Susan Glaspell

“The Middle West must have taken a strong hold of me in my early years, for I’ve never ceased trying to figure out why it is as it is.”

Susan Keating Glaspell was born in Davenport, Iowa, on July 1, 1876, the second child and only daughter of Elmer and Alice Glaspell. Susan’s ancestors were among the first families of Davenport, and Susan grew up sure of her place in her Midwest town.

After her graduation from Davenport High School in 1894, Susan went to work at the Davenport Morning Republican as a reporter. Two years later, she was appointed society editor of Weekly Outlook magazine. Although most of her editorials concern etiquette or social events among the Davenport elite, she also took the opportunity to argue her opinions on less frivolous topics, such as politics, literature, drama, and women’s education.

Having high intelligence and a strong sense of self, Susan was scornful of the lingering idea that a college education could ruin a young lady’s femininity. In 1897, she enrolled at Drake University and tackled the same subjects as a young man would, including Greek, French, philosophy, and history. She balanced her studies with an active social life, and managed to contribute pieces to the college literary magazine.

Susan graduated with a bachelor’s of philosophy in 1899 and went to work at the Des Moines Daily News as a statehouse reporter. Starting with very little knowledge of politics, she learned on the go, charming the legislators into helping her with her articles. She also wrote a column called “The News Girl,” which discussed various topics both serious and humorous. A few of them showed a certain boredom with social matters, while others wondered whether it was fair for women to want all the traditional powers of men while demanding the traditional protections of women.

Susan soon retired as a reporter, thinking, as she later said, that a few years in the newspaper business had given her enough experience and material to become a full time freelance writer. Though she did briefly attend the University of Chicago for some post-graduate work, she also sold several articles and short stories to various journals, including Youth’s Companion. Her stories, though conventionally executed, were often about the integrity of an individual in conflict with society, which would remain a favorite theme of Susan’s throughout her writing career. In 1904, she was awarded a $500 prize by Black Cat magazine. In 1906, Susan was elected a member of the Tuesday Club, a study group for Davenport ladies, and presented a paper the next year on “The Influence of the Press.” She seemed destined to follow in the distinguished footsteps of Davenport author and literary grand dame Alice French. Susan, however, would soon take a fateful step off her expected path.

Perhaps to balance the impeccably respectability of the Tuesday Club, Susan also joined the far less proper Monist Society, one of the many freethinking philosophical clubs that were forming in relatively open-minded Davenport. She admitted that she found a certain thrill in skipping church to attend the meetings.

While involved with the Monists, Susan assisted in defending a book, The Finality of the Christian Religion, which the Davenport Library Board had banned. Freedom of speech was a cause that Susan wholeheartedly embraced, and during the ensuing political struggle, she formed friendships with like-minded people, many of them socialists. One of these was George Cram Cook, the great-grandson of Ebenezer Cook, who had given up a respectable university teaching career to write poetry.

George, called ‘Jig’ by his friends, held informal parties at his home near Buffalo, Iowa, to discuss literature or socialist philosophies; Susan was soon a regular visitor. Despite Jig’s then-engagement to second wife Mollie Price, who was working in Chicago at the time, he and Susan fell in love. Escaping a messy situation, Susan left Davenport to finalize the publication of her first novel around the time that Jig’s fiancé returned to marry him.
The Glory of the Conquered, a novel primarily about the power of love and star-crossed soul mates, was published in 1909, and enjoyed great success. Ironically enough, Susan was in Paris at that time, a deliberate distance from her own soul mate. Returning to Davenport in 1910, well after Jig’s marriage, she resumed her place at the Tuesday Club meetings.

Davenport proved too close to the Cook home, though, and despite Mollie’s pregnancy, Susan and Jig were soon involved in an affair. Facing the censure of both Davenport society and their own circle of friends, Susan left again for New York to work on the publication of The Visioning, a novel set on Arsenal Island. In contrast to Conquered, this new novel deals with several politically and socially charged issues, including sexual double standards, set against the strictures of traditional, rigid military society. Predictably, it was not as well received by the conservative readership as her previous work; regardless, Susan would not return to more conventional themes and styles—her inner rebellion was starting to assert itself.

