Veeser xi) of most New Historicists, as explained by H. Aram Veeser in *The New Historicism*. What has remained uppermost in my thoughts during this research is, in Veeser's words, "that literary and non-literary 'texts' circulate inseparably" (ix). While the definition of "texts" could be another study in itself, I would like to identify the texts that early on shaped my work and direction.

Before Glaspell's *Alison's House* three biographers, Bianchi, Pollitt, and Taggard, wrote about the life of ED. Their works were important literary texts, and their presentations of the Dickinson family and ED's reputation as a recluse became important non-literary texts. The changes and conformities Glaspell made in her depiction of ED's life from those of the biographers parallels cultural and theatrical changes in the early part of the century, as Ben-Zvi discovered with the John Hossack murder case and the play, "Trifles." To use the words of Joseph R. Roach, I have tried to "discern instances of intertextuality, erasing the line that scholars once drew between literature and its cultural background" (Reinelt 295), in hopes of understanding both the literature and the culture more thoroughly.

Yet while I have been reading, and evaluating, the works of scholars who have preceded me, I tried to remain aware of a second assumption of New Historicists, "that every act of unmasking, critique, and opposition uses the tools it condemns and risks falling prey to the practice it exposes" (Veeser xi). For example, I disagree with Sutherland's interpretation of the time setting of *Alison's House*. She views it as a means of safely addressing feminist issues, a somewhat dangerous topic that seemed to threaten femininity and domesticity during the 1930's. I will argue that setting the action of the plot in 1899 was a way to parallel interest specific to 1930 on the stage, yet I may not have taken as great an interest in researching the play's setting as I would have if Sutherland had not begun the conversation in 1978. I owe my understanding of the setting partially to Sutherland, so I risk overlooking important historical or critical information by supporting my thesis in response to hers.

The result is Veeser's third assumption, "that no discourse, imaginative or

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12 Sutherland remarks that leading feminists, Jane Addams and Carrie Chapman Catt, "exalted family, motherhood, and domestic values" (Sutherland 330) so as not to lose political or social support because a main fear of persons opposing equal rights was that the family structure would be drastically altered or eliminated if women were granted more power and choice.
archival, gives access to unchanging truths nor expresses inalterable human nature" (Veeser xi). I realize that I am part of the society I am trying to critique and I cannot raise myself out of my experience to be wholly objective. I do not present this work as the definitive look at Alison's House or the culture that produced it because each of us will have a different definition of the "truth" about this play. On the contrary, I hope my work will spark questions in future readers, spurring them to study this period of history, in the same way that I have been inspired by those whom I now cite.
CHAPTER 2 EMILY DICKINSON IN ALISON'S HOUSE

The End of Emily Dickinson's Century

Arthur Waterman noted that Susan Glaspell got the idea for Alison's House after reading The Life and Mind of Emily Dickinson by Genevieve Taggard (Waterman 86). Taggard was not the only writer to take a critical interest in ED during the 1920's, and Glaspell was joining a vital conversation when she presented her unauthorized picture of the poet via the character of Alison Stanhope. But given the widespread interest in ED, it's possible that Glaspell had read more than just Taggard. 1930 marked the celebration of ED's 100th birthday and the interest in her was high, almost as high as the interest in uncovering the identity of the man whose lost affection led ED to a life of near reclusiveness, or so the story goes. I think it necessary to look at the major publications about ED during this time to determine relevant themes, and ways of discussing these themes, that Glaspell carried from book to stage. The focus of this first section will be to introduce the authors Martha Dickinson Bianchi, Josephine Pollitt, and Genevieve Taggard, and the reception of their works.

Between 1924 and 1929, Martha Dickinson Bianchi, ED's niece, published three books pertaining to her famous aunt. The Life and Letters of Emily Dickinson appeared in 1924 and Bianchi here expressed hopes that her book might "lift the veil, or presume to lead her [ED's] shy reality into the light of mortal dawns again" (Bianchi Life and Letters preface). In this work and the others that follow, Bianchi strives to project the Dickinsons as a normal New England family for the time they lived in and ED's reputation as a recluse as an insult.

To one who loved her it is unthinkable that she could ever be supposed to have consciously secreted herself, or self-consciously indulged in whim or extravaganza in living, which her fine breeding would have been the first to discard as vulgar and unworthy. Bianchi Life and Letters 4

Several paragraphs and passages have supported my feeling about Bianchi's intent, but for brevity's sake, I reproduce only one more below.
A high exigence constrains the sole survivor of her family to state her [ED] simply and truthfully, in view of a public which has, doubtless without intention, misunderstood and exaggerated her seclusion--amassing a really voluminous stock of quite lurid misinformation of irrelevant personalities. She has been taught in colleges as a weird recluse, rehearsed to women's clubs as a lovelorn sentimentalist--even betrayed by one America essayist of repute to appear a fantastic eccentric.

Bianchi *Life and Letters* preface

Two interesting points can be drawn from Bianchi's statement. The first is that the true picture of ED has yet to be presented. The second is that as the only family member left, Bianchi holds that responsibility.

Allow me to pause for a moment and state that an authentic account of ED's work and life, and who could provide it, was an important question even before Bianchi published her book in 1924. Genevieve Taggard, whom I introduce prematurely as she offers background information Bianchi does not, opens the foreword of her book by lamenting that no respectable book had been written about ED earlier because a "scandal and a lawsuit ended the editing of the poems and deterred the memoir some friend might have written" (xi) after ED's death. The scandal she refers to seems to be an affair between Austin Dickinson, Bianchi's father/ED's brother, and Mabel Loomis Todd, a friend of the family who helped to edit the first of ED's posthumously published poems (McIntosh 2841). McIntosh and Hart point out that Todd cut or scratched out several references to Bianchi's mother in ED's work (2841). Let me speculate that Bianchi, because of her parents' bad relationship, plus the rumors of ED's eccentricity, may have felt the need to establish her own authority and the respectability that could stand behind it when she wrote. Her own writing does emphasize the family's respectability. What I do know is that ED's biographers looked to her family as one means of understanding her.

Bianchi's attempt at biography was accepted graciously by the public, but her efforts were not highly praised. Herbert S. Gorman, writing the review of *The Life and Letters of Emily Dickinson* called the book "both a pleasure and a disappointment. . . . Mrs. Bianchi has missed her chance, although there is yet
time for her to enlarge this life to the proportions that the subject deserves" (Gorman Ill:7). Bianchi was often criticized for her selective version of the facts, but forgiven due to the emotional ties to her subject. Many times her facts and descriptions are lines or stanzas from ED's own poetry which the reader must trust Bianchi to apply to ED's life as ED would have done herself. Unfortunately, Bianchi failed at one thing she had emphasized as being important to her, using her position as a family member to clarify who ED was. The role of "sole survivor" meant a lack of objectivity, but this did not mean other biographers would have an easier job trying to define ED. As time would prove, the more that was written about ED, the more there would remain to be said.

A second book, The Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson, was also published by Bianchi in 1924, but the title proved incorrect. By this time Genevieve Taggard was researching her own book and this research led to "the discovery of documents through which was unearthed the true story of the love affair that had so enormous an influence on the life and art of EMILY DICKINSON" (Taggard advertising after appendices). Bianchi published the "discovery," Further Poems of Emily Dickinson Withheld from Publication by Her Sister Lavinia in 1929. Instead of creating a clearer picture of the American poet, the 150 newly discovered poems only clouded the mysteries of why she was rarely seen and who her admirer was. Here one piece of criticism came to the foreground that would haunt all biographers to come. Percy Hutchison, writing for The New York Times Book Review, March, 1929, stated "The sister [Lavinia] seems to have shown a lack of logic in printing part of the poet's work; she should have refused the world none or all" (Hutchison "Further" IV:3). The search for the real ED and her lover began, but since biographers could not nail a complete picture of ED down, their works were criticized more than praised.

The publication, Further Poems, was quickly followed by the appearance of Emily Dickinson, The Human Background of Her Poetry by Josephine Pollitt and Genevieve Taggard's The Life and Mind of Emily Dickinson. ¹ Because

¹ These are not the only books written about ED during the late 1920's and early 1930's, but the references these authors make about each other indicate that they had established a conversation about ED and her personal life that I will show Glaspell drew on. Percy Hutchison refers to the increased publication surrounding Dickinson in his The New York Times Book Review of Taggard's work. He remarks "This year has seen the publication of several books about Emily Dickinson... Only the other day came a pleasantly reminiscent little volume by a playmate of Emily's childhood" ("Unsolved" IV:3). It also seems that Mabel Loomis Todd published a revision of the work she had first put together after ED's death (I have not had the opportunity to read the actual text) in 1931. The reviewer for The New York Times Book Review, Eda Lou
very little time elapsed between the publication of Pollitt's and Taggard's books, I will discuss first their common major themes and then the reception of each work.

