

SUSAN GLASPELL ON *THE VERGE*¹: MODERNIST FEMININITY ON THE THRESHHOLD

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This text sets itself the task to look at playwright Susan Glaspell and her play *The Verge* (1921) as a representation of one of the chief thresholds of modernity: the changing position of women. The focus is on modernist nomadic gestures of ‘pioneering’ in both Glaspell’s writing and her artistic persona. The play is considered from the perspective of creative and moral trespassing in connection with two major cultural tendencies in US society: puritanical conservatism and frontier exploration. The discussion focuses on the migrations of both the fictional character, Claire Archer, and the real woman, Susan Glaspell.

Key words: femininity / masculinity; nomadic displacement; modernist persona

When Susan Glaspell said “I began writing plays because my husband forced me to”, Gertrude Stein had not yet come up with the jocular slightly condescending phrase ‘the wives of geniuses’².

Since then time has proved Glaspell’s claim to genius, which she modestly hid behind this statement, more justified than that of her husband, George Cook, a man of brief but bright literary fame, in whose shadow she spent a considerable portion of her life. Giving way, stepping back, and standing in the shadow while silently taking care of things and placing everyone else’s interests ahead of your own were the chief virtues of ‘the Angel of the House’, a term Virginia Woolf came up with to sum up her own rebellion and the damage to a woman’s personality – especially her

¹ Further in the text abbreviated as *TV*.

² In *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* (1935) Alice – the wife – “sits with the wives of geniuses”, while Gertrude – the genius – presides among her (male) likes in the literary *salon* at their house in Paris.

artistic creativity – of being that kind of wife. Both Stein’s and Woolf’s apt phrases made their entrance on the literary stage in the 1930s, almost a decade after the premiere in 1921 of *The Verge*, staged by the Provincetown Players³, Glaspell’s controversial play, which deals with the same issue in a provocatively experimental manner.

From a different perspective, though in a similar manner, Glaspell spent most of her **theatrical** life in the shadow of her fellow playwright from the Provincetown Players, Eugene O’Neill. Ironically, “George Cook (1873 – 1924) is mentioned briefly in most of the literary histories because he was the founder of the Provincetown Players and, therefore, the discoverer of Eugene O’Neill.” (Tanselle 1976: n.p.). Needless to say, Susan and George “founded” and “discovered” together: both were wholeheartedly involved in the Provincetown project, writing, acting, directing. Cook was “the cohesive force of this community from first to last”⁴. Glaspell, apart from writing, acting and directing, was also responsible for most of the technical and organizational matters connected with the productions of the fledgling (initially amateur) theatre company, at least during the decisive first 5 years of its existence⁵. Her name is not even mentioned in the Wikipedia article on the Provincetown Players.

So typical.

Cook continued to get most of the credit, of which the above quotations from the 1970s and 1980s are two of many examples, for over half a century after his death. O’Neill was awarded the Nobel Prize. At least one of Glaspell’s biographers, Linda Ben-Zvi, admits she started work with the belief that Glaspell was “obviously a victim, beset by patriarchal villains (O’Neill and Cook)” (Ben-Zvi 2005: XI).

³ Provincetown Players, theatrical organization that began performing in 1915 in Provincetown, Mass., U.S., founded by a nontheatre group of writers and artists whose common aim was the production of new and experimental plays. <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/480689/Provincetown-Players> 28.01.13

The company began as a summer pastime for a small group of NYC bohemians / intellectuals and ended up as one of the chief driving forces in the development – away from superficiality and commercialism – of what is now widely recognized as original American theatre.

⁴ Robert K. Sarlós. The Provincetown Players' Genesis or Non-Commercial Theatre on Commercial Streets, p. 65. *Journal of American Culture*, Volume 7, Issue 3, Fall 1984 http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/j.1542-734X.1984.0703_65.x

⁵ It later became the Playwright’s theatre and went on with a break in 1921 until it disbanded in 1929.

“Today only one of her plays (the one-act *Trifles*) is regularly anthologized, productions of her plays are rare, her abundant oeuvre of fiction (nine novels and over fifty short stories) is almost completely neglected and Glaspell herself is remembered chiefly for her role in supposedly discovering Eugene O’Neill” (Black 2006: 151).

Even that secondary role doesn’t seem to have been her own role, but was shared with her husband – the proper way for a wife, his ‘significant other’, to use the politically sensitive terminology of the 1990-s, to play a role. As for O’Neill, Susan Glaspell is stereotypically listed as “the most significant other playwright of his own period and milieu” (Ben Zwi 1986: n.p.).

