From Stage to Page: Susan Glaspell’s Re-imagining of her play Chains of Dew as the novel Ambrose Holt and Family

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Abstract

Among writers of her era committed to transgressing genre boundaries, aesthetic cross-fertilization, and artistic syntheses of all kinds, Susan Glaspell stands out as perhaps the quintessential trans-literary dramatist of her era. She began her literary career as a journalist, published over fifty short stories in popular magazines, nine novels, fourteen plays, and a genre-blurring memoir/biography (The Road to the Temple). Passionately committed to the belief that “the arts fertilize each other,” Glaspell frequently trans-genred her own works, transforming plays into short stories or novels and short stories or newspaper articles into plays. This paper offers a close, intertextual reading of her play Chains of Dew (1922) and her adaptation of it as the novel Ambrose Holt and Family (1931), with particular attention to their respective critiques of (both feminine and masculine) gender roles and the relationship between the works and their respective contexts. Chains of Dew offers an unsentimental view of marriage and maternity as Dotty, the doll wife (allusions to Ibsen’s Doll House are many) comes to realize that her poet/banker husband’s happiness depends on her remaining a "burden" to him that must be borne with heroic resignation. In the novel, a similarly situated doll wife, "Blossom," lives a similarly discontented life with her poet/businessman husband. The added titular character, her father-in-law Ambrose Holt, is a gender outlaw, a man who shirked his "masculine" responsibility to provide for his family, deserting his wife and son when Blossom’s husband Lincoln was a child.

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