Before the publication of Pollitt's *Human Background*, Bianchi had suggested that ED's married lover, for whom she had gone into seclusion, was Dr. Charles Wadsworth (Mcintosh 2842), a minister ED had heard preach in March of 1854 when she was with her family visiting an old friend, Eliza Coleman, in Philadelphia. Pollitt attempted to identify ED's secret lover, but it seems that she did not have access to family papers. She acknowledged her debt to the books published by Bianchi since 1924 but explained that she was not allowed to quote from them (Pollitt xi). Instead she based her account of ED's life on the people who had known her. Each chapter of *The Human Background* focuses on a different person of ED's or her family's acquaintance. Pollitt concludes that Lieutenant Hunt, the husband of ED's friend, Helen Fiske Hunt, was the man referred to in the poetry. He was married, which ED's poetry and Bianchi alluded to, and he had also been out of the country for part of the time, another allusion taken from ED's poetry. The final proof seemed to be in the novel *Mercy Philbrick's Choice*, which Helen Hunt wrote and published after her husband's death.\(^2\) Pollitt draws several parallels between the novel's plot and ED's life in Amherst. She believes that Helen Hunt had been aware of the feelings between her husband and best friend but "could now look back upon
the events of her early married life and view them as interesting drama, subject for literary material" (Pollitt 275). With this claim Pollitt had made her case and the stage was set for Taggard's text.

After ten years of research and the discovery of unknown poems, Genevieve Taggard published *The Life and Mind of Emily Dickinson* in 1930. Her intent was to tell "the story of two lives in one person . . Emily's outer and her inner existence, the outer becoming less significant, and the inner more so" (Taggard xiv-xv). With a heavy emphasis on ED's mind, Taggard's text provided an interesting contrast to Pollitt's review of the people who had passed through ED's life. As did Bianchi, Taggard based her hypothesis on ED's poems and letters, using changes in ED's handwriting to establish chronology. Also, like Bianchi, she used stanzas of ED's poetry to describe who ED was or what she was feeling. But Taggard's conclusion about ED's lost love refuted both Bianchi and Pollitt who had assumed that a married lover meant ED fell in love with a married man. Taggard instead picked a man who had possibly sworn to love ED but married later when the union proved impossible. Based on letters from family friends, referred to as "X," "Y," and "Z," Taggard makes a strong case that George Gould, not Dr. Wadsworth or Lieutenant Hunt, was the young man whom ED loved.

"Y," whose mother was friends with Bianchi's mother, was not able to give Taggard the name of ED's lover, but thought that Taggard made a logical case for Gould. "Y" continues to note

> [t]hat he was Helen Hunt's husband seems inconceivable.
> In fact it was a distinct shock to read in "Life and Letters" Mrs. Bianchi's version, that he was a married man. You no doubt noticed that the story told in the preface to "Further Poems" differed from the one in "Life and Letters."  Taggard 358 and provides more evidence that Bianchi was not perceived to be the family biographer with the correct view of ED that she wished to be.

Taggard's sources "X" and "Z" claimed to know the identity of ED's lover because Lavinia Dickinson had told them the story after long association with the family. George Gould was nearing the end of his senior year, and according to "X," Mr. Dickinson recognized the growing mutual interest George and ED showed and he told ED she could not see George again. ED had to arrange a
secret meeting with George on the afternoon of the graduation to tell him that she would continue to write to him (Taggard 107-108). "Z" stated that George went to Mr. Dickinson to state his interest in marrying ED. Mr. Dickinson refused not only the marriage, but permission for ED to see George again because life behind the pulpit was a poor paying profession. Mr. Dickinson had wished more for ED (Taggard 357-358). According to all the biographers, the man showed up at the house one day to take ED away with him and Lavinia had to run and get Sue Dickinson to keep ED from leaving. ED didn't go; the pull of her family was too strong, and life went on much as it had before.

Mr. Edward Dickinson plays almost as large a role in Taggard's book as his daughter does. Taggard consistently returns to the point that Mr. Dickinson felt his three children, Austin, Emily, and Lavinia were his emotional property; Austin was all ready to go west with his bride when Edward offered to build the then fashionable Italian villa, on ground adjoining the sedate old mansion, if Austin would stay and live next door and go on in the family law office. Austin stayed. Taggard 126

Edward Dickinson also took care that his daughters did not stray far from him. Taggard notes that he eventually "grew jealous of her [ED's] flowers" (126). As the legend goes, even in death Dickinson controlled his family. "X," who had visited Lavinia after the publication of Bianchi's Further Poems wondered why ED had not married after Edward Dickinson's death, and Lavinia had replied we were just as much afraid of father's wrath after he died as we were when he was alive, and Emily would not dare to go against his will. Taggard 337

For Taggard, the family environment and Mr. Dickinson's over-protectiveness of his children was the key to understanding ED's reclusiveness.

Hutchison based his criticism of Taggard on Lavinia's anecdote, relying on fact to challenge Taggard's work. He points out that Gould married in 1862, twelve years before Mr. Dickinson's death, so he would not have been free to marry when ED finally was. It seems "Miss Taggard has done so much interweaving during her ten years of work on her book that she has committed an error from which a closer scanning of chronological sequence would have
saved her" (Hutchison "Unsolved" IV:3). He also reminds his readers of Bianchi's comment that Edward Dickinson indulged ED in almost everything, so the argument that Edward had stopped her proposed marriage seemed illogical. Hutchison appeals to psychology to provide his own version of ED's lover:

> It is far from psychologically impossible that she had been superficially in love with several men and synthesized all these incipient passions into a fancied "grande passion" centring around a truly phantom lover. The fact that every one who attempts identification arrives at an impasse at least lends color to this purely psychological explanation of the enigma. "Unsolved" IV:3

Percy Hutchison and Eda Lou Walton, both writers for The New York Times, relied heavily on psychological interpretations in their reviews of the books about ED. Hutchison criticized that Pollitt's book "fails to make the illuminating link between Emily Dickinson's love and work [and] it is perhaps due to the fact that Miss Pollitt may be more interested in biography than in psychology" (Hutchison "Mystery" IV:5). Pollitt had simply lost ED in the people acquainted with the Dickinson household. Hutchison also wished someone would attempt to understand what was going on in ED's mind since she was to him, a mystic. He defined, "The mystic state is one in which a divided self is unified through concentration" (Hutchison "Mystery" IV:5) and mysticism became another point where Hutchison and Taggard differed in their definition of ED. Taggard, perhaps responding to Hutchison in her attempts to describe ED's inner life, asserts that she

> is not a mystic poet . . . The real mystic experiences an ecstasy, and his invariable report is that life is single and divine; he abhors a double. . . . In order to embody her opposites, Emily divided herself (or life divided her) into this and that. . . . [S]he is everything else by pairs. Taggard 321
It is not until Mabel Loomis Todd\(^3\) republishes her letters from ED, adding some that she had left out before, that a reviewer for *The New York Times* wholeheartedly praises Taggard. Eda Lou Walton claimed that the additional letters clarify nothing and that Taggard's book remained the most believable. Its main strength was "point after point here of proof--make it Freudian psychology or not, as you will--of Emily's love and fear of her father" (Walton IV:2). Once again, psychology was the determining factor in a book's merit.

What I think is important after surveying the several books about ED and the critical reception they received is that the Dickinson family was not easily defined, even by persons who had contact with them. From Bianchi to Taggard, family relationships and reputations are a recurring theme. Walton values this more than she does additional ED letters. Glaspell, then, was following an established pattern when she wrote *Alison's House*, where it is through the family that we learn about Alison Stanhope.\(^4\)

Also critical to note is Taggard's assertion that ED was not a "mystic poet . . . [H]er conclusion is always in the mood of the observed fact" (Taggard 320), but neither Taggard nor Bianchi present their works based on "observed fact." Bianchi's facts became muddled in memories, and possibly personal politics. Taggard, according to Hutchison, gets lost in her "interweaving." Both biographers used bits and pieces of ED's poetry as factual source material and proof of their arguments. Even though the chronology of the poetry based on handwriting, as Hutchison pointed out, cannot be exact ("Unsolved" 22), the poetry was the best source left for understanding ED. Bianchi and Taggard used it to build the past and invoke ED's presence in their works.

