Sophie Treadwell: A Cog in the Machine

Born in 1885 in Stockton, California, Sophie Treadwell was the only child of a dysfunctional pioneer family. She was raised essentially fatherless, as her father was seemingly busy serving elsewhere as a judge/lawyer. With no financial support from him, Treadwell attended the University of California at Berkeley in 1902. At Berkeley, Treadwell wrote her first one-act plays while acting as well. Having nearly worked herself into a state of exhaustion, she graduated in absentia in 1906 (though graduation services were ultimately upended as a result of the San Francisco earthquake.)

Treadwell next worked as a schoolteacher in Mother Lode Country (in Northern California gold rush country) where she “impressed the natives with her insistence on feminist ideas.”1 After a year, she returned to the San Francisco area to pursue a career as a journalist. She soon decided to follow her interest in acting. With her mother in tow, she moved to Los Angeles where she performed in vaudevillian stage. Treadwell soon grew disillusioned with the “squalidness of the performance conditions.”2 She became a typist for the famous Polish actress Helena Modjeska. Treadwell participated in theatre all the while. Modjeska proved to be a mentor and an ally, even writing to New York playhouses about Treadwell’s writing.

In 1910, Treadwell married the distinguished sportswriter William O. McGeehan. This gave her the opportunity, or at least the impetus, to move to New York in 1915, where the New York Herald Tribune employed her husband. Treadwell convinced that paper to send her to Europe as a war correspondent in World War I, but the restrictive policies towards women didn’t allow her to see the action at the front.

In 1921, she conducted the only American interview with famed Mexican rebel Pancho Villa. (Treadwell’s absent father was raised in Mexico, a detail which helped her attain the interview). Her meeting with Villa may have inspired her first produced Broadway play, Gringo (1922).

Treadwell, however, continued her freelance journalism career, as Broadway proved to be rather frustrating for her. She encountered a number of difficulties in seeing productions of her plays come to fruition. In 1928, she succeeded in bringing Machinal to the Broadway stage for 91 performances. Though it was a critical success, the run lost money.

Though she continued to write, direct, act and produce theatre for the rest of her life, Sophie Treadwell never topped her effort with Machinal. It is the play for which she is most popularly known. However, as the play perhaps examines, or was at least a response to, popularity is a funny thing.


In the end, Sophie Treadwell left us forty plays and contributed to theatre across six decades. She died in 1970. With the stipulation that proceeds from printing or production of her work should go the aid and benefit of Native American children throughout Arizona, Treadwell left the rights of all her work to the Roman Catholic Church Diocese of Tucson, Arizona, where at 80, she actively participated in the staging of her last production, _Now He Doesn’t Want to Play_. Her art and magnanimity endure together.

**THEMES: Man and Machine versus Woman.**

Throughout her career, Sophie Treadwell explored the ideas of modern society and its inhibiting effects on women’s equality and individual freedoms.\(^3\) Perhaps none of her work displayed this theme more powerfully than _Machinal_. Treadwell, along with Susan Glaspell, was one of the first American playwrights to appeal to a specific feminine aesthetic. According to Cary M. Mazer, Associate Professor of Theatre Arts and English at the University of Pennsylvania, “…Treadwell's depiction of the Young Woman is so incontrovertibly feminist. Of all the American women playwrights of the few decades before and after _Machinal_—Rachel Crothers, Mae West, Clare Booth, Lillian Hellman—only Treadwell and Susan Glaspell depict women's issues from a women's perspective.”\(^4\) With women receiving the right to vote eight years earlier, the women’s suffrage movement had accomplished much, but the options still seemed quite limited as to what a woman’s role in society could be.

_Machinal_ depicts, in an expressionistic way, what can happen when a woman rejects such roles. The use of expressionism helped Treadwell bring her themes to the stage. According to _The Creative Spirit_ by Stephanie Arnold, expressionism is “a theatrical style that uses exaggeration and distortion in both design and acting to reflect the interior world of the characters.”\(^5\) Treadwell constructed _Machinal_ purposively, hoping to allow her fragmentary, expressionistic style to seep into her audience on an unconscious level. Consider what John Gassner says in his book _Twenty-Five Best Plays of the Modern American Theatre_: “By giving the story an expressive form, Miss Treadwell transfigured the commonplace of adultery and murder we encounter in newspapers and popular fiction into something considerably more humanly meaningful and socially suggestive.”\(^6\) Through the use of its episodic structure, evocative musical

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and sound effects, and Helen’s poetic free-association ramblings, the play seeks to comment upon the limited roles allowed women in society at the time.

The English translation of the French word *machinal* literally means “automatic” or “mechanical.” Helen is given very few options in her male-dominated world. She is expected to be a doting mother, a loving wife. She can see very few other options. She is portrayed as being caught up in a machine, over which she seems to have no control. Whether or not she can avoid becoming a cog in that machine is open to interpretation.

**1920s: Dry Jazz**

*Machinal* was written in 1928 during the roaring twenties, at the height of the Jazz Age and Prohibition (somehow those two movements correspond). When men were men, ladies were dames, and everyone who was anybody did the foxtrot.

With the end of World War I, the effects of the Industrial Revolution were everywhere. The war itself provided a boon to the economy as well as to the growth of the city. Yet the full scope of man’s potential was no longer province to just men, as the 19th amendment finally gave women the right to vote (though amendments don’t assure equality).

The 20’s saw a time of literary transcendence: F. Scott Fitzgerald defined the Jazz Age with books like *This Side of Paradise* and *The Great Gatsby*; Hermann Hesse offered the west an eastern perspective in *Siddhartha*; James Joyce’s *Ulysses* and William Faulkner’s *The Sound and the Fury* opened the world up to modernist stream-of-consciousness; and Ernest Hemingway portrayed new norms for macho in *The Sun Also Rises* and *A Farewell to Arms*.

