

# Scene breakdown: “A Jury of Her Peers” by Susan Glaspell

#	SCENE	CHARACTERS	QUESTIONS	NOTES
1	View Martha’s kitchen  From: <i>When Martha Hale opened the storm-door...</i>	Martha Hale	Why is Martha being called away, when she “hated to see things half done”?	<p>The first sentence is an action - but it’s really a reaction. Martha is in a reactive state. Mrs Peters asked Martha to join; the wind makes her grab a scarf; her husband calls her away. See? All reactive.</p> <p>As readers, we already have questions: Why is Martha being called away? But this passage gives us few answers. As it should be in the beginning of a story.</p> <p>Note how objects already play a role: the woolen scarf, the flour in the kitchen. There’s a tangibility to things in this story that’s very nice – and that will prove significant for the plot.</p>
2	Approach the Wrights’ farm  From: <i>She again opened the storm-door...</i>	Martha Hale Mr Hale Sheriff Peters Mrs Peters County Attorney	Who are the three men and one woman with Martha – and why must they go to the Wrights’ farm?	<p>We learn who the people are but not why they’re here – only that it’s something bad.</p> <p>“And right there it came into Mrs. Hale’s mind, with a stab, that this man who was so pleasant and lively with all of them was going to the Wrights’ now as a sheriff.” Martha senses the danger. Already this early, the story establishes our detective hero (Martha), sidekick (Mrs Peters), and the antagonists (the three men).</p> <p>“It had always been a lonesome-looking place. It was down in a hollow, and the poplar trees around it were lonesome-looking trees.” Note repetition of “lonesome-looking” – used sparingly, this is a good technique for emphasizing; it can have a haunting quality.</p> <p>Notice how Martha observes her surroundings up until this moment; here, on the cusp of her crossing the threshold (literally and figuratively), she delves deep within herself to reflect on her personal stake in the story. This gives us a sense of her motivation.</p> <p><b>Craft tip:</b> When characters stand on the cusp of a difficult decision or risky undertaking, it’s a good time for deeper reflection.</p>
3	Establish county attorney’s authority  From: <i>The men went over to the stove.</i>	Martha Hale Mr Hale Sheriff Peters Mrs Peters County Attorney	Who’s in charge? And (still open) why are they here?	<p>This must be an official investigation – could it be a serious crime, like murder?</p> <p>There’s a subtle reference to the rocker, which will play a part later. Note how gradually the story establishes the setting. We writers can be tempted to dump all the information at once: “The kitchen was small and contained...” Resist the urge. Let the setting, like the story, unfold gradually.</p> <p>Notice that the CA tells the women to “come up to the fire” (more a command than an invitation), and then how the sheriff takes charge, only to be undermined by the CA, who ends the short scene in charge. The sheriff bends to the CA’s will – but importantly, the women don’t.</p> <p>It feels stronger that the story establishes the CA as the authority. Both Mr Hale and Sheriff Peters make comments that set up a strong patriarchal power imbalance. But even within the patriarchal power, there’s a hierarchy, and we learn that the CA is at the top.</p>



