

Analysis of machinal



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Introduction (428):

Machinal, written in 1928 by Sophie Treadwell is an expressionist play hovering topics of female oppression and the role of women in society post industrial revolution. It chronicles the journey of a young woman, oppressed by her society into pursuing a loveless but secure marriage and other traditional feminine roles. Treadwell not only captured the struggles of women in a patriarchal society, she also captured the spirit of expressionism. *Machinal* is an expressionist play therefore does not succumb to the traditional norms of a Broadway performance, Treadwell abandons the traditional and conventional structure of a play, and instead of dividing it into Act & Structure, she divides it up into episodes, she also categorizes characters by title rather than formal name and experiments with movement and symbolism. All of these expressionist aspects were very contemporary for the public in 1928, therefore *Machinal* did not thrust with popularity. Although acclaimed as a masterpiece by Broadway critics, *Machinal* was never given high recognition and closed after just 91 performances. This was due to a variety of reasons but mainly stemming from the idea that the play contained abstract and unconventional mannerisms which was “ ahead of its time”. The play is based off the trial of Ruth Snyder, a wife who killed her husband; it was a widely publicized murder case in 1927. Treadwell first-hand observed and was a journalist during the investigation of this case, she then took this sensationalized murder case and produced an expressionist piece of theatre surrounding the notion that the murderer was not innocent nor evil. The trial and case of Ruth Snyder was an instance where the public never really knew the women, they just knew the tabloid mythology and the

sensationalized, demonized quality of a women. It can be seen that Sophie Treadwell tried to humanize the women, and explores the circumstances in which an ordinary women (nothing special, nothing particularly evil) can be driven to commit this crime. Machinal functions as a very powerful critique of modern life and post industrial capitalism and how at the time this came as an expense to women's freedom and the right to be treated as an equal partner. Treadwell uses various expressionist aspects to deliver a contemporary piece of theatre allowing a different perspective to the Ruth Snyder case to be conveyed. Treadwell's expressionist drama suggests that this Snyder's actions are the result of the stultifying and repressive role forced on women by society. Thus, this paper addresses the question: How did the expressionistic techniques used in the 1928 production of Machinal put forth a feminist voice?

Body Paragraph 1 – Cultural Context + Explanation of Trial (732 words)

The 1920s were a pivotal decade for American women and Sophie Treadwell was a major player in the huge societal shift of the time. The women's movement in England and America began and developed during the 19th century, it was related to the changing status of the family, which had been greatly affected by the changes of the Industrial Revolution. Industrial Revolutions was certainly not wholly responsible for the problems of women, it exacerbated them, perhaps to an unprecedented degree . Prior to the industrial revolution, in a more agricultural society families were located physically close to a homestead or farm, divisions of labor were less rigid and women sometimes worked in the fields alongside men, as well as children. As industrialization progressed and subsistence solely on the farm became

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less possible, work for an outside employer became a necessity for most people. Gradually with the growth of unions, an expectation was developed that the man was the wage-earner, and this ideal evolved that one man needed to be paid well enough to be able to support not only himself, but his wife and children as well. Before the revolution there were women unions too, but because of increasing competition for jobs with men and “women duties” at home these unions died away. Women began to receive little opportunity in the working life as these jobs were only offered to men and women were not given a proper education. Women became isolated from society and their only tangible contribution became the role of a “housewife” which involved taking care of kids, cooking and cleaning. This caused the glorification of women’s domestication to begin, this had other ramifications as women came to be seen as better able to rear children, kinder than men, and eventually more elevated and purer than men. Women were then perceived extremely different from men, occupying their own sphere. If a man were to sleep with another woman that was not his wife he would be perceived a player/stud, but if a woman were to sleep with another man she would be perceived as sinful and as a whore. These assumptions served as justification for women’s presence in the workplace, allowing industry to continue without disrupting social hierarchies. This subjugation of women was of major concern to Treadwell, who was a member of a number of feminist organizations, and became a prominent theme in her writing, most notably in *Machinal*. Treadwell explored this notion of female oppression and the role of women in society through her production of *Machinal*. Treadwell based *Machinal* off of the Ruth Snyder Case which was a sensationalized and publicized murder case that took

place in the late 1920's. In 1927, Long Island housewife Ruth Snyder and her lover Judd Gray were tried for murdering Snyder's husband, a story that, due to the extensive newspaper coverage, became a source of entertainment for the American public. " Americans were fascinated by the quiet, neighborly woman who helped murder her husband one night. . . The element which lifted this story above the ordinary love triangle murder was that the lovers who planned and executed the murder were such ordinary people" (Shafer 259). Ruth Snyder enlisted the help of her lover, Judd Gray, to kill her husband in order to receive a \$48, 000 life insurance award. According to Gray, the two made seven unsuccessful attempts before killing Albert Snyder by bashing him over the head with a heavy window sash weight, then strangling him with a picture wire (Schneider). The two staged a burglary to cover the murder, but their undoing was hiding the supposedly stolen items in the home, which the police discovered during their investigation. Snyder and Gray were both convicted during a highly publicized trial and were sentenced to death by electric chair. Ruth Snyder was the first woman executed in Sing Sing Prison since 1899. By taking the case of Ruth Snyder and making it into a theatrical performance Treadwell could've gone in two directions: Firstly, she could've victimized the main character, portrayed the idea that killing her husband was her only option for freedom. However, she could have also demonized the protagonist and made her seem like a ruthless and evil woman. Treadwell didn't do either of these but created a play where there are no clear antagonists and protagonists, in a sense, everyone is a victim but also culpable at the same time.