In theatre, German Expressionism was the rage in Europe, which caused a short-lived American reaction to the movement. Besides *Machinal*, George S. Kaufman & Marc Connelly's *Beggar on Horseback*, Elmer Rice's *The Adding Machine*, and Eugene O'Neill's *The Hairy Ape* all made expressionistic impressions on the theatre-goers of the day.

The buildings were getting bigger. Silent movies became “Talkies.” Charles Lindbergh flew the first solo non-stop flight across the Atlantic Ocean. Liquid-filled rockets set new speed records at a near daily clip. The universe seemed limitless.

But there were also other currents in the air. The war itself proved nothing. Though the Treaty of Versailles officially ended World War I in 1919, there was still much unresolved. As a partial result of the high price of the war reparations imposed on Germany, Hitler’s *Mein Kampf* gained popularity there throughout the 1920s. Mussolini came to power in Italy, bringing Fascism with him. The roots of communism took hold in Mother Russia.

All of this of course had an effect on anyone living at the time, as it must have affected Sophie Treadwell. But as far as informing the play *Machinal*, the biggest news event of the day was undoubtedly the Snyder-Gray murder trial, which Sophie Treadwell regularly attended under the auspices of her journalism background.

Long before Amy Fisher and Joey Buttafuoco hypnotized America’s public with their own Long Island love triangle, the sensational trial of housewife Ruth Snyder and her corset-selling lover, Judd Gray, captivated the nation. The lovers stood trial for the murder of Gray’s husband, whose repeated beatings of his wife and child didn’t titillate
the masses nearly as much as the sordid details of the affair. Both Snyder and Gray were put to death via the electric chair, but the majority of the public seemed to blame Snyder. A picture of her fried body covered the New York Daily News after the electrocution. 7

**Why Now?: Young Woman, Everywoman**

Though the play received mainly good reviews, the original Broadway run of *Machinal* was only 91 days. The play featured a young Clark Gable in his first starring Broadway role. After its original Broadway run, the play gained popularity in Russia after a successful run at Moscow’s Kamerny Theatre. Part of the reason for the play’s contemporary popularity was the 1990 staging by the New York Shakespeare Festival and the 1993 production at the Royal National Theatre in London.

The University Players production of *Machinal*, directed by Trevor Bishop, will offer audiences the opportunity to reflect on the meaning of truth in our own world. Internal truths are often silent, but the goal of this production, according to Trevor Bishop, is to blow up that silence.

Through a highly stylized and theatrical production, Bishop hopes not only to represent visually the cogs of the machine, but also to make the audience feel as though they themselves are being enveloped by the machine. All the elements of the show have been constructed with the aim of depicting a mechanical world. The lighting is cold. The lines of the set are linear. The costumes are colorless. The sound makes the audience feel like they are inside a machine.

However, the play is about the individual’s role within that machine, specifically the individuality of the young woman, Helen. In the coldness of the machine, hints of softness and warmth are displayed in relation to Helen. Where the machine world is blue, Helen is lit with red. Where the cogs of the machine wear white, Helen shows some color. The staging should leave the audience feeling as though Helen is continuously fighting for freedom.

The fight for one’s freedom is not for the faint of heart. Bishop hopes the production shows that we have much more yet to fight for, as the problems of Helen are still, in some way, the problems of every woman, every man. Bishop points to how society has constructed Hillary Clinton’s campaign as too masculine, or too feminine, or not feminine enough. “She’s in a double bind,” says Bishop. He hopes the University Players production will show how these double standards are still relevant, and how freedom is a construct as much as the machine.

**Glossary:**

affidavit: a written, sworn and authorized testimony usually used as evidence in court.

Amontillado: a type of sherry. Sherry is a type of fortified wine made in Spain. The wine is strengthened with brandy (which is liquor made from distilled wine).

Cielito Lindo: a popular, Mexican folk song.

dago: an ethnic slur to describe Italians or Italian immigrants.

dregs: the sediment (small solid particles) left behind at the bottom of a liquid, particularly wine or coffee.

neckers/petters: a reference to the 1923 film Flaming Youth which salaciously advertised “neckers, petters, white kisses, red kisses, pleasure-mad daughters, [and] sensation-craving mothers”.

paramour: a lover, especially one involved in an extramarital affair.

peignoir: a lady’s nightgown or negligee.

Poe (as in Edgar Allan Poe): 19th century American writer of Gothic, usually macabre prose and poetry including The Raven and The Tell-Tale Heart.

purgatory: in the Roman Catholic religion, believed to be a temporary place or state of suffering where a sinner’s soul waits until it has made amends necessary to enter the kingdom of heaven.

Rio Grande: a river that starts in Colorado and travels south to create the natural border between Texas and Mexico and the agreed upon border since 1848.

St. Peter: the leader of the twelve apostles whom Jesus picked as his first disciples.

stenographer: a job for someone whose skills include using shorthand to take dictation of a letter, giving us the term “take a letter”.

tart: slang for prostitute, or a woman with lascivious standards.

Verlaine (Paul): a French Symbolist poet (Symbolism is a late 19th century artistic and literary movement which espoused using symbolic images to evoke thought and feeling).

BASIC PROMPTS:

1) Using examples from the play, how can Machinal be read as a warning about the future? What positive lessons can be learned from the play?
2) Judging from her actions in the play, did Helen act morally?
3) Using examples from the play, how does Machinal hold up in today’s society? In what ways is the show dated? In what ways is it still relevant?

ADVANCED PROMPTS:

1) How is Machinal an expressionistic play?
2) How is Machinal’s version of expressionism different then the style and dramatic form popular in Europe at the time?
3) How does expressionism in Machinal help to convey meaning