Possibly because a recurring theme in ED's poetry is immortality, Bianchi and Taggard impressed upon their readers the feeling that ED's spirit could still felt, even though she herself had died. For Bianchi, reading the newly discovered poems "was for one breathless instant as if the bright apparition of Emily had returned to the old house . . . to salute us" (*Further Poems* preface). Taggard wrote a poem for her book's dedication and I offer a few of the lines she wrote about ED. "Still you [Emily] have been/ Some months my shy

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\(^{3}\) For information on Mabel Loomis Todd, consult footnote 1 of this chapter.

\(^{4}\) Marcia Noe pointed out that many of the female characters are like Alison, but she does not relate the importance of the family context (61).
companion. . . . Wait . . . read the great verse. Do not look up if you [the reader]/
think you hear her./ Do not for a moment stir./ She will come near, confidently
nearer,/ Even as I write this, she is here" (Taggard vii-viii). Taggard carries her
interest in "spirits," a term I apply loosely, further by explaining that as ED
worked in her garden the last years of her life, she was accompanied by two
ghosts . . . The first ghost came in 1850; he stayed;
he did not excuse himself and go when, four years
later, the ghost of a man not yet dead entered the plot
and interrupted a conversation about poetry between
Emily and the first comer Taggard 4
These ghosts are Leonard Humphrey, an admired tutor of ED's who had died
when he was twenty years old, and George Gould. They are referred to as
mortals and ghosts throughout Taggard's biography of ED.

This "biography" based on "fact" yet framed by an appeal to belief in a
spiritual world proved a powerful model for Glaspell to follow and to change in
Alison's House. Like Taggard, Glaspell took an "inner existence," a private one,
and brought it to the eyes of the public. While I cannot prove that Glaspell read
Bianchi's memories of her aunt Emily, the similarities between Bianchi's and
Taggard's major themes are extensive. Also, I cannot prove that Glaspell read
Josephine Pollitt's attempts to clarify who ED was, but I think it's important to be
aware that the three biographers shared similarities detailing main events of
ED's life. Taggard was not only aware of what had preceded her work in
publication, but she referred to it as if her readers were aware of these works
also, and the newspapers eagerly kept tabs of the on-going debate. The next
voice to be heard on the subject was Glaspell's.

Alison's House opened in New York City on December 1, 1930, just in
time to observe ED's 100th birthday on December 10th. Bianchi, Pollitt, and
Taggard had taken stanzas of her poetry, letters from her family, and historical
documents, all things from the public domain, to reconstruct a private person.
To depict her Alison/ED, Glaspell began with the private domain and showed its
impact on the public. Before I begin my discussion of how Glaspell adapted the
recorded life of ED to the stage, I offer a plot summary. In the subsequent
section I will offer my interpretation.
**Alison's House: Plot Summary**

The action of *Alison's House* takes place on December 31, 1899, in the "homestead" of the Stanhope family where Mr. John Stanhope (referred to as Stanhope or The Father) was raised with his two sisters, Agatha and Alison. Stanhope runs the family law practice with his eldest son, Eben, in a "small city . . . about ten miles up the [Mississippi] river" and lives there with his family, but Alison and Agatha had never moved away from this house. Alison, a famous poet, has been dead for eighteen years and her family has patiently provided the public world with as much information about their famous relative as is they feel is necessary. Agatha has become a zealous self-appointed guardian of Alison's reputation and personal possessions, but she is aging. Her heart is bad and she is showing signs of senility. Stanhope has decided to have Agatha move to the city to live with him, so the house must be broken up and sold because Agatha wouldn't be able to accept it being used as a museum or not being allowed to live in it if it still belonged to the family. The play opens in the middle of the break up of the house. Old contracts and family papers are being catalogued or burned and books and pieces of furniture are being removed from their customary spots for shipment to distant relatives.

The play opens at 11:00 am in the library of the house and Act One establishes that the public world is not going to give the Stanhope family any privacy as it goes through the difficult move. Richard Knowles, a reporter from Chicago, arrives to write an article about the break up of "Alison's house." Before he even meets Stanhope, the head of the family, he has established a rapport with twenty-three year old Ann, who acts like a secretary, and he has been given a tour of Alison's bedroom by Ted, Stanhope's college-age son. Both Ann and Ted are impressed by Knowles' understanding of the importance of Alison's poetry. Knowles tells Ann that "Anything about her [Alison] is alive. She belongs to the world. But the family doesn't seem to know that" (5). It is an

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5 All references in this section are from Glaspell's *Alison's House*, unless otherwise noted. Below is the cast of characters.

| Ann Leslie | Eben |
| Jennie | Elsa |
| Richard Knowles | Miss Agatha |
| Ted Stanhope | Hodges |
| Louise | Mrs. Hodges |
| The Father/Stanhope | |
important friendship that these three establish before any other family members come on stage, because they represent the next generation, the ones responsible for the future. Ann is not sure she should allow Ted and Knowles upstairs but is reassured by Knowles' respect for Alison and Knowles is able to sum up the situation, "We understand. We three. Why trouble the older folks about it? This is the last day of the nineteenth century" (9). Ted and Knowles exit to the upstairs.

Glaspell sharply contrasts the mood established by Knowles with the immediate entrance of Louise, Stanhope's daughter-in-law/Eben's wife. She has heard of the reporter's presence in the house and questions Ann about him. Louise is frustrated that Ann will offer very little information, "You refuse to talk to me--about a family matter?" (10), and calls Stanhope in. Because she is concerned about the family's reputation, Louise's conversation with Stanhope reveals several family tensions: Stanhope's daughter, Elsa, has run away with Bill, a married man from the local community, causing everyone to gossip; the scandal Elsa caused leads to recurring rumors that Alison was in love with a married man, creating further gossip; Stanhope considers Ann to be a member of the family, even if Louise does not. Unable to get Stanhope upset about a reporter in the house, Louise leaves in a huff of exasperation.

Ted and Knowles return to the library at about the same time that Agatha enters with some pieces of family china. Agatha begins to pack the china in a basket of straw while Stanhope politely tries to determine if Knowles is going to write a "lurid" (18) story about Alison. Agatha also questions Knowles to see if he has learned anything about her sister, perhaps something that she has been trying to protect. Stanhope indicates that because of her health Agatha should not be upset, so Knowles leaves. Ann offers to pack the tea set for Agatha and when she has finished, she helps Stanhope catalogue the books that Alison loved.

But even when family members are the only ones present, the outside world pressures them to give up what they know about Alison. Ted bothers Stanhope because he is flunking English at Harvard and an insider's report on Alison might save his grade. At first Stanhope tries to ignore Ted and Agatha gloats that she has knowledge Ted doesn't have. Ted defends himself

We can't keep Alison in a prison. . . . She
belongs to the world. . . .

Agatha: I say she does not belong to the world! I say she belongs to us. And I'll keep her from the world--I'll keep the world from getting her--if it kills me--and kills you all! Glaspell 25

Stanhope is drawn into an argument with Ted, and Agatha removes the china from the basket of straw; taking the straw with her, she leaves the room unnoticed by her family.

Louise once again enters to worry about what the outside world is saying about the family and she sees the china sitting by itself. Her entrance is quickly followed by the entrance of Eben. He has closed the law office for the rest of the day to help the family, yet it seems that he needs to be in the house more than the family requires his presence. Ted continues to ask the family about Alison since he was two years old when she died (38); his impertinence peaks when he asks if Alison was a virgin. Eben, who desperately wants to believe that they are somehow better people for knowing Alison, cannot believe Ted's outrageousness and begins to shake him.

The quarrel is forgotten only when Elsa, the prodigal daughter, appears in the doorway. Before Stanhope can decide how he should respond to her request to enter the room, Jennie, the housekeeper, discovers a fire upstairs. As they work to put it out (the action occurs off-stage), Eben realizes that the fire was set with straw and coal oil. At first Knowles seems the prime suspect but the family then remembers that Agatha had taken the china out of the basket. When she is questioned about the straw used for packing the china, she responds, "O-h! I wish you'd all go away--and leave me here alone! Why couldn't you let it burn?" (49). On the edge of collapse, Agatha speaks to herself, "... I tried--and tried. Burn them? All by themselves? (In a whisper.) It was--too lonely" (49). Stanhope sends Louise and Ted to call the doctor.

The first act established the tension the Stanhope family feels in trying to keep Alison as one of "them" when the world is so insistent in its claim that she belongs in a public domain. Act Two heightens this battle. Here is the theme that the old will be replaced by the new and the young. This is especially relevant to Stanhope who sees his ordered world slipping away in Act Two. The time is 3 o'clock in the afternoon and Stanhope and Ann are still at work in
the library, but they use their time together to reminisce about Ann's mother who has been dead for nine years. Stanhope obviously loved her, but remained faithful to his wife and family.