Jig and Mollie had finally divorced in 1911, and he and Susan married on April 14, 1913 in New Jersey. They were interested in the new kinds of plays, based on contemporary realism, that were appearing on the New York stage, and began experimenting with scripts of their own. In 1915, the Cooks summered in Provincetown, Massachusetts, which at that time was a retreat for writers and artists tired of the cultural status quo and traditional philosophies. While there, Susan and Jig discovered that several of their friends had also written plays, and they all decided to perform them for their personal entertainment.

News spread, and soon the group was performing in front of the community, in a small makeshift theater. This was the start of the Provincetown Players, a long-running company that would have incalculable impact on the American stage. Having unintentionally started a theater troupe, the Players were now required to write or acquire more scripts. Many a playwright began a notable career this way, by submission or shanghai; one member even raided his shy roommate’s hidden supply of manuscripts, bringing Eugene O’Neill’s work to the public eye.

Susan claimed that she wrote plays only because Jig told her to; however true this is, her plays were well received, and some of them are still quite well known. Trifles, a very short one-act play based on a murder case that Susan covered while at the Des Moines Daily News, is probably her best known and most studied work. The central character, a woman arrested for the murder of her husband, never appears on stage, but her actions and motives are easily reconstructed and understood, by the women of her community, who wait in her kitchen as patronizing male authorities overlook clues as meaningless ‘women’s things.’ In an act of solidarity, the women arrange the evidence to support their sense of justice toward what they see as a justifiable homicide.

Her success as a playwright might have made up for the poor reception of Fidelity, which was published in 1915; certainly, she would not write another novel for almost a decade. Setting societal mores against romantic love, the main character of Fidelity wants her midwestern town to accept her wildly romantic affair with a married man. It is meant to be a novel of personal growth, but the average reader of the time, or at least the average critic, was not sympathetic to an unrepentant fallen woman or the author who dared give her an optimistic ending.

The enthusiastic reception of Trifles, on the other hand, encouraged the Provincetown Players to move to Greenwich Village in New York. Remaining a club, with tickets sold only to subscribers, the stated mission of the Players was to produce “plays written by its active members, or by others in whose work the active members may be interested” in order to "encourage the writing of American plays of real artistic, literary, and dramatic...merit.” Sinclair Lewis was only one of the future-famous writers whose work was accepted, and a very young Edna St. Vincent Millay, actually joined as an actress before venturing to offer her scripts to the club.

Susan liked Greenwich Village, immediately joining the Heterodoxy club, a feminist organization dedicated to the freedom of the individual. However, Susan soon discovered that many of the ‘bohemians’ populating the area were more interested in the cache of being thought radical that in committing to the underlying philosophies and ideals. She called this kind of chic radicalism “egotism in disguise,” and
wrote a play, *Close the Book*, in which two young revolutionaries in love are dismayed to find out that their families are actually quite reputable and even distinguished, thus making it impossible for them to respect each other, or themselves.

Oddly enough, while Susan and Jig were known for their lifestyle of radical bohemianism, for the most part they wrote about it rather than lived it. A traditionalist in many ways, Susan wanted children, but after a miscarriage in 1914, it was deemed to risky to her health. Instead, she mothered her two stepchildren, Nilla and Harl, whenever they visited their father, trying to given them a nice, stable home. Susan was often far more sympathetic towards her heroines than toward her wayward stepdaughter. One evening, Nilla missed her curfew by two hours, and discovered two anxious, freethinking parents sternly waiting up for her.

Susan also subscribed to what could be called a puritan work ethic, writing to a strict morning schedule that allowed her to sell many short stories to a lucrative magazine market. Susan even reworked a few of her plays into stories (*Trifles* became “A Jury of Her Peers”) and vice versa. So devoted to her writing habits was she that when heart trouble kept her from climbing stairs, Jig built her an elevator to take her up to her writing room every morning.

By 1922, the Provincetown Players had premiered over ninety plays by almost fifty American playwrights. Like most of the writers, Susan produced, directed, and acted in many of her own plays, not because the Players were strapped for funds, but because Jig felt that playwrights should experience every aspect of their work. Susan was considered to be a good actress, or at least to have a good stage presence. As Jacques Copeau, a French director of some note, said about a performance of *The People*, “She was absolutely lacking in technique . . . [but] there was in the look a human emotion that brought tears to my eyes.” Praise indeed for a woman whose theater group now included such illustrious walk-ons as Isadora Duncan, Mary Pickford, Walt Disney, Irving Berlin, and George Gershwin. Even Charlie Chaplin was rumored to have once asked for a role.

