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MACHINAL

SOPHIE TREADWELL



INTRODUCTION

Sophie Treadwell was one of a few playwrights of her era that directed and produced many of her own works. *Machinal* was loosely based on a murder trial in New York. The play is written in nine episodes depicting ‘*the different phases of life that a woman comes in contact with, and in none of which she finds any place, any peace*’. Each episode titles the location of the social institution or the type of behaviour expected of women.

The woman is essentially soft, tender, and the life around her is essentially hard, mechanized. Business, home, marriage, having a child, seeking pleasure – are all difficult for her – mechanical, nerve nagging (nerve-racking). Only in an illicit love does she find anything with life in it for her, and when she loses this, the desperate effort to win free to it again (to win freedom) is her undoing. [Author’s notes, p. xi].

Treadwell experimented with the dramatic form and style. The play uses sound effects, juxtaposition of overheard dialogue and more traditional internal monologue to create the world of the characters. Critics at the time stated that it was ‘*one of the first plays by an American dramatist to successfully merge expressionistic form and expressionistic content*’ [Oliver M. Saylor, *Footlights and Lamplights*, (USA, 1928)]. Contemporary audiences had perhaps become familiar with some of these ideas through plays such as *The Adding Machine* by Elmer Rice and films such as *Metropolis*.

PRODUCTIONS:

- After its original production in 1928 starring the unknown Clark Gable, *Machinal* was performed across the world.
- In 1931 in London it was renamed *The Life Machine*.
- In 1933 Treadwell was the first American playwright to receive production royalties from the Soviet Union after a production in Moscow at the Alexander Tairov's Kamerny Theatre.
- NBC and ABC aired production of the play in 1954 and 1960 and an off-Broadway production followed in 1960.
- It was revived in 1990 for the New York Shakespeare Festival. In 1993 the Royal National Theatre produced the play at the Lyttleton Theatre, London. The production was directed by Stephen Daldry, with Fiona Shaw taking the lead role.
- The most recent production has returned to the USA with Rebecca Hall as the Young Woman, her first lead in a Broadway production and directed by *Chimerica's* Lyndsey Turner – January 2014.

CONTEXT: EXPRESSIONISM IN THE THEATRE:

Some of the reportage style of *Machinal* is influenced by Treadwell's journalistic background. But most importantly, it owes much to the achievements of the expressionist artists and dramatists of the early quarter of the 20th century such as the German expressionists Oscar Kokoschka or Ernst Ludwig Kirchner.



Expressionists put their mark on cinema, painting, sculpture, music and architecture, but were perhaps most productive in the theatre. 'This is the theatre of gesture, noise, colour and movement, theatre which is not psychological but plastic and physical, theatre which is anarchic and dangerous.'¹

¹ J. M. Ritchie, *Seven Expressionist Plays* (London: Calder & Boyars, 1966)

The atmosphere of expressionist plays were often dreamlike or nightmarish, the mood being aided by shadowy, distorted lighting. Setting avoided the detail of naturalistic setting, but emphasized the themes of the play and bizarre shapes and extremes of colour were used. The plot and structure followed episodes of action often reinforced by tableaux. They were incidents tied together rather than forming a coherent plot; a sequence of dramatic statements. Characters were nameless or stereotypes and caricatures of people. They were Mother or Young Woman rather than individuals. This could assist in representing them as grotesque embodiments of groups of people. Dialogue was often staccato or 'telegram style' and then contrasted with poetic monologues or song. The style of acting was in contrast to Stanislavskian naturalism. Exclamatory action focused on the attitude of the actor to the message being conveyed and was presented in mechanical movements or puppet-like actions.²

MAIN CHARACTERS

Treadwell establishes a world where the only character given the opportunity to show themselves as a complex mix of duty and rebellion is through her protagonist, the Young Woman. Other characters are stuck in society's mould and they struggle throughout the play to fulfil the demands this stereotype puts upon them. Even the rebellious adventurer, the Man, betrays the Young Woman by conforming to the demands of the law. In the penultimate episode his words are those that damn her.