				<p><b>Craft tip:</b> In a story that deals with big oppositions in power, like men vs. women or poor vs. rich, try this out: individualize the power and establish a single character at the top of the hierarchy, and see how that works. Often it will save a story from becoming a kind of ideological essay with abstract parable-like forces rather than a drama with emotional impact.</p>
4	<p>Mr Hale reports</p> <p>From: <i>"Well, Mr. Hale," said the county attorney...</i></p>	<p>Martha Hale Mr Hale Sheriff Peters Mrs Peters County Attorney</p>	<p>Why are they here?</p> <p>Will Mr Hale make things harder for Minnie Foster?</p> <p>Did Minnie kill her husband?</p> <p>Related: Will the CA prove that Minnie killed her husband?</p>	<p>OK, so now we know: they are here to investigate Mr. Wright's suspicious death. Which invariably introduces the traditional mystery questions: Who killed the victim and will the killer be brought to justice?</p> <p>We don't know yet if Minnie did it or not. Keep in mind that in a traditional mystery, the prime suspect usually turns out to be innocent. Also keep in mind that the traditional mystery has a conventional, even conservative view of what a crime is and who should be punished.</p> <p>Sometimes a story is not just about the questions asked on the page but about the questions readers will bring to the story because of preconceived ideas.</p> <p>Did you notice how the small chair was added to the rocker, expanding the key objects in the setting? And then there's the reference to the rope (the off-stage murder weapon) and the apron. Of those two, which will turn out to be more important to the story? The apron. This defies traditional mystery conventions, in which the murder weapon is usually hugely important.</p> <p>I love how Martha tries to influence the situation without speaking – through her gaze – and how she worries her husband will make things worse for Minnie. In the end, it does seem he has made things harder for Minnie by saying she looked "scared." It's a small victory for the CA. His victories will grow bigger as the story advances. In general, this is how we want to build drama – on average, increasing successes and failures from small to ever larger. On average? Yes, because sometimes you may want a larger success or failure followed by a smaller one, making the rhythm of your story more varied and the trajectory of the plot less predictable.</p> <p>"...so he hadn't been home when the sheriff stopped to say he wanted Mr. Hale to come over to the Wright place and tell the county attorney his story there, where he could point it all out." Notice this smooth way of weaving backstory into the narrative; we're being told about Harry, except we're also getting backstory without it feeling like the author is shoving it down our throats. And right after this she worries about Harry out in the cold – a good way of making Martha sympathetic to the reader.</p> <p><b>Craft tip:</b> To build sympathy for a character, show the character caring, worrying, or loving another character – it makes them more human, relatable, and likable. You can take this one step further by making the character take an action that shows consideration for another person.</p>
5	<p>Confrontation btw. Martha and county attorney</p> <p>From: <i>"I guess we'll go upstairs first—then out to the barn and around there."</i></p>	<p>Martha Hale Mr Hale Sheriff Peters Mrs Peters County Attorney</p>	<p>Did Minnie kill her husband?</p> <p>Does the kitchen contain clues to the murder?</p> <p>Will the CA succeed in getting Marta to</p>	<p>More objects: the fruit jars, roller towel, and dirty pans under the sink. Notice the CA's reaction to the smashed fruit jars: "'Here's a nice mess,' he said resentfully." An impartial man of authority wouldn't express resentment. We're often warned about adverbs, but here's a case of an adverb doing good work – it hints that the CA is biased against Minnie.</p> <p>Mrs Peters, who asked Martha to come in the first place, tries to draw Martha into the conflict here ("Oh—her fruit," she said, looking to Mrs. Hale for sympathetic understanding.) When Martha doesn't react, Mrs Peters turns to the CA, who ramps up his attack on Minnie (he doesn't want to build sympathy for Minnie; he wants to prove her guilt and punish her).</p>



			<p>implicate Minnie in the murder? (Will the CA prove that Minnie killed her husband?)</p>	<p>Martha has been drawn into the conflict, but she continues to be reactive, or defensive. The active scene goal here lies with the CA: He wants to get Martha to implicate Minnie. Martha's reactive goal is to defend and protect Minnie's reputation.</p> <p>Note how the CA says Martha is "loyal to her sex" – in other words, she's taking Minnie Foster's side, while he's set himself against her. This is a clear establishment of the antagonism that will drive the story forward.</p> <p><b>Craft tip:</b> With a main character who is reluctant to act, add one or more secondary characters who pull the character into the action. This can be a more or less friendly stranger (like Mrs Peters in this story, Gandalf in JRR Tolkien's <i>The Hobbit</i>, or the ghost in Shakespeare's <i>Hamlet</i>) or it can be an antagonistic force (like the county attorney here, Count Dracula in Bram Stoker's <i>Dracula</i>, or Captain Ahab in Melville's <i>Moby Dick</i>). I've often revived a dead story by adding a character who actively draws my passive protagonist into a conflict she doesn't want to be part of, giving my heroine no choice but to take action, even if it's a reaction.</p> <p>Also take a look at the exchange between the CA and Martha, how he lobs statements at her and then she questions or disagrees with them. It's like a dialogue duel:</p> <p>CA: "You didn't like her?"  Martha: "I liked her well enough."  CA: "I shouldn't say she had the home-making instinct."  Martha: "Well, I don't know as Wright had, either."  CA: "You mean they didn't get on very well?"  Martha: "No; I don't mean anything."</p> <p><b>Craft tip:</b> Set up two characters against each other and make one state something that the other will disagree with, which then sparks a reaction (a question or another statement) from the first character, which again provokes disagreement from the second character. Notice how the same happens in dialogue between Martha and Mrs. Peters.</p>
6	<p>Establish county attorney's authority - again</p> <p>From: <i>He moved toward the stair door, followed by the two men.</i></p>	<p>Martha Hale  Mr Hale  Sheriff Peters  Mrs Peters  County Attorney</p>	<p>Does the CA trust the women? Does he see their role as important in the investigation?</p>	<p>The CA says he trusts Mrs Peters, because of her role as the sheriff's wife (she is "one of us"), but he leaves out Martha, suggesting he doesn't trust her.</p> <p>Note how he suggests that the women may find a crucial clue to the motive. This is important because a) it establishes that the CA doesn't doubt Minnie killed her husband; b) it actually makes the CA more dangerous, because he's not as quick to dismiss the women as the sheriff and Mr Hale are; c) it foreshadows what will, in fact, happen – Martha and Mrs Peters will unravel the mystery.</p>
7	<p>The investigation begins: Why did Minnie leave her work unfinished?</p> <p>From: <i>The women</i></p>	<p>Martha Hale  Mrs Peters</p>	<p>What interrupted Minnie, so she left her work half-finished?</p>	<p>My heart lifts when I read this section, when Martha slips into the role of sleuth. It delivers on a mystery trope that I enjoy as a reader – the detective who, through deduction, will try to discover the truth.</p> <p>Now the importance of the objects comes to the fore.</p> <p>Note how Martha's question about Minnie harks back to our question at the beginning: Why would she leave</p>