Eben, and then Ted, enter in time to be present for the arrival of the Hodges who are going to buy the house from the Stanhopes, "modernize it" (65), and rent out rooms to summer boarders. The appearance of the Hodges is unexpected and Stanhope realizes that he must begin to accept change. While Ann shows the Hodges the upstairs, Stanhope learns that his world is not going to turn out the way he had always planned. Neither Ted nor Eben wants to continue in the family law firm, and since Elsa has brought disgrace on the family, she can never expect to be a part of it, even though Stanhope will allow her to stay this night. He cannot understand why his children won't accept their responsibilities as he has done by supporting his family. The Hodges come downstairs and write a check for the house. Stanhope is just coming to terms with the loss when Knowles returns to ask Ann if she wants to go for a walk by the river.

During the time that Ann gets her things, Stanhope has a chance to talk to Knowles and finds in him someone who cares deeply about Alison, and now Ann. Because Alison loved to make gifts to the children, Stanhope honors her by giving Knowles a book of Emerson's poems, an old favorite of Alison's, and he reads the poem "The House" to Knowles. The theme of the poem is that the work of a muse is well-constructed and will last through time. Knowles and Ann leave for their walk.

Elsa enters because Agatha wants to come downstairs and Stanhope leaves to talk her out of it. Eben and Elsa have a chance to discuss Elsa's affair. She knows she must accept the guilt for what she did which she is willing to do, because she couldn't have lived like Alison who "had God" (102). Agatha enters with Stanhope's help, but once she is seated, he leaves because he cannot bear her sorrow. Eben senses that Elsa and Agatha should be left alone and leaves also. Agatha seems upset and Elsa offers to do "anything in the world" (107) for her. Agatha shoves a small portfolio into Elsa's hands and collapses. Elsa calls for Stanhope and Eben, but Agatha has died.

Together Agatha and the house represented the guards placed on Alison's privacy and the only ties that Stanhope had to his distant past. Agatha
is gone and with the sale of the house, Stanhope's vision of who Alison was is also threatened. The books and the bedroom are no longer hers; they are to be occupied by the public, "summer boarders." There is a strong indication that Ann and Knowles are falling in love, and as a result, Stanhope risks losing two more women from his life. The first is Ann's mother. He will no longer have anyone to reminisce with about her beauty and mannerisms. The second is Ann, who in a way has always been his daughter, but who is even more important now that Elsa has run away.

Elsa shares the focus of the play with Stanhope in Act Three. It opens in the most private of places, Alison's bedroom. It is about 10:30 pm and Elsa enters, a little unsure if she really belongs there. Over the course of the act she will accept her role of belonging and not belonging to society and to her family. Alison, who never seems to be far from the characters' thoughts throughout the play, is part of every conversation.

Elsa is about to open the portfolio that Agatha gave her when Ann knocks and enters the room. She is looking for a picture of Agatha for Knowles' newspaper story, but Elsa is reluctant to give her one. Elsa doesn't feel that she can make decisions for the family and wishes Alison could make everything all right like she did when Elsa was younger. Ann and Elsa begin to speak of the suddenness of love, how it struck Elsa and Bill and Ann and Knowles. Ann sees Alison as bringing her and Knowles together and takes it as a blessing (116). Then she admits that she and all the girls had looked up to Elsa when they were younger, and now they think of her as "brave" (118). Elsa responds, "I wasn't brave. I was trapped." (118).

Eben enters and allows Ann to use a picture that had been in Alison's room. Ann exits. Eben and Elsa remember Alison, creating a picture of a woman who was always cheerful. They reinforce the picture of Alison as a gift-

6 I base this statement on the way Stanhope and Ann talk about Ann's mother. With just a few words Stanhope can create a picture and Ann responds, "I can see her" (54). Also, Knowles talks with Ted while he is waiting for Ann.

KNOWLES: I'm glad she [Ann] has this nice position.
TED: It isn't a position.
KNOWLES: What is it then?
TED: Oh it's just--the way it is. Glaspell 93

In Act Three Ann actually says "I feel as if you were my father, . . . Well, here we all are--the children--Eben, Elsa, Ted, and Ann" (149).
giver with their memories of her little poems and gifts of sweets. This is interrupted by Stanhope who is worn out and wishes aloud that he could speak with Alison. He begins to question Elsa about the last moments of Agatha's life and their attention is turned to the portfolio. Once again it is not opened, this time because Jennie enters. She is worried because she had made a promise to Agatha that she would burn what was in the portfolio. Stanhope convinces her that the family will take responsibility for it. When Jennie leaves, the family finally opens the portfolio and recognizes the paper and handwriting as Alison's.

Ted enters, apologizing that he wasn't there when Agatha died. He had gone to a New Year's Eve dance. At first it seems that the family has been united in their grief, but Ted recognizes the paper as belonging to Alison and starts to ask questions. Eben, wanting to leave the subject until the next day, asks Ted to leave and not upset Stanhope. Ted departs angry. Eben, Elsa, and Stanhope debate if they should read the poems and can't help but get drawn into them.

The lights on the stage dim to suggest the passage of time. Stanhope, Elsa, and Eben are amazed at how lonely Alison had been during her life--she had never indicated this to them. There is a disagreement over what should be done with the poems. Stanhope wants to burn them and his children think they should be published. Ted enters with Ann and Knowles. Eben considers inclusion of outsiders a traitorous act on Ted's part. Ann, because she does care about Stanhope like a father, is able to reassure Stanhope that Alison would want the poems published. Stanhope remains unsure. Knowles recites the final stanzas of the poem "The House" which Stanhope had read to him earlier. Everyone leaves except Stanhope and Elsa. Stanhope is determined that the poems will not be published but burned. He appeals to Elsa that this is one last thing they can do together. Elsa remains adamant that Alison would want to speak to the new century. At the stroke of midnight, Stanhope finally hands the pack to Elsa because Alison "loved to make her little gifts. If she can

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7 There is a possible mistake in the text here. Ann tries to convince Stanhope to let Elsa decide what to do with the poems because she's a woman and "Alison said it--for women"(150). Stanhope is not willing to accept that Elsa and Alison have any similarities. According to the text, Elsa says, "Then let her speak for Elsa, and Mother, and me..."(150). This would logically seem to be Ann's line.
make one more, from her century to yours, then she isn't gone. Anything else is too lonely" (154).

Dickinson's Life Translated to the Stage

It has always been known that Glaspell relied heavily on the ED legend when she wrote Alison's House. I believe the problem in understanding this play today is that critics are aware of this fact and don't investigate it further. Therefore, they haven't sufficiently connected Alison's House to the time in which it was written. Thomas P. Adler, whose interest in the play is based on its Pulitzer status, does a better job of relating the influences of Chekov and Ibsen to the play than establishing it as an American prize-winner.8 He feels Glaspell's interest is in debating if the artist belongs to her family or the world, and ".. the outsider and journalist/poet Richard Knowles, provides the answer-to the world-at the outset, so even though the exact content of the poems remains hidden, the dramatist's stance is immediately clear, diluting audience interest" (Adler 133). I argue that the audience most likely knew the events of ED's life and works before the play started. Sufficient literary efforts from Bianchi, Pollitt, Taggard, and the newspapers had brought ED's story, the life of one of America's most well-known poets, to the public arena. It is inevitable that the poems will be discovered and published, not because of Knowles' statement, but because that is what had occurred in the two years preceding the play's run. Glaspell, like Pollitt and Taggard, used established "facts" from ED's life and relied on the family setting possibly to explore the psychology of the poet, the individual. Defining and clarifying ED, not using her life to speak for all

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8 According to Adler and other critics, Alison's House resembles Chekov's The Cherry Orchard when Mr Hodges plans to remove the trees around the house and turn it into a place for summer boarders. Ibsen's influence is the structure of the plot on the revealed secret (132). In his summary of the play, Adler mistakes that Stanhope "even threatens to kill his son, Eben," (Adler 133) over the children's wish to publish Alison's poems. In fact Stanhope threatens to kill Ted who has grabbed handfuls of the poems and feels responsibility for them falls to him as the youngest Stanhope. "I'll be alive when the rest of you are dead." (143-144) he argues and Stanhope responds, "Drop them! Drop them or I'll kill you!" (144). Adler's mistake is not crucial to the resolution of the play. Stanhope still is ready to sacrifice one of his children to protect an ideal he holds of his sister. But throughout the course of the play Ted has driven Stanhope and other family members to a kind of breaking point. Eben would never stand up so openly to Stanhope as to grab poems and stuff them in his pockets, which is what Ted does. For Eben to drive Stanhope to the point of threatening murder at the end of the play suggests a complete character reversal after the characters' personalities had been so painstakingly established by Glaspell in her first two acts.
artists, was the crux of many of the publications of the late 1920's and early 1930's, and Glaspell was part of this conversation.

