

Machinal's representation of gender

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The representation of gender particularly in the past has been strongly manifested in theater, music, dance, and other performance practices. Most of the time, these performances aim to explore gender inequality which is one of the most controversial political issues in history especially during the early 20th century. The issue of gender inequality seems to be an unending concern that is still highly debated in the contemporary world. Human's cultural, religious, and social orientation differences make this subject timeless. A woman's social role in history is confined and regimented to home, motherhood, and sexual partner.

In the past, these constructed social roles given to women used to prevent them from being involved in politics and many social activities which, as a result, hindered them to fully explore their potentials and capability. The play "Machinal" written by Sophie Treadwell is only one of the literary pieces that subtly illustrate how women were treated and approached in history. Helen, the main protagonist of the play, is trapped in a male dominated society bound by the trend of forced marriage where love is considered unnecessary.

The play mainly features a woman who, after seeing the reality of her situation, is encouraged to perform wickedness. Machinal is a tragedy and drama which presents the events from the point of view of a young woman. The first episode of the play with the office as the main setting shows the authentic personality of the young woman. Her lack of interest and focus in an office work manifested in her tardiness shows that she feels subdued by her work. She cannot stand the stifling crowd in the subway who seem to enjoy their routine job.

The “ sounds of machine going, which continue throughout the scene” intentionally illustrate the machine-like quality of the surrounding (Treadwell 1). Office or secretarial work given to women symbolizes their lack of opportunity in career world. The sound of clattering typewriters, adding machines, and ringing telephones metaphorically depicts the confined and oppressive world of women during 1920's. They were perceived as the inferior gender not just physically but intellectually, limiting their chances to engage in a more competitive and challenging job.

However, as a young woman eager for new kind adventure, love, and life, Helen does not fit in such a constricted work environment. The character of Helen depicts the emergence of modern American women who have woken up to the reality that women are more than how the society perceives them. At that time, women like Helen were starting to unconsciously establish a mentality that they have much to offer beyond the confines of home and motherhood. Demoralized in her new role as a mother, Helen's discouragement from the birth of her daughter in episode four is only one of the consequences highlighted in a marriage devoid of emotion.

Her total dependency on her husband financially forced her to stay in a loveless marriage and eventually made her conform to the given roles. Thus, this episode suggests that, just like most women in the early 20th century, Helen married for the purpose of financial security and position. Most women at that time were willing participants or victims who totally conformed to the society's standard. However, when Helen met a man who introduced her to the new experience of momentary passion, she finally realized how society

has confined her and how her husband, George, has unconsciously dominated her every decision.

With her feelings of hopelessness, Helen decided to murder her husband to free herself from the constraints of the society. The story or play was created during 1920's when there was already an emergence of women's movement by the group of feminists in the U. S. that sought forequalitywith men. “ The abstract presentation and discussion over women's status that started from 1846” encouraged different kinds of literature to explore the issue of gender inequality (Imbornoni). The character of Helen presents a subtle reality in the past that inspires and reminds contemporary women that they must enjoy a wider freedom they have right now.