	<i>stood motionless and silent, listening to the footsteps...</i>			<p>her work half-finished? Because of the scene at the beginning, the story has established that the interruption of domestic work has significance.</p> <p><b>Craft tip:</b> If you want to develop a clue in your story, consider if there is a mirror image of that clue and place it earlier in the story to give it significance. That way when you get to the clue itself, its importance has already been established.</p> <p>For example, you want to add a clue that the primary suspect was not the last person to use a knife in the kitchen. Early on, the protagonist notes that her husband, who's left-handed, has been at her desk, because he's left her favorite fountain pen on the left-hand side of her notepad, where she never leave it. Later, at the scene of the crime, she notes that a carving knife next to the chopping board is not only clean, it's positioned to the left of the board, suggesting the person who last used it was left-handed – which the prime suspect isn't. The sleuth deduces this because of her earlier realization about her husband using her fountain pen.</p>
8	<p>The investigation continues: Where does Mrs Peters stand?</p> <p>From: <i>They were soon back...</i></p>	Martha Hale Mrs Peters	Does Mrs Peters care about Minnie's side of the story?	<p>This scene establishes Martha and Mrs Peters as working together – as seeing eye to eye.</p> <p>Notice how their observations about the objects match the traditional detective's approach.</p> <p>"...she said she wanted an apron. Funny thing to want..." There is uncertainty in how they "read" the objects at this stage, but as the story moves forward, both of them will become more confident in uncovering clues.</p>
9	<p>The quilt revealed</p> <p>From: <i>Mrs. Peters went to the back of the room to hang up the fur tippet she was wearing.</i></p>	Martha Hale Mr Hale Sheriff Peters Mrs Peters County Attorney	What's significant about the quilt?	<p>This brief interruption of a scene reminds us that the CA is still working hard to find a solution, which means condemning and punishing Minnie Foster.</p> <p>And a key clue occurs at the same time: the quilt.</p> <p>This works well. Discovering the quilt is a breakthrough for the detectives, and so it's a good time for the antagonist to return – to remind us of the threat looming over them.</p>
10	<p>The investigation continues: What's the significance of the quilt?</p> <p>From: <i>"I don't see as there's anything so strange," Mrs. Hale said resentfully...</i></p>	Martha Hale Mrs Peters	What's significant about the quilt? And what will Martha and Mrs Peters do with that knowledge?	<p>We learn that the quilt is evidence – and that Martha is willing to tamper with official evidence to help Minnie. This is step one in a series of three that builds to the climax.</p>
11	<p>The investigation continues: What's the significance of the bird cage?</p> <p>From: <i>But next moment she moved...</i></p>	Martha Hale Mrs Peters	Why is the bird cage important and what happened to the bird?	<p>This scene is the big reveal: The story has set up the idea that it's focused on investigating the murder of Mr Wright, but this scene reveals the crime committed against Minnie Foster.</p> <p>The bird cage and sewing basket are key clues, leading our sleuths deeper into the mystery.</p> <p>Remember how I mentioned the way the CA and Martha engage in a dialogue duel? The same technique is used here to show how Martha and Mrs Peters are investigating what happened:</p>