ED's life is marked by certain "anecdotes": belonging to a strict and prestigious family, falling in love and being tempted to run away with the man, isolating herself from society, and giving gifts to the children next door, usually gifts of poetry. Percy Hutchison had called for someone to interpret ED's life as a mystic in which the "divided self is unified" ("Mystery" IV:5) and Taggard had stated that is impossible to do since ED "divided herself" (321). While Glaspell did not probe the mind of the poet as Taggard did, Glaspell may have adapted Taggard's "doubling" theme by presenting characters, usually two characters, who make different choices given identical situations. By placing these characters in a family relationship, Glaspell was able to give a greater picture of the elusive ED, as her biographers had attempted to do. Once again it is Knowles who points this out, "...I think all your family have something of the spirit of Alison Stanhope... It's as if something of her remained here, in you all, in--in quite a different form" (92). The characters who explore the options of ED's life are usually Stanhope and Elsa.

Like Alison, Stanhope and Elsa were tempted to run away with a person who was married. I've already discussed the various attempts at discerning who the man was in ED's life and they are important because Glaspell didn't rely solely on Taggard's example of George Gould. Alison met her love at her father's thirtieth 9 class reunion in Cambridge. "He was for her. She was for him. That was--without question. But he was married. He had children. They parted" (Glaspell Alison's 141). The setting of being with family on a trip is most similar to Bianchi's version of ED meeting Dr. Wadsworth in Philadelphia. Stanhope's and Elsa's experiences echo Pollitt's book since both of them have fallen in love with someone known to the family. It is never indicated how far Stanhope's relationship went with Ann's mother, only to what extent it did not develop. He does remember fondly taking her for a carriage ride (53). Ann sums up Stanhope's situation, "You were so good to Mother. (Low.) You loved her. And she loved you. Through years. And you denied your love, because of

9 The number thirty recurs often in the discussion of Alison and her lover. She met him at a thirtieth reunion. When Ann sees the man's picture and remarks "How strange the clothes look." (Glaspell Alison's 114), and Elsa responds, "Ours will look strange too, in thirty years" (114) which would place them in 1930. I wonder if Glaspell was trying to connect the setting of the play with the end of ED's century here.
me, and Eben, and Elsa, and Ted "(149). Elsa's experience is the most scandalous because she fell in love with the husband of Louise's best friend and ran away with him, crossing the line where Alison and Stanhope stopped. She tells Eben, "Bill's all right. He misses the business, and his friends, and the children. I can see him missing them" (Glaspell 103). The variation on the same experience gives Glaspell a chance to provide her audience with a picture of the loneliness ED is believed to have felt. Stanhope has a love that is in reach, yet truly unattainable. He is left with honor. Elsa has the love, but she also has the burden of guilt and the loss of her family. Because they have chosen different paths and not found happiness, Alison, and therefore ED, seems to be a more admirable person in comparison. She took a situation that was "death for her. But she made it--life eternal" (Glaspell 141).

Glaspell also uses Stanhope and Elsa to vary the experience of the admirer coming for ED. Alison stayed because Stanhope "asked her to stay. He [Alison's lover] was below. He had come for her" (140). After reading Alison's poetry Stanhope regrets what he had done. Because of the loneliness in his own life, he understands what he inflicted on her. In the next generation, Eben also had the power to keep Elsa from running away with a married man, but Elsa didn't give him the chance to persuade her.

EBEN: What did you run away like that for? Why didn't you talk it over with me?
ELSA: You would have kept me from going.
EBEN: Of course I would!
ELSA: But I had to go, Eben. Don't you see? That was the way I loved him. Glaspell 103-104

Even though Elsa did succeed in running away, she did so only by avoiding her family, specifically her brother Eben. The quote indicates that the family has the greatest control over the individual in her case, as it had between Stanhope and Alison. Elsa just found a way to avoid confronting their influence. Through the two generations on stage Glaspell has reinforced the power of the family as the biographers have done.

Had Glaspell followed Taggard's view entirely, that the admirer was a single young man, the threat to the family's reputation would have been minimized a great deal. The affair means that "the town does talk about Elsa."
You can't run away with a married man--live with a man who has a wife and children and not be talked about" (Glaspell 13). Since he is well-known to the family, his wife and Louise are best friends, the affair also threatens existing family structures. In Act II, Louise states that if Elsa stays in the house, she will leave, "How could I ever face Margaret again, if I'd stayed under the roof with Elsa?" (78). Eben thinks Elsa should stay because Louise "take[s] too much pleasure in siding against her" (79). It eventually comes down to a question of a man's loyalty to his wife, and in this matter Eben feels none for Louise. Elsa's running away and return, which Glaspell changed from the ED story, makes the family life more public. By accepting her in the house for just one night, the family's old view of personal duty is threatened. I do not know if Glaspell consciously based the married lover on Bianchi or Pollitt, or as other scholars have suggested, her own life with Jig Cook, but there was sufficient material available besides Taggard's book.

Another major theme is ED's strong relationship with Austin Dickinson's children. Bianchi speaks of the poems, iced cakes, sweets, and flowers that ED would send across the yard to her brother's children or the friends who had come to visit them (Life and Letters, 52-65). Like ED, Alison Stanhope has two nephews and one niece. 10 The play holds an endless list of gifts that Alison gave to the children "[a]n apple--pebbles from the river--little cakes she'd baked. And always her jolly little verses with them" (Glaspell Alison's 36). Eben remembers her stories about "the bumble bee that got drunk on larkspur and set out to see how drunk you could get in heaven" (124-125), and Elsa remembers running to Alison for solace.

Aunt Agatha won't give me a cookie, because I pulled the cat's tail. She tells me Aunt Agatha can't help being like that, and that the cat would agree with her. And she she says--what if I pulled the cat's tail off, and we laugh; and she writes me a little poem about a cookie that had no tail. She gives me candy . . . Glaspell 125

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10 According to Bianchi, her older brother was named after Edward Dickinson. Her younger brother, Gilbert, died at the age of eight. While all the children are adults, or almost adults in the play, it's interesting that the youngest son's name is Edward (Glaspell Alison's 8) although they call him Ted. Further discussion of this theme could include research on connections between this character and his namesake.
It has been noted before, by Makowsky and others, that Alison stands outside of the adult role of rule maker because of the gifts she likes to make. She does not correct Elsa for her actions, but turns them into a funny poem. When other characters honor Alison by making their own gifts, they can also step outside of their defined roles of duty and responsibility to offer solace and find it for themselves. The theme of gift-giving in the play is "doubled" because the recipients become the givers and take responsibility that the spirit of the gift remains alive. Stanhope gives Knowles the book of poetry and Knowles returns to recite the "The House" to Stanhope, reassuring him that Alison would want to speak to the next century. Ann and Elsa have received inspiration from Alison and they also join the fight to get the newly discovered poems published, because to do otherwise would be like destroying life (Glaspell Alison's 150).

One change that Glaspell did make in the legend was in the character of Agatha, Alison's sister. Lavinia Dickinson was excited about finding poems of ED's that she had not been instructed to destroy and she wanted Mabel Loomis Todd to edit them for publication (Taggard 331). Agatha is quite the opposite and has guarded Alison's possessions, the poems, the pen she used, etc., since her death. Agatha represents an extreme response to the world's insistence that it be told everything about Alison and like Elsa's decision to run away with a married man, Agatha's actions threaten the family structure. Her need for privacy about Alison, supported by Stanhope, provokes Ted to look outside the family for support. He first half-jokingly asks Knowles to write his term paper for him (93) and then tells Ann and Knowles about the poems after Agatha's death. Agatha's character helps Glaspell to emphasize the needs of the family and of the public world over material that belongs to both, the poetry and the reputation of Alison Stanhope. I will discuss the pulls between the private and public worlds more in Chapter 3.

One final change Glaspell made was in the play's setting, December 31, 1899. ED died in 1886 which would not place the play in 1899 if the poet has...
been dead for eighteen years, as the play points out (Glaspell 5). I believe that Glaspell used the setting of her play to evoke the feeling of reflection that had accompanied ED's 100th birthday in 1930. Even if the audience wasn't interested in the play's connection to ED, they would understand the sentiment of the new year and century changing, a point of looking back and looking forward. The poems discovered at the end of the play become a gift "from her century, to yours" (154). The setting is not a "retreat" from the issues of the day, as Sutherland claimed. Instead it places the situation very exactly in the present time of the production.