Characters are given type names often identified by what they do rather than who they are. An expectation of their behaviour and status is immediately accessible to the audience and invites us to be guilty of excluding the Young Woman from society, however much we long for her to break free from it.

² J. L. Stynan, *Modern Drama in Theory and Practice 3: Expressionism and Epic Theatre* (Cambridge University Press, 1981).

THE YOUNG WOMAN

At the beginning of the play the Young Woman is the last to enter. The world that surrounds and traps her has been established clearly by the office staff. Their mechanical answering of phones or responding in short staccato lines establishes them as cogs in the machine of society. It is into this world she arrives late, *'preoccupied with herself – with her person.'* [p. 1] and thus identifies herself as different. She is seen by her co-workers as *'artistic', 'inefficient'* [p. 7] – attributes that potentially slow down the well-oiled machine of the office.

Her inertia in the opening scene and contrasting pace of action separates her from the others. She expresses early her need to escape. She had to get off the subway, *'I had to get out... In the air!... I thought I would faint. I had to get out into the air!'* [p. 6]

This physical reaction in response to being trapped metaphorically or spatially is repeated throughout the play. It reinforces one of the main messages expressed through her character.

The Young Woman is denied a fulfilling relationship with those except the Man. Her Mother bullies her to eat her potatoes and torments her by throwing in her face the expectation and self-sacrifice that womankind has endured. It is expected that she too will carry on this repeated pattern. The Mother's view of marriage as a business arrangement lacking in love shocks the audience. However, it establishes clearly the loveless world in which the Young Woman searches for her freedom. This is typified in the Mother's response when asked:

YOUNG WOMAN: But Ma – didn't you love Pa?

MOTHER: I supposed I did – I don't know – I've forgotten – what difference does it make – now? [p. 17]

Lack of affection and spiritual fulfilment is not permitted in this society. Her honeymoon is haunted by the spectre of the sexual consummation of husband and wife. It is this scene that shows how emotionally unprepared the Young Woman is, and how predatory the Husband appears. The awkwardness in this scene is excruciating. The Husband's attempts at saucy joke-telling only compound the isolation of the Young Woman as he drools over her:

HUSBAND: (pinches her above the knee) Say, what have you got under there?

THE YOUNG WOMAN: Nothing

HUSBAND: Nothing! (laughs) That's a good one! Nothing, huh? Huh? That reminds me of the story of the Pullman porter and the – what's the matter – did I tell you that one? [p. 23]

This acutely contrasts with Episodes Five and Six where she is able to joke and behave freely with the Man. It is in these scenes that we see a more mature woman who has learned to live with the horror of childbirth and settled into domestic life but still yearns to escape to the '*high dark mountains*' and '*Little Heaven*'. [p. 46]

It is with the Man that she truly begins to explore herself, '*all her gestures must be unconscious, innocent, relaxed, sure and full of natural grace.*' [p. 50]. No longer the awkward and self-conscious '*pat to her hair*'. [p. 7] Her relationship with the Man leaves her '*purified*'. To some extent he has saved her from the hell of society. This optimistic and hopeful part of the play is brought to a decisive end with the silence and dislocation of the dialogue in the next scene – Scene Seven: Domestic.

After the murder of her Husband, the Young Woman becomes caught up in the machine of law and media speculation. The power she had in her hands and the control over her own destiny is taken from her by the men of the law. Even her Man is manipulated by the word of law to betray the Young Woman. From this scene onwards she is trapped entirely – there really is no way out.

Her motive for the murder has no value in the eyes of this society:

JUDGE: You confess you killed your husband?

YOUNG WOMAN: I put him out of the way – yes.

JUDGE: Why?

YOUNG WOMAN: To be free

JUDGE: To be free? Is that the only reason?

YOUNG WOMAN: Yes.

JUDGE: If you just wanted to be free – why didn't you divorce him?