But she was not a victim, not in comparison with the millions of women outside the bohemian environment of Greenwich Village and other centres like that, where the 20th century came even before WW I. She was a pioneer, with all the dogged perseverance and sturdiness of the frontier – and all the independence. Her sense of pioneering experience was grounded in her perception of her native place:

“Her own emancipation from the narrow confines of conventional second-generation life in Davenport is described as a pioneering venture, when, in 1907 at the urging of Cook and his 16-year-old protégé Floyd Dell, she attended a meeting of free thinkers, called the Monist Society: *Some of us were children of pioneers; some of us still drove grandmother to the Old Settlers' Picnic the middle of August. Now – pioneers indeed, that pure frightened exhilarating feeling of having stepped out of your own place and here, with these strange people, far from your loved ones and already a little lonely, beginning to form a new background.*” (Ben-Zvi 1986: n.p.) (my italics, R. M.).

It is this same exhilaration of “having stepped out of your own place and here” that drives Claire Archer in *TV* to keep looking for more boundaries to overstep – from a point where her behaviour is seen as odd by her well-mannered friends and family to a point of monstrous megalomania – and beyond the verge of sanity. The play, on the other hand, is the author’s most experimentally daring one, the act of its writing – another gesture of “getting out” and “leaving behind”, the true modernist migration.

Glaspell's pioneering role in US theatre is seen as all the more important in view of the fact that in the first decades of the 20th century it was focused on light-hearted entertainment, epitomized in the cultural concept / site of Broadway, a deficiency that The Provincetown Players and similar groups set out to fill. Her pioneering gesture(s) made history:

“Glaspell's many achievements include the co-founding of the Provincetown Players. In the teens and early twenties she was identified, along with Eugene O'Neill, as one of the country's leading dramatists. She was only the second woman, after Zona Gale in 1921, to receive the Pulitzer Prize for drama with *Alison's House* (1931). She was an award-winning fiction writer, whose short story “A Jury of Her Peers” and its dramatic counterpart, *Trifles* (1915/16), were immediately identified as landmark texts. Her later novels appeared on best-seller lists around the country. And in the 1930s, she served as the Director of the Midwest Play Bureau for the Federal Theatre Project. Given this catalogue of triumphs, (...) Glaspell is a “pioneer”, a woman who, throughout her life, challenged assumptions of what women could or should do and repeatedly overcame private and public obstacles to her creative and personal fulfillment” (Gainor 2005: 1).

TV was among the most unorthodox instances of experimental attempts among its kind, and perhaps symbolically, it came out in the Provincetown troupe's most conflict-ridden, though very successful, season – 1921. This in my opinion makes the production of *TV*, which deals with the issue of a woman's desperate and controversial claim to genius, all the more significant. It presents a woman would-be pioneer and genius, a personage seemingly very different from the author, yet quite “logical” to anyone familiar with her lifestyle and life story. It seems very likely that the playwright had, besides her political motivation, reasons of an experiential nature for this focus (cf. Ben-Zvi 2006: 293). She had married George Cook (after their relationship had caused him to divorce his second wife) and shocked Davenport, Iowa. She then remained a wife to him in the most angelical self-sacrificial manner to his death in 1924. This was a relationship which started as a challenge to convention and ended in the depth of it. If, in Christopher Bigsby's words, it expressed the modernist “right, indeed in some sense the responsibility, to challenge convention and insist on a freedom of thought, emotion and action, [...] in tune with a society now finally turning its back on the old century” (Bigsby

1987: 3), it was not very successful. If the real woman was unable to quite live up to that modernist responsibility, the fictional character brought it to extremes that go beyond the verge of absurdity in a manner weirdly tragic and grotesque at the same time.

Apart from ‘The New Woman’ and what happens to her in the 20th century, the play explores more than one feminine identity in its three female characters – in fact, all clichés of femininity culturally operative at the time. They range from the self-effacing 19th century ideal of True Womanhood, a.k.a. Angel of the House, through the archetypal manipulative ‘vamp’ / femme fatale made particularly popular by numerous movies around WW I, to the frivolous light-hearted ‘Flapper’ of the 1920s. The development of the concept of femininity seems to be traced historically: one could even look at this play as an attempt to make a projection forward into the future. In this way it seems to reflect the author’s (frustrated) desire for emigration to a kind of gender utopia.