By looking at the play in this context we can see that Glaspell was adding to the numerous definitions placed on ED and her legend, perhaps highlighting the concerns of the biographers as well as ED herself. If Glaspell did lose some of the radical characters in this play that she developed while she was at Provincetown, it should be remembered that the rebellious spirit in American society had changed by 1930, which I will discuss in my next chapter. I feel that Glaspell maintained her ability to mirror the society in which she was writing and I hope that this play would find a new value in the discussions that surround ED and the interest in her during the 1920's and 1930's.
CHAPTER 3 PUBLIC AND PRIVATE SPACE BEFORE 1930

Early Twentieth Century Culture and the Theatre

During the fifteen year period that Susan Glaspell wrote for the theatre, the United States was experiencing the growing pains of a young industrialized country. Immigrants and migrants from the rural United States flocked to the large cities in search of opportunity and wealth, and there they created a mass culture. Instructions on how to live as a part of this mass culture, from private to professional life, from family to corporation, abounded everywhere. By 1920, the American Bar Association, the American Medical Association, the National Education Association, to name but a few, had formed to set standards to protect the interests of professional workers. Associationalism was viewed by a number of prominent Americans . . . as the dawn of a new more rational economic system that synthesized individual entrepreneurship and corporate enterprises.

In emphasizing provisional standards, ethical codes of conduct, and rational problem solving, the private associations were self-disciplining and self-improving . . . Olson 20

Public needs not met by the associations were addressed by the government. The Sheppard-Towner Act of 1921 established the Childrens' Bureau in the Department of Labor to reduce infant and maternal mortality. One of their main goals was to provide guidelines for proper hygiene (Olson 301). And six years later Abraham Epstein created the American Association for Old Age Security which, with the later assistance of the New Deal and Dr. Francis Townsend, would create the Social Security Act of 1935 (Olson 9).

One of the strongest leaders in creating norms for the mass culture was Hollywood. According to Lary May, the movie industry had received its first success with D.W. Griffith's *The Birth of a Nation*, but film makers wanted to move away from his Victorianism. They were interested in "a morality appropriate to the corporate order, one that solved the difficult issues of work, family, and class status" (May 97). The movies of the late 1910's mark the changing attitudes towards the individual's role in the public sphere. As May points out, this is especially evident in the career of Mary Pickford. In the 1914
movie, *Tess of the Storm Country*, her character leads a rebellion against the local corrupted sheriff. In *The Hoodlum* (1919) Pickford portrays a rich girl, turned social worker, who is able to convince her capitalistic grandfather to become a "social guardian" (May 144). Pickford's appeal to her fans was equally strong off screen. She was known for her eternal youth and energy, making her the perfect co-star and later wife of Douglas Fairbanks, who symbolized athletic health. Both were so popular that they were called upon to write advice columns and use their fame to promote political and social action.

American theatre responded to the cultural changes as well and it was in opposition to Broadway's commercialism that Jig Cook, Susan Glaspell and others founded the Provincetown Players. Their aim was to give the American playwright a space to experiment in. Here Glaspell introduced the Midwestern kitchen of the Wright home in "Trifles" and Cook spent all but $6.40 of the company's treasury in building a plaster dome setting for Eugene O'Neill's *The Emperor Jones*. The success of *The Emperor Jones* proved paradoxical for the Provincetown Players. It helped to establish them as a "private club" but it was also the first Provincetown play to move uptown, taking the step toward commercialism (Deutsch 70).

In their history of the Provincetown Players, Helen Deutsch and Stella Hanau recall how the opening of the seventh Provincetown season in 1920 lent a definition of success for the theatre. *The Emperor Jones* opened the season and was so popular it drew the scrutiny of several New Yorkers who had never paid attention to Provincetown before, one such group being the New York Sabbath Committee. They complained about Sunday performances, a common practice of the Provincetown Players. The theatre's defense and salvation was their policy that only "subscribers" to the playhouse could attend performances,¹ and Judge Simpson settled the case in court. He determined

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¹ Deutsch and Hanau further explain that the policy allowed anyone to become a subscriber for one performance; among memories that linger with those who bought tickets at the Provincetown are the little slip and pencil which invariably were shoved through the box office grating with the honeyed query: "Are you a subscriber?" 70-71

Deutsch and Hanau do not indicate if Judge Simpson was a "subscriber," but they do point out that at least one judge in New York, Judge Corrigan, was a "subscriber" and he directed police to be elsewhere on Sundays than in the Provincetown theatre.
that "This is a private club. It is not a theater of public amusement to which the public is admitted at any time" (Deutsch 70).

From their modest beginnings in the Hapgood's living room where they performed their first plays to the court case of their seventh season, it seemed that the Provincetown Players stood opposite to everything that was happening in the larger culture. Where Mary Pickford depended on her projection of youth and innocence to make a living, the Provincetown Players had "found themselves, intellectually and artistically, before they met in Provincetown the summer of 1915. They were already doing serious work in other fields, and the theater began largely as recreation" (Deutsch 6). While the rest of the country was enjoying the success of commercialism, the Provincetown Players fought to retain their place as a "private club" (Deutsch 70). But *The Emperor Jones* proved so successful that the Players were talked into moving it uptown, so they could "make money for new plays, and [grant] a widening experience for the playwright" (Deutsch 71). It was a decision that once made the effects could not be reversed.

They were beginning to identify success with a move to Broadway, and were trying to force plays into success by moving them uptown instead of letting the plays force them into the move. (Deutsch 84)

Commercialization came quickly. Glaspell's *The Verge* opened the eighth season, in 1921, a year after *The Emperor Jones*. Her play "was announced for an uptown showing even before the first curtain" (Deutsch 85) in the Provincetown Theatre. The Players did not even wait to see how well it would be received. Despite the praise that *The Verge* won, the rest of the season for The Provincetown Players was highlighted by failure. Few plays could make a successful transition uptown and Jig Cook decided to go to Greece for spiritual renewal. His vision of the experimental theatre had failed as commercialization became more and more important to the group.

It is the early Provincetown years that Susan Glaspell is usually associated with, but we must remember that she also was a writer who was affected by the environment she lived in. Jig Cook died in Greece in 1924 and Susan Glaspell returned to the United States, but not to the Provincetown Players that she had left behind. Her work in Provincetown carries incredible
importance to theatre history and women's studies, but Glaspell did not stop writing with Cook's death. As corporations, such as the movies and associations, set the standards families or small communities had once provided guidance on, the society changed. It would hard to imagine that Glaspell was unaware of these shifts.

The Stock Market Crash of 1929 effectively destroyed the environment that had made Glaspell, a woman with radical views but conservative behavior, such a powerful Bohemian figure just after 1915. According to Malcolm Goldstein, the Crash closed "the last age in which a capitalist and a Communist could indulge in camaraderie without suspecting each other's motives" (15). Because of the chasm between the theatre of the left and the more commercialized right wing theatre, it is difficult for me to define what the theatre of the 1930's was and how Glaspell could have influenced it within the space of this research, so I would like to review interpretations of the theatre from two critics who have discussed Glaspell's work to establish how that decade has been defined. Then I will trace changes in Glaspell's writing to show that *Alison's House* should not be judged by the standards that have arisen from study of Glaspell's Provincetown works. Instead we should look to the shift in society from private-based individuals or groups standing opposed to the large corporation, as was evident in 1915, to society's acceptance and utilization of larger and more public organizations in the 1930's.

Two scholars whom I've already discussed, C.W.E. Bigsby and Brenda Murphy, have studied Glaspell and the theatre of the 1920's and 1930's. I've already pointed out the discrepancies of Bigsby's criticism of *Alison's House* and mentioned Brenda Murphy's incorporation of several of Glaspell's earlier plays, but not *Alison's House*, in her discussion of realism. I would like to use their definitions and views of changes in the theatre to re-evaluate the social reflections Glaspell is making of the early 1930's.

In Volume One of *A Critical Introduction to Twentieth Century American Drama*, C.W.E. Bigsby prefaces his discussion of the years 1900-1940 by saying that "the central theme of this new drama became alienation.... The dominant image was of the loss of space: Physical, emotional, and moral" (Bigsby, *Critical*, vii). This would certainly coincide with the threat of becoming a "slave to the machine," an image society worried about as industries became
stronger and had greater influence in the work force and personal lives. Several of Glaspell's characters from Provincetown fit this definition. 