YOUNG WOMAN: Oh I couldn't do that!! I couldn't hurt him like that! (burst of laughter from all in the court). [p. 75]

She believes she saved her husband from the public humiliation of divorce and that death, in this judgmental and loveless society, was a kinder act. Or did she just fulfil her dream to be a

'bandido'?

In the final scene, the Young Woman returns to being a total outsider. The words of the Priest seem alien and unforgiving, reinforcing the patriarchal control over life and the after-life. It is only the Negro spiritual that speaks genuinely to her soul – religion is just words that become incomprehensible. Religion even intercedes, robbing her of the last lines of the play:

YOUNG WOMAN: Somebody! Somebod– (Her voice is cut off)

PRIEST: Christ have mercy – Lord have Mercy – Christ have Mercy [p. 83]

In her final words no one can save her. She has not been served by her mother, her husband, her colleagues, medics, lawyers, her lover, the media nor the Church. Society has conspired to condemn her for wanting to break from its rigid constraints.

THE HUSBAND

In the first scene of the play he is presented as a successful businessman with a clear idea of how to get ahead in this modern world, '*I'm never in a hurry – that's how I get ahead! (laughs – they all laugh) First know you're right – then go ahead.*' [p. 4]

As such he is used to control, and getting what he wants. This is why he has been determined in his pursuit of the Young Woman. He will do anything to achieve the status of husband and father – the next trophy for his cabinet! He guarantees a financial settlement to take care of her mother, which could be seen as generous but also as a tool to play upon the guilt of the Young Woman. Her mother does remind her that '*you've got a mother to support?*' [p. 17].

He is physically repulsive to the Young Woman, '*When he puts his hands on me, my blood turns cold. But your blood oughtn't to run cold, ought it? His hands are – his hands are fat, Ma – don't you see – his hands are fat – and they sort of press – and they're fat – don't you see? – Don't you see?*' [p. 18]

His stereotype could be presented as such. However, despite his lack of awareness of the Young Woman's needs, he does try to please his wife. He executes the expectations of society as a husband well. He takes his marital rights, he produces a child, he brings flowers to his

wife, and provides her (and her mother) with financial security. What more could a woman want? It is his excellent adherence to the rules of society that condemn him and he fails to realize what his wife, what a woman really needs. Is this the 'crime' for which he loses his life?

Our sympathies are guided towards the Young Woman in the play but it should be remembered, he too is as much a victim of society and its expectations as she is.

MAN

Whilst the Man acts to release and 'purify' the Young Woman, it should be remembered that he meets her with an idea of the 'arrangement' clear in his mind. He doesn't care she's married – he does not conform to the rigid rules of society. He is a free spirit.

FIRST MAN: You're married, huh?

YOUNG WOMAN: Yes – I am.

FIRST MAN: All right with me. [p. 38]

It is the ease with which he engages in conversation and listens in the conversation that strikes the audience. The dialogue in Episode Five between the two flows and is open. It so keenly contrasts with the other conversations that are juxtaposed against it in this scene. He calls her an '*Angel*' and distinguishes her as '*different from girls like that other one*' [p. 43]. This is what she wants to hear – some admiration and an understanding that she is not like everyone else. In saying this, he gives her a much-needed sense of belonging or validation. In Episode Six his full connection with her mentally and physically is complete. He too understands freedom and he has experienced it, '*Oh – you're free down there! You're free!*' [p. 49].

His romantic existence as a wandering traveller is enticing and allows her to dream about a life beyond the constraints of domesticity. It is this inspiration that comes to the Young Woman's mind as she murders her husband. The fighting for their life against the bandits is paralleled with her fight to escape from her husband. This romanticizing of it seems to make it justifiable to the Young Woman, '*There were a bunch of banditos – bandits you know – holding me there – what was I to do – I had to get free – didn't I? I had to get free –*' [p. 58].