The Players, which by this time had incorporated, had changed over the years from a playwright’s playground to a production showcase, and from a commune-style theater workshop to a moneymaking business concern, forcing an ideological split in the membership. Jig and Susan, loyal to the original vision, left the conflict behind to live in Greece, which Jig considered his cultural home.

“The Faithless Shepherd,” a story set in Greece, shows Susan’s feelings for the ancient traditions of its people. However appreciative Susan was of the mysticism of her rustic surroundings, she found it difficult to live in a foreign country, especially when Nilla, her strong-willed stepdaughter, joined them. Susan contemplated going to Paris to stay with friends, but while it is doubtful that she could have left Jig for long, the decision would not be hers to make.

Upon returning from Athens, where Nilla was attending an American school, Susan found a sick husband who was too worried about their ailing dog, ToPuppy, to care about his own symptoms. Misdiagnosed with the grippe, Jig’s health worsened, while ToPuppy had to be put down. An American doctor was brought in, but arrived too late. Jig had contracted glanders, a rare, incurable infection, probably through a scratch or bite from ToPuppy. George Cram Cook died on January 11, 1924.

Susan took Nilla home to Mollie, and went to Davenport to stay with her mother. Depressed, ill, and drinking too much, the visit was not the comfort Susan wished it to be, and she returned to Massachusetts. Through Provincetown friends, Susan met Norman Matson, a much younger writer, and they were soon inseparable, and set up housekeeping in Truro, Massachusetts.

It is interesting to note that although she and Norman never married, Susan put a marriage announcement in the newspapers and made sure her friends wrote to “Mrs. Matson” whenever she visited Davenport. Even after all she had done and written, Susan still found it difficult to violate the conventions of her upbringing, especially for the sake of her family.

Despite her involvement with Norman, Susan never lost sight of Jig and the profound effect he had had on her life. When Eugene O’Neill wanted to continue using the Provincetown Players name, despite the
group’s almost complete departure from the original intent, Susan blasted him with an accusation of betraying Jig’s memory and washed her hands of the Players. O’Neill later put up a massive bronze memorial plaque to Jig in Provincetown Playhouse, as an apology.

Creating her own memorials, Susan gathered an anthology of Jig’s poetry, Greek Coins, and began writing a “spiritual biography” of her soul mate. Published in 1927, The Road to the Temple, while one of her best-selling books, may not be Susan’s best work; she herself admitted that she may have been too close to the subject to be objective. As Marcia Noe suggests, the effect was “rather like someone standing directly in front of one of the foothills of the Alps and mistaking it for Mont Blanc.”

Having retired from the Players, Susan began writing novels again, producing four in quick succession, including the best-selling Brook Evans, which was purchased by Paramount and made into the 1931 movie, The Right to Love. She also wrote numerous short stories, and two plays. One of these plays, The Comic Artist, she co-wrote with Norman. The other, Alison’s House, based on the life of Emily Dickenson, won a Pulitzer in 1931. The award was a complete surprise to Susan, who had worried that Alison’s House wouldn’t do well. In fact, she almost didn’t open the Columbia University-embossed envelope, imagining that it held a request from a student group to waive the royalties for a performance of one of her scripts.

Having achieved some stability in her life and work, Susan once again had it yanked away. While visiting Paris in 1932, she became ill and left Norman to seek care at home. While on his own, Norman had an affair with the nineteen-year old daughter of one of Susan’s friends. Susan thought it was a brief fling, and tried to forgive Norman, but the relationship deteriorated. The final blow came when Susan was informed that the girl was pregnant, and Norman was going to marry her.

Smarting from the loss of her lover to a younger woman who could give him children, suffering from chronic bad health, and living primarily on her savings, Susan was no longer the picture of the successful writer she had been just a few years previously. In fact, she couldn’t seem to write, or write well. Alcohol didn’t help; as she told her friends, “I have to find out if I don’t write because I drink, or I drink because I don’t write.”