Brenda Murphy, who studied several of Glaspell's plays but not *Alison's House*, is more specific in her definition of theatrical themes during the 1920's and 1930's. She notes that "[t]he twenties playwrights produced plots that leave . . . women alone and lost. . . . The thirties playwrights tried to get beyond this simple punishment of individuals in order to suggest the much more complicated social problems that they embodied, thus producing a fuller representation of life" (179) Goldstein looks to World War I to explain this new attitude towards the individual as a product of the larger society and states that no playwright or play-goer "could still take seriously the pre-war belief that the moral lapse of a character had to result in the loss of his life or the lowering of his social status" (4). I hope to show in my section how this definition fits the character of Elsa and is not applicable to either Minnie Wright or Claire Archer.

Both Bigsby and Murphy discuss the theme of the loss of space as important to plays of the period, so I will take their discussions a step forward and apply their definitions to *Alison's House* by studying the role of the public and the private spaces and the use of physical space in "Trifles," *The Verge* and *Alison's House*. I define private space, or sphere, as representing the self or dominating the actions of the individual. I define the public space, or sphere, as the standards or knowledge that govern a group of people.

**Public and Private in the Plays of Susan Glaspell**

The heroines of Glaspell's "Trifles" and *The Verge*, as Murphy has pointed out, are ostracized because they do not conform to the standards that the public defines as their role. In "Trifles" the public sphere cannot even understand what Minnie Wright's kitchen reveals to them because the law

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2 I am discussing "Trifles" and *The Verge* only due to space constraints, but two other plays from the Provincetown days apply to Bigsby's definition. In *The Inheritors*, Madelaine Morton faces a jail sentence at the end of the play for protesting for free speech. She accepts the jail sentence despite her family's attempts to get her to back down from her principles. In the final act of the play, she measures out the jail cell size on the living room floor before leaving for court. In "The Outside," Mrs. Patrick has renounced life and lives in an abandoned life saving station on the edge of the beach. When a life-saving team brings a drowning victim to the old life-saving station in an emergency, she feels pushed out of her home by the corpse of the man the life-saving team could not save. See *Plays by Susan Glaspell* edited by Bigsby for the complete texts.
officers cannot imagine the life that Minnie has led. The Verge presents a different situation. While her family and friends know that Claire Archer is trying to develop a new plant, they do not see why the experiment is important and while she is not physically left alone, she is very much intellectually and morally on her own. I'll begin with a closer look at "Trifles."

It is the public sphere's inability to understand the private sphere that makes "Trifles" (1916) a gripping play and establishes the influence of the public sphere. In this one-act, John Wright has been murdered in his bed and his wife, Minnie, whom we never meet, is being held in jail awaiting trial. George Henderson, who is the County Attorney, Sheriff Henry Peters and George Hale, a neighbor who reported the murder, return to the Wright's farm seeking clues to Mrs. Wright's guilt. The Sheriff's wife, Mrs. Peters, and Mrs. Hale have come along to get clothes for Minnie Wright. The set is the kitchen of the Wright's home but through dialogue we get the feeling of the barrenness of the rest of the house and the remoteness of the farm from other human settlements. As the men search the bedroom and the barn, areas John Wright would have been familiar with, they must pass through the kitchen several times. The women are left alone here and are able to piece together the desolate life that Minnie Wright led since her marriage. While the men search, the women acknowledge their guilt in adding to Minnie Wright's loneliness.

Many feminist scholars have seen this play as a definition of gender roles, which I do not dispute, but these gender roles are based on public definitions of a good wife and a good husband. The public role of a wife is to be a homemaker, according to both the men and women in the play, and homemaking is equated with keeping the house clean and "cheerful." In Minnie Wright's case, she should be successful in this role regardless of the physical environment she is placed in. The kitchen/set is littered with one example after another of projects left uncompleted. The dirty towels are a catalyst for the County Attorney to say, "Not much of a housekeeper, would you say, ladies?" (Bigsby Plays 38). Even though Mrs. Hale answers twice that a farm wife has a lot of work to see to, she too is at first struck by the disorder of the kitchen and is uncomfortable there. Even when she tries to defend Minnie Wright, she cannot excuse the fact that she never visited the Wright farm because it was not a cheerful place to be. With this realization, which she shares with Mrs. Peters,
both women can remember times when they had been or felt alone in the remote country, usually on farms, and then they can understand Minnie Wright.

The public definition of a good man also hinders the men and women in their understanding of what possibly occurred in the Wright's home. "Mrs. Peters: . . . They say he [John Wright] was a good man. Mrs. Hale: Yes--good; he didn't drink, and kept his word as well as most, I guess, and paid his debts." (Bigsby *Plays* 42). The public role of a good man is one who keeps his word. Little emphasis is placed on how he goes about keeping his word and very little social interaction is expected of him. Like Richard Knowles will later do in *Alison's House* by saying that "Alison belongs to the world," (Glaspell *Alison's 5*). Mr. Hale immediately gives the audience the key to the secret hidden in the kitchen. He wanted to talk to John Wright about a party line telephone. He had attempted to do this in the past, but Wright had put me off, saying folks talked too much anyway, and all he asked was peace and quiet--I guess you know about how much he talked himself; but I thought maybe if I went to the house and talked about it before his wife, though I said to Harry that I didn't know as what his wife wanted made much difference to John--

While it may have seemed strange to his neighbors that John Wright was so quiet, it was not a means by which to judge him. The strict line between how a good man behaves and how a good woman behaves leaves the investigators of the case amazed at the disorderly state the house is in, but this provides them with no clues to what happened. Since we do not meet John or Minnie Wright, it is nearly impossible to determine how their roles were defined in their private lives, meaning most specifically if John expected Minnie to keep a "cheerful" house. If he followed the public definition that Minnie would make the home livable, but didn't appreciate her efforts, Minnie's loneliness is emphasized to the women in the play and to the audience.

Physical space is also important to "Trifles." The kitchen, as Mrs. Hale notes, can be "turned against" the woman and in turn, personal space is a means of defining personal value. It was up to Minnie Wright to make her home a "cheerful" place to live in and visit regardless of the fact that the farm itself was situated on a lonely road (Bigsby *Plays* 42). Since Minnie had grown up as
"one of the town girls singing in the choir" (Bigsby Plays 40), the loneliness of the farm becomes amplified and Bigsby's suggestion that these plays are about "alienation" would appear to be apt. It is ironic that because the public, the law, cannot understand the clues they see before them that Minnie Wright has a good chance of being released for lack of evidence. The discrepancy between what the public sphere expects in a home and what it confronts at the Wright farm is too vast until the women have time to make sense of the disorderly kitchen.

Claire Archer, another Glaspell character, will suffer for pushing beyond the role that the public thinks she should fill. In The Verge, which is considered one of Glaspell's most important works, there are clear definitions of what the public expectations are and Claire, the heroine, does not fit the public post-World War I definition of what a good woman does. In this play Claire is close to a horticultural breakthrough with her plant, The Breath of Life. Claire did not create the plant for its beauty. She's looking for plants that "[e]xplode their species--because something in them knows they've gone as far as they can go" (Bigsby Plays 70). Claire is assisted in her work by her assistant, Anthony, but she is held back by everyone else, her husband and their friends, her lover, her daughter, and her sister.

When the play opens, Anthony is checking the temperature in the greenhouse. Harry, Claire's husband, tries to get into the greenhouse from the wintry outside, but Anthony ignores him. Eventually Anthony decides he must open the door, but becomes very concerned about what the cold air is doing to the flowers. Disregarding Anthony's concerns, Harry allows the two house-guests, Tom and Dick, to join him for breakfast in the greenhouse since Claire has had all the heat from the house directed to the greenhouse for her plants. The men joke about Claire's interest in the flowers, and Claire puts up with them, just barely. Elizabeth, Claire's daughter who has just been "finished" in Europe, arrives and comes out to the greenhouse to see her mother. She is eager to help her mother, but doesn't understand that Claire isn't raising plants for their beauty but to create a new breed. Claire rejects her daughter, and the men feel

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3 Many scholars have already noted the importance of the names Tom, Dick, and Harry to the play, that they are stereotypes and not individuals. I think this is an important point but will not base discussion on it since I am more interested in Claire's relationship with her daughter.
that her interest in plants has gone too far. Claire's husband comes up to her room, which resembles part of a crooked tower, to talk sense into her, but he only makes Claire angry. The following morning Claire checks on the Breath of Life and it has indeed gone "outside what other flowers have been" (Bigsby Plays 63). Claire goes mad in her new godlike existence.