Body Paragraph 2 – Expressionism (367)

Machinal is an expressionist piece of theatre, and this element of the performance allows for a deeper and more contemporary message to be put forth. Expressionism a style of painting, music, or drama in which the artist or writer seeks to express emotional experience rather than impressions of the external world. Expressionism often contains features including, distortion, exaggeration and abnormality in line, shape, proportion and coloring. Anthropomorphism is also commonly used which is the projection of human qualities onto inanimate objects. Expressionism originated in Germany in the early 20th century and was a pivotal moment in the world of theatre. The style moved away from both the melodramatic and naturalistic acting styles prominent at the time, and required actors to embody objects and ideas. Expressionism allowed for a cultural transformation “ in social consciousness and ethical commitment, as well as an artistic form and aesthetic philosophy, expressionism sought to revolutionize German society and renew its faith in humanity” (Kuhns 1). Rather than enjoying a piece of entertainment, expressionistic productions asked audiences to confront social problems, to see the world from a viewpoint different than their own and to begin to ask themselves difficult questions. Originally society responded negatively to expressionist theatre as it was very contemporary and dealt with concepts that made the audience feel uncomfortable. It can be said that the expressionistic form that Treadwell employs is the most vital component to *Machinal*’s success. The expressionistic style that is utilized as the dramatic structure of *Machinal* allowed her to use the Snyder murder trial non-specifically. Within *Machinal* Treadwell does not tell a biographical story of Ruth Snyder but rather a story of a Young Woman whose life resembles that of Ruth Snyder and whose society resembles our own.

Treadwell employs various expressionistic techniques which will be discussed throughout this paper, including abandoning the traditional Act/Scene structure and having it be divided episodically, the identification of characters, the subjective point of view, speech patterns, the simplicity of props and the symbolic meaning of lights and sound. Through all of these expressionistic approaches that are employed, Treadwell is able to deliver a more complex and deep production highlighting the female oppression that was so prevalent at the time.

Body Paragraph 3 – Staging (600 words)

Treadwell abandons the traditional and conventional structure of a play, and instead of dividing it into Act & Structure, she divides it up into episodes: Episode 1: “ To Business”, Episode 2:“ At Home”, Episode 3:“ Honeymoon”, Episode 4:“ Maternal”, Episode 5:“ Prohibited”, Episode 6:“ Intimate”, Episode 7:“ Domestic”, Episode 8:“ The Law”, Episode 9:“ The Machine”. Each episode’s title represents both action and thematic elements and understanding this episodic structure was crucial.

Body Paragraph 4 – Characters + Subjective Point of View (500 words)

Another crucial expressionist technique that Treadwell employs is how she categorizes and identifies characters. Treadwell rather than categorizing characters by name she does it by title. *inset character list* Critic Styan writes that “ Characters lost their individuality and were merely identified by nameless designations like, “ The Man”, The Father” ect”. This aspect of Treadwell’s script is of particular significance because the characters’ actual names are eventually made known to the audience even though their official

character names remain titles. We learn, for example, in “ Episode Five: Prohibited” that Young Woman is named Helen. The character of Husband is actually George H. Jones and we are aware of this fact from the very first episode, yet his character name remains an alienating title throughout. In Treadwell’s direction notes of the original production she wrote that these characters “ are too be played as personification of what they represent: genuinely type actors, giving type performances. Treadwell provides us with descriptions of these “ types” in her stage directions. She describes Telephone Girl as “ young, cheap and amorous” (366). And “ young, cheap and amorous” Telephone Girl remains when we rejoin her in “ Episode Five.” Stenographer is “ drying, dried” (366). The character of 1st Man, who becomes simply Man once he becomes Young Woman’s lover, is described as “ pleasing, common, vigorous” and his friend, 2nd Man, “ is an ordinary salesman type” (Treadwell 380). The way Treadwell identifies and categorizes characters is important not only because it distorts and strips away any individuality of characters, but it allows for a subjective point of view in this production. The “ Young Woman” whose name is later revealed to be Helen is the central character of this play and is the only three dimensional character. While all other characters are only explored superficially and on a surface level, Helen is a fully developed character and the only character to undergo any sort of emotional change, allowing the play to revolve around her and be seen through her perspective. This aspect of the play is essential in exploring the Ruth Snyder case from a different perspective, one that does not demonize the protagonist, however, is also essential in exploring the larger topic of female subjugation. Instead of focusing specifically on the woman who murdered her husband, Treadwell

elevates the story to a broader view of the objectification of women in the early part of the 20th century. Treadwells use of expressionism allows for a more abstract and contemporary piece to be put across however it also allows for the audience to receive a powerful message regarding social norms and societal standards women are obliged to follow. Expressionism is the key factor in allowing this compelling message

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