Importantly, by discarding one traditional image of femininity after the other, the central character, Claire Archer, appropriates elements of gendered behaviour which in traditional mindsets are associated with masculinity. The play focuses on presenting her as a wealthy housewife who from the pastime of fiddling with potted plants moves on to radical genetics experimentation. Much in the manner of the ‘Mad Scientist’ cliché from science fiction, the ultimate professional, she is ready to do anything and sacrifice everything to reach her Faustian demiurgic goal of creating a new form of life:

(Claire) [...] But it *can* be done! We need not be held in forms moulded for us. There is outness – and otherness (Glaspell 1987a: 64).

As for Glaspell herself, New Womanhood was a topical political issue and she was apart from a philosophically curious modernist, a truly conscientious New Woman in the political as well as the artistic sense, who kept trying hard to practice what she preached:

“It was not Glaspell’s relationship to husband George ‘Jig’ Cram Cook that was her primary relationship but, rather, her attachment to the feminist, political and aesthetic environment of Greenwich Village” (Gainor 2003: 17).

This very statement, however, seems to point to lasting tensions between the personal and the political in her life.

Apart from this ideological affiliation, Glaspell was active first in Chicago and then New York pre-WWI Bohemian circles in two ways of considerable significance. On the political level her efforts went into social betterment projects (they of course included feminist goals and “charter membership” in the Heterodoxy Greenwich Village Feminist Club (Carpentier and Ozieblo 2006: 16). Feminist critics / biographers have called Susan Glaspell “a venturesome feminist and determined rebel” (ibid. 17) but they tend to bypass the wifely aspect of the rebel. If her life was an exploration of the ‘untouched’ terrain towards the verge – it was ambiguous exploration in many ways. In the artistic sphere – as a writer, critic and journalist, she was part of the on-going vigorous, sometimes exalted, even hysterical search for novelty going on all around – yet in her prose, for example, she remained quite faithful to passé realist conventions. Like a small but significant number of the female intellectuals of the time, she was a professional with remarkably high personal standards ... and a wife: an oxymoron in the eyes of most people at a time when the idea of the working girl was far from synonymous with the notions of professional and intellectual.

I tend to look at Glaspell as a clear-cut case of nomadic⁶ displacement though she can hardly be classified as an immigrant / expatriate. Her nomadism is not really geographic in the sense of transnational nor did she move about very much in the course of her lifetime. In terms of lifestyles as well as identity-forming mindsets, however, moving from 19th century Davenport, Iowa to Chicago and then to New York’s Greenwich Village is quite serious as migrations go. I would rather call that a mindset displacement **towards the future**: she experimented with a way of life characteristic of a time which was yet to come so far as women were concerned. That lifestyle included mobility, professionalism, political involvement, bohemianism and making choices with respect to sexuality, among other things. While in the first decades of the 20th c. such displacement was nothing out of the ordinary for men, in a woman it was

⁶ The term nomad is used in the Deleusian sense as developed by Rosi Braidotti to imply subjectivity / identity in motion, change, flux that may or may not include actual geographic dislocations. It is thus an identity determining state(s) of mind – and the corresponding lifestyle(s). Modernist nomadism is itself a very interesting problematic which, because of limited space, has to remain outside the scope of this text.

very likely to be regarded as transgression. The ease with which the young male intellectuals of the time converged in places like Greenwich Village to form the landmark bohemian communities was incomparable to the resistance, both internal and external, their female counterparts had to overcome to get there and to be there. So for Susan Glaspell and many modernist women this is also a displacement in gender: performing what acceptable roles prescribe for masculinity, ‘infringing’ on male prerogatives, freedom in the first place.

Claire, like her author, dangles suspended in an in-between-ness between eras (more than between spaces / locations). Culturally, even when totally immobilized by being caught in societal constrictions, both are nomads. Claire’s attempts to pull herself out by the hair from what she sees as a swamp swallowing her fail – but the termination of such efforts is an impossibility for her. Both are in perpetual motion towards – and beyond – verges of metaphoric or literal nature, even when they stay ‘at home’, whatever that means or wherever it is. “Out there – lies all that's not been touched – lies life that waits,” Claire says (Glaspell 1987a: 66).

Susan Glaspell did stay in the same place physically most of her career and the exceptions are notable. Among them, the cultural-geographic displacement that stands out is her sojourn in Europe because she seems to have had no other but purely ‘wifely’ reasons for it. The couple’s 2-year long expatriate episode in Greece⁷ is hardly interesting in cultural terms so far as Glaspell is concerned: rather than an enriching novelty, this was, under the surface, a period of internal migration, migration to herself and solitude. On the surface, she followed / accompanied her husband, helped him achieve a cherished, though rather childish, dream – as were, by the way, many of his projects. So it seems that in or out of the US, both her feminist alias and her bohemian one are more interesting as delineated marginality and internal otherness.