Her financial situation was somewhat improved by Hollywood’s interest in purchasing the rights to some of her plays, including Trifles. But Susan’s real rescue came from the government: In 1936, Susan was asked to come to Chicago to direct the Midwest Play Bureau (MPB) for the Federal Theater Project, a division of the Works Progress Administration. The MPB was set up to support American playwrights of promise, and to stimulate the commercial theater by offering inexpensive tickets to their plays. Her salary would be very small, but she would be involved in the theater and living in the Midwest, both of which she thought might help her break her writer’s block.

The MPB had no staff, no money, and no support from the theatrical world, but it now had a very determined director. Susan refused to allow the Bureau to become a clearinghouse or a forum for contract or rights negotiations; her job was to find great plays and to help talented playwrights, and she did her fighting best. If she couldn’t get a promising play produced in the Midwest, she sent it to another Bureau director in hopes that it would be accepted elsewhere. She encouraged writers to stand up for their right to own their work, even against the Federal Theater Project itself. And when critics, most of whom automatically assumed that no one on ‘relief’ could write a decent play, were especially harsh, she considered writing articles defending the plays, the playwrights, and the Bureau. As she told the Project coordinator, “As a playwright I rather hate to launch an attack on the critics, but if my country needs me, I am there.”

After two years of constant battles, Susan resigned her directorship, and returned to Provincetown. She immediately became a part of the community, and shared her time and money with others. Always generous, she supported her brother, Ray, and often used her royalty checks to help out those in need. Where direct help wasn’t accepted, she used subterfuge, as when she hired her old friend Harry Kemp, to do her gardening, despite her own green thumb. She privately joked that she couldn’t figure out how to pay him to leave her garden alone.
A touching example of Susan’s kindness was her attitude toward her maid, Francelina, who had become pregnant by her alcoholic husband. Francelina had wanted to leave him, but faced the disapproval of her family and friends. Susan not only gave the girl emotional and financial support through her divorce and pregnancy, but gave her a gift of the precious baby clothes Susan had bought for the child she’d miscarried so many years ago.

Back among friends, Susan was writing again. In 1940, her only children’s book, Cherished and Shared of Old came out; a Christmas present to her goddaughter. That same year, her novel The Morning is Near Us was chosen as a Literary Guild selection. She also delivered a speech at the Boston Book Fair about her belief that literature could illuminate the darkness in the world, and hold up visions of a better world to fight for and build.

It may have been this belief that held her back in 1942 when she was asked by her publisher to give the metal bookplates, from which her books were printed, to the war effort. This was a serious request of an author, as books were not often reissued once the plates were destroyed. Susan released The Glory of the Conquered, but asked that her other books be spared. Susan was not unpatriotic—she did donate the bronze plaque that had hung in the Provincetown Playhouse in memory of Jig—but she felt that literature was as important as metal to the war effort. As she said, “Wholesale book destruction sounds more like our enemies than us.”

Susan published two more novels, Norma Ashe and Judd Rankin’s Daughter, which were released to mixed reviews. In 1945, she wrote a new play, a comedy about World War II, Springs Eternal, but it was rejected by the Theater Guild, who felt that the themes and jokes were tired and passé, hard criticism indeed for the one time master of cutting-edge theater. Instead, she involved herself with a 1946 summer theater production of Alison’s House. She continued to write every day, but didn’t produce much more than a few articles and letters protesting the Provincetown Library’s banning of Ayn Rand’s The Fountainhead, and vilifying the attempt of a new theater group to name itself the Provincetown Players.

Susan’s health, never perfect, was now very poor. She had anemia, heart problems, and her eyes were failing. In 1947, she was diagnosed with stomach cancer. Finally, she contracted viral pneumonia and suffered a pulmonary embolism, a blood clot in her lung. On July 27, 1948, at the age of 72, Susan Glaspell died, and was buried in Provincetown.

During her busy life, Susan wrote nine novels, fourteen plays, countless short stories and articles. She inspired and guided other writers and was a good friend to many. At times, her work and her personal choices reflect acceptance and admiration for the culture, values, and attitudes of her Iowa origins, and at other times rejection and scorn—but there is no doubt that she never lost sight of her Midwestern roots. In 1967, nineteen years after her death, Susan Glaspell was inducted into the Iowa Women’s Hall of Fame.

Sources:


http://homepages.nyu.edu/~jqk2598/provincetown.html