It is the Man's words about the gift of the lily that finally cause the Young Woman to confess to the murder in open court. But we are reminded that he too has been swallowed up by the legal process. It is implied he is driven to give evidence, via affidavit, to avoid prosecution himself. The lawyer suggests ironically, '*I suppose you didn't threaten him with extradition on some other trumped-up charge, so that –*' [p. 74]

It is this desperate betrayal that condemns the Young Woman in the eyes of the law, the media, religion and society.

ENSEMBLE

The ensemble plays a vital part in the play *Machinal*. Without the presence of 'Not Heard' characters invading the space and the brief interchanges between minor characters, the contrast and comparison of the behaviour of the main characters would not be highlighted.

In the opening scene, the ensemble is important in establishing the dominance of society in the play. The office colleagues all establish the mechanised sounds of the modern world. It is their chatter and staccato sentences that create the relentless pattern of society at work. Their comments on the action act like a Greek chorus guiding the audience to make judgment upon the motives of the main characters:

STENOGRAPHER: You're late!

FILING CLERK: You're late.

ADDING CLERK: You're late.

STENOGRAPHER: And yesterday!

FILING CLERK: The day before.

ADDING CLERK: And the day before.

STENOGRAPHER: You'll lose your job.

YOUNG WOMAN: No!

STENOGRAPHER: No?

They represent the overpowering force of Society.

In other episodes this can be seen through the Nurse and the Doctor, who force their rigid rules upon the protagonist. Or in the final Episode Nine where

MATRON: The Rule

JAILER: Regulations

BARBER: Routine [p. 78]

must be adhered to in the shaving off part of the Young Woman's hair.

Throughout, the swell of control is underscored by the continual invasion of the action by 'Not Heard characters', *Corridor Life – Woman in Bathrobe passes door* [p. 29].

The invasion of the outside world adds to the imposing nature of society on the life of the Young Woman. The more gentle 'passing feet' of unseen characters impose upon the intimate moments between the Man and the Young Woman in Episode Six. However, the ensemble resumes its overwhelming nature in the courtroom. Here the Lawyers argue, the Judge intercedes, the reporters declare their varying opinions; building the frenzy up to the final declaration of guilt. These characters are vital in showing how the individual can be overwhelmed by society. They act to show how they are punished by it should they try to stand against it. It is only in the final scene, when the song of the Negro competes with the Latin of the Priest that a single voice from society reaches out to her. But this character becomes subsumed into the chaos of the Priest, the reporters and the sounds of the airplane overhead and even the Young Woman's '*Voice is cut off*' [p. 83], swamped by the outside world.

ISSUES

Machinal focuses on the main issue and dilemmas of the '**Individual versus Society**', a theme to be expanded on in the work of other American playwrights such as Eugene O'Neill and Arthur Miller. *Machinal* presents society on various levels whether it is the machine of business and commerce or the inherent prejudice against women. This is expressed through the views of the Mother, who is also a victim of the stereotyping of society her daughter succumbs to. The Young Woman continually comes up against the power of the patriarchy represented in various institutions: religion, law, medicine, marriage and the media. Here the individual is consumed by the machine of society, chewed up and spat out by it, much like the physical representation conveyed by Charlie Chaplin in *Modern Times*. In this film, he is physically sucked into the machine and trapped by its cogs that seem to conspire to trap him further.

The Young Woman fears being drawn into society, and then allows herself to conform; she breaks free but finally she is judged and rejected by it. This is not to say that her crime was not heinous and premeditated, but Treadwell presents it as a possible inevitable conclusion to the individual's suppression at the hands of the 'society machine'. Even in the final episode her resistance is futile, '*I will not be submitted – this indignity! ... Oh my God am I never to be let alone! Always have to submit – to submit!*' [p. 79] she says to the Barber, but yet again her words are lost and she is physically overwhelmed by their need to execute their duty to society.