Writing as self-creation, writing the self, fictionalizing the self through the performance of a public persona – the quintessential modernist gestures – were what Susan Glaspell did not do, not in a direct straightforward way, anyway. The verge between the 19th century ideal of

⁷ That was George Cook’s “fulfilling a lifelong dream by sailing to Greece and becoming a shepherd and poet among the Parnassian hills, where he was admired by the natives and honored at his death by the removal of a stone from the ruins of the ancient temple of Delphi to mark his grave.” (Tanselle 1976: n.p.)

True Womanhood and the New (Bohemian) Woman was where she kept teetering most of her life. She mothered her husband, bore burdens for him, assured his survival in more than one sense, nursed his tumultuous – and of course fragile – bohemian ego, considering him a genius worth the investment of devotion and self-sacrifice. What she did for the Provincetown Players was very similar and it is hard to say if the project would have succeeded without it. Such feminine gestures were certainly not exceptional in the modernist literary milieu. In fact, they were quite typical, exemplified by the female editors of the most important vehicles of poetic Modernism, the ‘little’ magazines. The majority of their names, even though brought to light in a number of late 20th century studies, nevertheless remain canonically obscured by the spectacular self-aggrandizing personas of male gurus like Ezra Pound and T.S. Elliot, exemplifying on their part the modernist concept of creativity as masculinity, of novelty and experiment in writing as gestures of masculine self-affirmation against the literary heritage / establishment as against a symbolic father figure.

Susan Glaspell played the ‘wife of a genius’ role for what became an important part of ‘off-Broadway’, or ‘serious’ American theatre. Especially after the Players got transferred to New York City, she divided her attention, quite typically, between writing plays, producing them – so far as the term was applicable in this amateur context, acting in them on stage, and being the always reliable stage-manager-organizer-producer figure behind the scenes who got things done. Clearly, the creative part (writing plays) must have been only a small part of her activities at that time.

To Glaspell as both a person and a thinker, freedom was an issue. The freedom of hers and her native region’s as well as the nation’s historical frontier heritage was something she was keenly aware of – just as she was of the freedom possibilities of the bohemian way of life: "I am like the flowers in the hot-house, a forced production.... How would it feel to be free? ... and be a free thinker and an eccentric, generally?" (Glaspell 1987b) And it is precisely these questions that *TV* addresses, in the literal, as well as well as the symbolic sense:

(Claire): [...] There would be strange new comings together – mad new comings together, and we would know what it is to be born, and then we might know – that we are (Glaspell 1987a: 64).

Bohemianism is fertile ground for the New Woman. Before ‘new’ women, in 19th c. bohemia, women mostly played the role of muse /mistress / companion / playmate to the male artist: a role which was itself in conflict with the prescriptions of True Womanhood. It was the New Women, however, who could enter the bohemian milieu on their own terms, in the hitherto strictly male position of the creative experimenter – artist, poet etc:

“...They added a sense of themselves as heroines in a new story to bohemia's increasing store of plots. Just as bohemian identity was intimately intertwined with its representation in print, so was being a New Woman...” (Stansell 2000: 23).

The theme of male resistance to female creative fulfillment is strong throughout Glaspell’s work, and the anxiety about the thwarted fate of female genius looms large:

“Repeatedly in her plays her personae – all of whom are women – break with the confining norms of society, almost always presented as male-dominated, and reach forward to some new awareness, breaking in the process the traditions of society – traditions usually foisted as the inheritance of the past, but now only stagnant and life-threatening” (Ben-Zvi 1986: n.p.).

If the New Woman is about political projects, among them significantly – feminist politics, the female figure at the centre of *TV* comes closer to the 1920s cultural cliché of the flapper, a lady of fashion and leisure – but also an immeasurably free woman in comparison with the generation of her grandmothers: a figure, which the author herself never ‘performed’ in life, but gave quite a bit of attention in her texts. The flapper is a carnivalesque figure – the flapper is about pleasure, fun, ‘a moveable feast’. Somewhere among these different images looms the femme fatale, the demonic manipulative woman who (often destructively) makes an instrument of her irresistibility to men to gain power over them. The text of *TV* is itself carnivalesque:

“(Glaspell’s) texts, polyvalent and multi-determined, can be seen to demonstrate Bakhtin’s ‘carnavalesque discourse’ which breaks through the laws of a language censored by grammar and

semantics, and, at the same time, is a social and political protest” (Carpentier and Ozieblo, 2006: 10).

as it offers not only glimpses at these clichés of femininity, but it also puts them on an ambiguous genre carousel from drawing room comedy to vaudeville to farce to expressionistic drama of mental disturbance to tragedy and back. It seems to invite ironic doubling in allowing readings that combine mutually exclusive modes and genre characteristics, in staying earnestly political while juggling clichés very much in the entertaining manner of popular culture.