				<p>Mrs Peters: "Here's a bird-cage. Did she have a bird, Mrs. Hale?"  Martha: "Why, I don't know whether she did or not."  Mrs Peters: "Seems kind of funny to think of a bird here. I wonder what happened to it."  Martha: "I suppose maybe the cat got it."  Mrs Peters: "No; she didn't have a cat. She's got that feeling some people have about cats—being afraid of them."  Martha: "My sister Bessie was like that."</p> <p>Notice how the sequence of dialogue ends when Martha doesn't offer a counterpoint – she agrees, but also diminishes the attempt to go deeper into the matter. In reaction to this, Mrs Peters looks closer at the bird cage.</p>
1 2	<p>Establish county attorney's authority - once more</p> <p>From: "<i>Well, ladies,</i>" <i>said the county attorney...</i></p>	<p>Martha Hale  Mr Hale  Sheriff Peters  Mrs Peters  County Attorney</p>	<p>Will the CA discover the bird cage and its significance?</p>	<p>The CA notices the bird cage, raising tension, but Martha and Mrs Peters dodge a bullet – he doesn't realize its importance.</p> <p>It doesn't seem accidental to me that the men return at this moment. Right when the women have discovered the clue that's going to blow the case wide open. We can learn something here.</p> <p><b>Craft tip:</b> When your main characters come close to getting what they want, it's a good time to push them back by bringing the forces of antagonism into the action again, obstructing the progress the characters have been making.</p>
1 3	<p>The jury deliberates: Who's going to punish this crime?</p> <p>From: <i>The two women sat motionless, not looking at each other...</i></p>	<p>Martha Hale  Mrs Peters</p>	<p>Who will deliver justice for Minnie Foster?</p>	<p>The response to the key question in this scene, "That was a crime! That was a crime! Who's going to punish that?" is delayed until the end, but we get a stepping stone toward that final resolution: Martha and Mrs Peters agree to cover up the truth about the broken jam jars.</p> <p>Along with Martha redoing the quilt work, this is an example of Martha taking greater and greater steps to cover up the crime, so there can be justice for Minnie Foster. The final effort in this series of three is Martha hiding the dead bird.</p> <p><b>Craft tip:</b> The power of three pops up in stories again and again, from parables in the Bible to modern Hollywood screenplays. Don't underestimate how deeply resonant a series of three can be for a reader. When you're working on a story and want a climax to happen, consider what the climax is and brainstorm related actions. Find two that feel like they are smaller than the climactic action and string them together to create a progressive series of raised stakes.</p>
1 4	<p>Strengthen county attorney's authority - one last time</p> <p>From: "<i>No, Peters,</i>" <i>said the county attorney incisively...</i></p>	<p>Martha Hale  Mr Hale  Sheriff Peters  Mrs Peters  County Attorney</p>	<p>Will the CA discover what Martha and Mrs Peters have discovered (i.e. the truth about the murder)?</p>	<p>Notice how dismissive the CA is in this scene, and how distracted he seems here at the end of the story. He's a huge threat to the women, but he's less assertive than earlier in the story. How would the scenes change if the CA aggressively questioned the women or returned to snooping diligently around the kitchen and its objects?</p> <p>"I want to go over everything. I'm not satisfied we can't do better." This is an overt reminder that the antagonist – the CA – won't stop until he succeeds or fails. The reminder is good timing, since we're so close to the climax.</p> <p>Notice how much more direct the story has become in telling us things (including via Martha's dialogue). The closer we get to the climax, the more overt the story can become.</p>



				<p><b>Craft tip:</b> Reestablish or ramp up the stakes of the story just before the climax – and, at this point, don't worry too much about being subtle.</p>
1 5	<p>The jury hands down its verdict: justice</p> <p>From: <i>Martha Hale sprang up, her hands tight together...</i></p>	<p>Martha Hale Sheriff Peters Mrs Peters County Attorney</p>	<p>Will the CA discover what Martha and Mrs Peters have discovered (i.e. the truth about the murder)?</p>	<p>This scene is the climax of the story. Note how short it is. The climax itself can be narrowed down to a single sentence: "Martha Hale snatched the box from the sheriff's wife, and got it in the pocket of her big coat just as the sheriff and the county attorney came back into the kitchen."</p> <p><b>Craft tip:</b> Make the climax quick. Compression is your friend. Often a climactic scene will consist of a failed attempt to resolve the climax (here we witness Mrs Peters attempt to hide the bird, and fail). Then, maybe, we get one more attempt, but often we'll go straight to the "climax proper" (as Charles Raymond Barrett calls it in his book <i>Short Story Writing</i>). In short fiction, the climax proper is ideally a single sentence. After this sentence, the story has reached its resolution, and now you want to swiftly wrap up. If you have a story where the ending is dragging or feels long and flat, try this: set yourself a strict word limit – 250 words for the scene and a single sentence for the action that marks the climax proper.</p>