In this play once again we see a private individual, a woman, who will not or cannot live up to a clear public definition of acceptable behavior, and the public definition comes from within Claire's family. The private roles of husband and wife are well-defined. Claire's husband, Tom, doesn't mind her interest in plants as long as she is fun at times and pays appropriate attention to her daughter and her guests. Claire doesn't really expect anything from Tom except that he stay out of her way. It was once important that he be exciting, so that maybe they could together break out of themselves, but she seems to have given up on this dream. Instead of the public coming to the personal space of the character on official business, for example, in the role of the sheriff or county attorney, Claire's daughter and sister provide the public definition that Claire rebels against. Her treatment of her daughter brings her relationship with her husband to a breaking point. Therefore, through the family, the influence of the public sphere begins to encroach on the private sphere.

Claire's daughter, Elizabeth, often gives the public definition of who a good woman is by phrasing even her own activities in the impersonal third person. "Studying ...[t]ennis and skating and dancing ... [are] the things one does. ...Europe ... was awfully amusing. ...Of course, I'm glad I'm an American [because] one is glad one is an American" (Bigsby Plays 74-75). Elizabeth even supports Goldstein's statement of the changes that arose from World War I.

I think it's just awfully amusing that you're doing something. One does nowadays ... It was the war, wasn't it, made it the thing to do something? ... We should each do some expressive thing ... Of course, one's own kind of thing. Like mother-- growing flowers

This does not fit Claire's wish to create something new and something that is entirely her own. The resulting controversy, her husband's and lover's distaste
of the way she treats Elizabeth, does not trouble Claire since she is loyal to her vision of becoming a creator. But it is in her successful fulfillment of her vision that Claire is lost. She removes herself so much from the public sphere that she goes mad.

Where the public collapses onto the private in this play is best seen through Glaspell's use of physical space. The greenhouse is obviously Claire's space and here her interest in plants is the norm, not the exception. Throughout the first act Harry and the house guests invade this space for a commonplace action: breakfast. In the second act, Claire's tower room is invaded by her husband and her sister, neither of whom has visited the tower before. As Claire gets closer to breaking through to a new form with the Breath of Life, the outside and acceptable public invades and attempts to set down rules in her private sphere. Because the public sphere is represented by family members, we can see a parallel between the two spheres that was not present in "Trifles."

Gender lines are not drawn so clearly in this play as they are in "Trifles." Claire is acceptable to the men in the play until she rejects her own daughter, and the person who seems to care about the plants as much as Claire does is Anthony, her male assistant. Yet the character of Claire is a good example of female characters in theatre during the 1920's. Her insanity at the end of the play agrees with Murphy's description of many female characters in the plays of the 1920's, but Glaspell also seems willing to open the male and female worlds, so they intersect. As I will point out in the discussion of *Alison's House*, gender lines are important in Glaspell's work, but they are not the only means she used of addressing issues of the time.

*Alison's House* represents a mixture of the public and private spheres because Alison Stanhope had the ability to speak for all people. As I have stated before, Stanhope and Elsa have chosen different approaches to the same situation, but each feels the same about Alison's poetry. At the end of the play Elsa feels Alison is speaking to her through the poetry, but Stanhope counters "I feel she wrote them for me" (Glaspell *Alison's* 153). Knowles' understanding of Alison's poetry has led him to write his own verses, which have been published (Glaspell *Alison's*  6-7) and Ann thinks of her mother when she reads the poetry (150). The poetry then takes private experiences, makes them public, and they have the potential of reaching more people. The
end result is that private conflicts can be resolved in the public sphere. Ann tells Elsa that other women thinks she's "brave" (118) for running away with Bill, and Eben longs to have that kind of love with someone (104).

One interesting development in this play is the acceptance of the idea of running away with a married person and this acceptance falls along generational lines. Stanhope, at the beginning of the play, will not even admit that Alison had been tempted to leave her family until Louise has to say it specifically (12-13). Eben and Elsa will at least acknowledge that some action has occurred in Elsa's life, but they don't state it out loud. Even the guilt is acknowledged but is never referred to more than "it."

Elsa: Oh, Eben--don't.
Eben: Well, you've got to take it.
Elsa: Of course. But if only I could take it--all.

At the end of the play when Stanhope tries to tell Elsa that she and Alison have nothing in common, Elsa responds "Don't Father. Don't say it. She wouldn't. You ought to hurt me--some" (Glaspell 153). Between these characters we see a more open discussion than those that belong to the older generation and Eben and Ted carry on the most accepting conversation of all. Ted half-jokingly offers to take Louise to Cambridge, away from Eben, if he will write a theme for Ted's English professor. Later, when Louise complains about the shame Elsa will bring on them, Ted suggests she come to Cambridge for a change of scenery. Eben could be encouraging the idea when he adds "I think the idea of a little trip with Ted--" (Glaspell 81), but Stanhope interrupts him. Even though we don't get the rest of Eben's line, the idea has entered the family's conversation and is no longer hidden.

The character of Ted depicts another interesting development in this family. Unlike Agatha and Stanhope, who have been able to guard Alison by controlling the contact with the outside world, Ted has to negotiate with that world. He must go to college to fulfill his role as a Stanhope, yet because of his place in the family, he is pressured by the outside world to write an essay about

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4 To read more about this trend in the movie industry, consult Lary May's Screening Out the Past, New York: Oxford University Press, 1980.
Alison's private life, something a Stanhope would not normally do. His English professor at Harvard "takes [him] out for dinner--fills [him] up on wine--... always ends telling [him he's] got no soul--insensitive family--unworthy" (Glaspell Alison's 30-31). The private sphere, the family, expects Ted to do well at school and take his place in the family law firm. They are frustrated with Ted because the public world demands he supply information. Eben finally tells Ted, "... You have no sense" (145). When Ted can't live up to Alison's reputation outside of his family's life, the public sphere, represented by the English professor, judges him "unworthy." Caught between public and private worlds, Ted must prove his value to his professor and his family.

While I could discuss several other characters in the play who are also caught between public and private worlds, I believe Elsa represents this paradox as well as Ted. Like Ted, Elsa belongs to neither the family nor the public world, but she still attempts to find a space between the two where she can exist. Throughout the play, Elsa is conscious of the fact that she really has no say in the family, but when Ted grabs Alison's poetry in Act Three, starting a fight, Elsa says, "Oh this isn't the way we act in our family" (Glaspell Alison's 145). Later she tries to get Stanhope to think about life beyond the town he has grown up in and Stanhope's only defense is in replying, "Our little town is our lives. It's Eben's children" (152). Elsa seems to be fighting for the private world of the family to open up to a larger public world, which would be less restrictive, yet she also seems to feel that standards within the family should be maintained. To Elsa, at least, the public world beyond the town and the private world of the family can co-exist if the family would look beyond the small-town boundaries they have been living by and acceptance of Alison's poetry becomes a means of redefining the public and private spheres. Because of Alison, Ted has to negotiate with the world in a way that his father did not have to and Elsa can establish new boundaries on public and private worlds.

While the two plays from Glaspell's Provincetown bills show us the work that the heroines have accomplished in their personal spaces, the public and private mixture is so strong in Alison's House that the space is better destroyed than occupied by someone else. We may not see Minnie Wright working in the kitchen, but we can see the results of her actions in the mess that is left. We do see Claire in her greenhouse and in her tower room, which was an area no one
else had been in before. But these are just rooms occupied by people. In 
*Alison's House* the physical stands for the person herself. Agatha wouldn't let 
anyone tear up Alison's room during the move (8) and she would rather burn 
down the entire house than just Alison's poetry. Stanhope wants "]n]o 
disturbance in Alison's room. It is to keep its--serenity, the one day it has left" 
(14) as if the room presents his memory of Alison. And this is felt by people 
outside the family as well. Knowles goes for a walk along the river and returns 
to tell Ann "it was as if [Alison's] thoughts were there. They must have been 
hers--for they were better than mine" (96). Hodges, who will buy the house and 
break up the rooms for summer boarders, thinks that the river "ain't healthy. . . . 
Seems like the river had something against this place. Right here on this 
bend's where she washes in more and more" (67). Alison's poetry has allowed 
Knowles to be a part of the world he lives in, to understand the emotional and 
physical places.

To many scholars *Alison's House* has been a black mark on Glaspell's 
writing career. It has been called a "retreat" and a "surrender" from the radical 
themes of her early plays. Yet many critics, Waterman, Noe, Makowsky, and 
Ben-Zvi have shown that Glaspell was influenced by the issues of the world 
around her. *Alison's House* should be given that same cultural critical eye and 
I hope my investigation of some of the changes that occurred in the early 
twentieth century has given a new look to *Alisons's House*.
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