Womanhood is seen by Claire’s men as a kind of natural force – indomitable, horrible but irresistible. Male creativity / constructiveness is divided between them and so are their roles – husband, lover, friend, teammate. The first three have an ironically joint name: Harry – the husband, Tom – the friend, and the lover’s name is, predictably (in vaudeville stylistics, certainly not in a tragedy) – Dick. Claire, or the significant aspect of her, seems to be considered his own by each of the four, while at the same time they genially tend to look upon her as a kind of joint property, and joint care. That does not mean each does not genuinely care about her in his comfortably disparaging masculine way. The getting out of hand of that property they seem firmly bent on disregarding for as long as they can. With the exception of the perceptive friend who besides loving her is totally understanding about her restlessness and her fixation on what she terms ‘outness’, they are deeply sunk in the typical denial, men’s hiding place, alongside with their homo-social togetherness and camaraderie, from problems too hard to fathom:

(Harry) Oh, I wish Claire wouldn’t be strange like that. [...] I sometimes wonder if all this [...] is a good thing. It would be all right if she’d just do what she did at the beginning – make the flowers as good as possible of their kind. That’s an awfully nice thing for a woman to do – raise flowers. But there’s something about this – changing things into other things – putting things together and making queer new things – this – (Glaspell 1987a: 65).

Each man represents a stage and a perceived failure in Claire’s search for her true – feminine, but more and more questionably so, as the play progresses – self. Each is punished by her for being a failure. The husband and the lover she rather openly despises for their lack of

individuality. Of the two, it is the husband who stands for romance – though in a kind of negative form, as romantic disappointment, because he is so conventional.

The lover is, somewhat surprisingly perhaps, especially for today's audience, in the position of a sex object: she is in the male conqueror's role of evasiveness from the bonds of love, her rejection of commitment is violent to the point of psychosis – and her attitude to him rather undeservedly callous, even brutally sexist.

The friend is in spiritual unity with her, her alter ego and soul mate:

(Tom) Let her be herself. Can't you see she's troubled?

(Harry) Well, what is there to trouble Claire? Now I ask you. It seems to me she has everything.

(Tom) She is left so – open. Too exposed.[...] You see, Claire isn't hardened into one of those forms she talks about. She's too – aware. Always pulled towards what could be – tormented by the lost adventure (Glaspell 1987a: 71).

He is, like her, restless, but in a much more down to earth, 'sane' manner. That is why, paradoxically, he is the one that has to be sacrificed as the ultimate rejection of bonding – and the ultimate gesture of leaving behind for the sake of going where nobody goes.

The gardener is an odd element – the roles divided between the other three are quite commonplace, they, rather comically at times, function as a unity and coexist in a totally male world, following its male rules; each is, however, 'alone' with her and individually manipulated. Anthony is particularly vulnerable to this manipulation as a worshiper of creativity – the masculine stereotype of valuing (professional) performance is in him brought to the point of absurdity. He is divided between being enthralled by her fatal (feminine) charm and being in awe of her professional (masculine) qualities, especially her relentless tenacity in following the chosen path, her capacity for concentration, her ability to focus on the 'big picture', not the female 'trifles':

(Anthony) [...] She has an eye that sees what isn't right in what looks right. Many's the time I've thought – here the form is set – and

then she'd say 'we'll try this one', and it had – what I hadn't known is there. She's like that (Glaspell 1987a: 95).

Both Clare's marriages, the past and the present one, are commented on from her (rather ridiculously naïve and literal) perspective as failed self-liberating gestures and steps away from conventionality. Her choice of an artist as her first husband embodies Claire's hope invested in the liberating influence of creativity popularly ascribed to bohemianism. Then, after the predictable disappointment, she switches to the aviator whom she associates with flying – apparently in a metaphoric, perhaps mystical sense, and through flying with the symbolic and philosophical high hopes that it may bring about a giant (evolutionary) leap for humanity:

Claire: [...] ...I thought flying would do something to a man. But it didn't take us out. [...] To fly. To be free in the air. To look from above on the world of all my days. Be where man has never been! [...] I am alone. Can I breathe this rarer air? Shall I go higher? Shall I go too high? I am loose. I am out. But no; man flew and returned to earth the man who left it (Glaspell 1987a: 69).