DUTY

This message is acutely present in Episode Two: At Home. Here the Young Woman discusses her duty as a woman to marry. Avoidance of really tackling the subject of women's suppression is littered with excuses and the Mother imposes the 'duty' her daughter has towards her as a justification for entrapping herself in a loveless marriage.

MOTHER: Love! What does that amount to! Will it clothe you? Will it feed you? Will it pay the bills?

YOUNG WOMAN: No! But it is real all the same!

MOTHER: Real! [p. 17]

The Mother is interested in how the marriage might benefit her and provide her with financial security, which is the duty of a child to its parent in old age! *'I've worked for you and slaved for you!'* [p. 20] and now it is the Young Woman's duty to pay that back by marrying well.

Treadwell encapsulates this message in a very domestic scene where the women argue over who will wash the dishes. The scene is broken by the Wife's voice who is rejecting the advances of her husband. This interjection acts to show the audience what lies ahead for the Young Woman.

IDEALISED VIEW OF LIFE V REALITY

This is most clearly conveyed in the contrast made between various characters' lives. The Young Woman's sexual encounter with her lover compared to the Honeymoon episode with her husband; the dreams discussed about Mexico and life out of this society, compared to the drudgery of office life or the expectations so clearly defined by the Doctor as he forces the Young Woman to breast feed, *'I decide what we better and better not here, Nurse! Bring the baby!'* [p. 29]

ROLE OF WOMEN IN SOCIETY

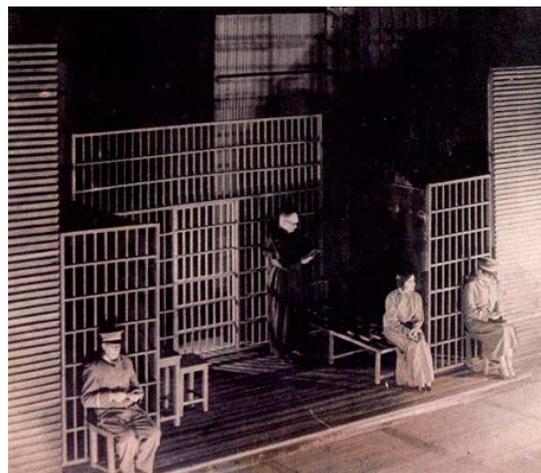
This message is very clearly identified throughout the play, mostly because the protagonist is a Young Woman. Women are treated 'of their time'. This, we must remember, was a pre-feminist society. Whilst the First World War had done much to open up opportunities for women in the workplace, the remnants of Victorian attitudes to women still lingered. What shocks a modern audience today was the expected norm in 1928. However attitudes conveyed by the Doctor, *'These modern neurotic women, eh Doctor? What are we going to do with 'em?'* [p. 29] still grate and this representation of the patriarchy was what Treadwell and her Young Woman railed against.

To see the play entirely as a feminist piece is to ignore that all the characters are in some way trapped and subjugated by society. This could be the Husband who behaves as his role determines, dutifully arriving with flowers at the hospital or the Reporter who is controlled by the hunger of the masses, eager to consume the tittle-tattle of the court procedures. We, the

audience, empathise to some extent with all those men and women that make up the society scrutinized in this play. The issue of women's emancipation is a more complex one for the Young Woman and for the audience. To some extent it holds a wider message of the right to be free from the all-consuming machine of society, whatever your gender.

STAGING

The 1993 production at the Royal National Theatre, London, was designed by Ian MacNeil. It used a huge metal grille suspended above the stage, lowered to the floor and slanted so that during the trial scene, the heads of the judge and other court officials poked through. In addition, there was a revolve for the opening scene. Later the stage floor raised up, revealing the condemned cell and the electric chair. Other scenes such as the hotel room and bar were pulled on stage³. This extravagant set, whilst effective, was considered maybe too much – *'it might have been just as effectively produced in a much smaller or even a fringe theatre'*⁴. This might be an issue to consider when students approach the challenges of designing for *Machinal*.



³ Peter Hepple, The Stage 28 October 1993

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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