As a modernist, she insists on conferring some metaphysical meaning on the merely physical / technological fact of aviation. There is no indication that the personality of either husband mattered in her choice. The audience is left with the impression that both relationships were meaningful to her only in offering a possibility to get closer to a utopian ideal of human perfectibility. Thus the two husbands: the first one who does not even have a name and is briefly mentioned with his occupation, and the second who really does nothing out of the ordinary to win her scorn – which is precisely his problem from Claire's perspective – fail. They fail so to speak by definition, for being normal and not the abstract impossibility sprung from Claire's troubled mind.

These 'social' experiments are analogous with her tampering with genetics: they are earlier steps in the same direction. She seems to have been drawn mostly to the cliché rather than the personality of either man. This is her problem generally: though she sounds original, she really works with clichés. She is in a way addicted to pretty (and intriguingly novel, sometimes tantalizingly poetic or provocative) sounding clichés associated with bohemianism – like yearning for the unattainable, achieving the unachievable in the refusal to make a difference between the modernist phraseology with its fixation on novelty on the one hand and reality on the other.

Claire [...]: Out there (giving it with her hands) lies all that's not been touched – lies life that waits. But here – the old pattern, done again, again and again. [...] And when you make a pattern new you know a pattern's made with life. And then you know that anything may be – if only you know how to reach it (Glaspell 1987a: 77).

Claire takes herself seriously in approaching life as a scientist and a philosopher – both male occupations that stereotypically belong strictly in the public sphere and which she transfers to her home environment, her family and loved ones: the private sphere – the realm of woman.

A female demiurge and domesticity – this would not sound oxymoronic if Claire was preoccupied with the stereotypically feminine ways of creating life, ways she bluntly rejects: she punishes her daughter with ostracism for having been integrated in society. That kind of thinking, on the other hand, would have made her so trite as to be unworthy of writing about. Whatever seems socially acceptable, habitual or normal in the people around her is a source of disappointment for Claire. This gives the whole play an oxymoronic sounding. Its chief paradox is: gender-misplaced creativity becomes destructive contradiction – instead of constructive harmony. It places femininity in conflict with artistic / creative identity. Even the relationship between the protagonist and stage space, a very sophisticated structural element of the play, betrays a strange interplay between femininity and masculinity:

“While the playing areas in *T V* are the domain of Claire – her workplace, her tower – it is clear that she has no control over who enters and who leaves; Glaspell even indicates that the tower confines her as much as it protects her. [...] She is at the control of others, defined by others, even though [...] she owns the house in which the play is set” (Ben Zwi 1986: n.p.).

As mentioned already, clichés play an important role in the world of Claire. The play as a literary product itself makes ‘natural’ use of them, they carry most of its inter-textual connections. Clichés of theme and genre stand out particularly in their interesting use: the human limits of creative power and the temptation of the erasure of limits; the Nietzschean superman figure in all its grandeur and the modernist concern with genius, both defined by isolation, in conflict with philistine social mores etc. But Claire is a kind of mutant Nietzschean. She is not a straightforward

imitation of male hauteur, intellectual arrogance and iconoclastic audacity, but rather a distortion of it, not less deadly, or hair-brained, for being parodic – but as convincing in a lofty tragic / romantic way and worthy of admiration as much as she is of ridicule.

So this is a play about the trapped state of woman. Claustrophobia is rather pervasive in her way of talking throughout the play, it intensifies as her hope to achieve a breakthrough with her super-plants fails. It is also a play about the absolute value of autonomy for woman, about freedom as a ‘new’ female value. It is also about the modernist performance of self, and about choice – a thing from the future. *TV* is also a play that equates self-discovery and madness following what was at that time a familiar path of depicting women – to a point that today it is perceived as just one more variation on a worn social theme. It highlights the discrepancy between the normative female self and the modernist female self, “making a gesture towards dichotomies (to show them) as collapsed” (Stufft 2006: 88) As modernist experiments often do, this play tends to fall out of genre, out of mood, out of dramatic (in the classical sense) as well as psychological, plausibility. Nor does it exhibit any coherence in style or any straightforwardness of the political message. It refuses to please the audience the way numerous modernist experiments do and does cross both social and artistic thresholds.

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