

## Dehumanization and Loss of the Individual Agency by Societal Mechanisms in Sophie Treadwell's *Machinal*

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### Abstract

Sophie Treadwell is hardly treated as an expressionist dramatist with a radical creative tendency to show women's anxieties for liberty and to find their own voice in modern society. Therefore, in this paper, Sophie Treadwell's play "Machinal" and its depiction of dehumanization, loss of the individual agency, societal mechanisms, maternity and the hospital-based childbirth are elucidated as a unique example of the expressionist art movement in literature.

By focusing on the concept of "Maternal," the author explores how the protagonist's traumatic postpartum experience aligns with the contemporary concerns about childbirth, maternity, loss of the individual agency and obstetrical care. It argues that the way characters respond to the Young Woman's distress reflects a prevalent trend of disdaining women's anxieties about childbirth or attributing them to the supposed "weakness" or "nervous exhaustion" of modern women.

Treadwell's play highlights the legitimacy of women's fears regarding childbirth while challenging the idea that mental-uplift can cure maternal anxiety. This aspect of the play is vital in providing a feminist social critique, questioning societal norms and prospects placed upon women during childbirth. Moreover, the paper emphasizes how "Machinal" extends its critique beyond maternity and childbirth to address broader issues of modern, patriarchal hierarchies and their ties to technological and dehumanization discourses.

By exploring the intersection of intimate and institutional structures in the play, the researcher also reveals the effects these systems can have on women. To strengthen the arguments, the paper provides specific examples to illustrate how Treadwell portrays the characters' responses to the Young Woman's distress and the medical figures' representation.

**Keywords:** Woman, dominance, society, suffering, struggle, oppression

## 1. Introduction

In this paper, the researcher's high argument is that Sophie Treadwell's play "*Machinal*", first performed in 1928, is a powerful expressionist drama that explores the dehumanization and loss of individual agency experienced by its protagonist, a young woman known only as "The Young Woman". The performance itself is motivated by the real case of Ruth Snyder, convicted in 1927 of murdering her husband and then executed. "*Machinal*" explores the impact of social mechanisms and oppressive forces on a woman's life at the beginning of the 20th century. For dramatists of modern drama, such as Elmer Rice, Eugene O'Neill, and others, often portray women as enduring horrifying circumstances and facing immense challenges in finding their own voice. Cotsell observes that most modern dramas discuss:

The slaving industrial worker; the banal and overwhelmed clerk .... are broken by the faceless machine.... At the crisis there is frequently a hysteric fit, often accompanied by violence .... Trauma – the overwhelming and shattering of the self by an overpoweringly adverse environment – proves to be at the psychological heart of American modernist drama (Cotsell, 2005: 10).

For Cotsell, "Every woman defended the act as a step toward the larger freedom, a fuller enjoyment of life. She is the victim of a machine-like, indifferent society" (Cotsell:18).

Among those dramatists, Sophie Treadwell (1885–1970), an American playwright and journalist, sought to shed light on the new social problems that arose as technology became an inescapable part of American lives. She focused on working-class women as prime examples to reveal the dreary situations women faced in society. In her play *Machinal* (1928), which was based on a real story about the life and motives of a lonely and trapped housewife named Ruth Snyder, Treadwell highlighted a woman's imprisonment in a loveless marriage and the dehumanizing effects of the machine age, which ultimately lead her to commit murder. Treadwell employed expressionist techniques, including lighting and sound effects, to create an oppressive world that critiqued the mechanized era responsible for inventions like electrotherapy and the electric chair.

Treadwell, along with other modernist dramatists, shed light on the emerging social problems caused by the pervasive influence of technology in American lives. Through their works, they construct environments where technology becomes an adversary to humanity, giving voice to the struggles

of working-class women (Wainscott, 1997:23). Treadwell's portrayal focuses on an oppressed woman whose life is filled with turmoil and who desperately seeks to escape from all forms of oppression, particularly her loveless marriage imposed upon her due to economic problems. Despite her yearning for change, societal forces conspire against her, rendering her efforts futile.

In her play *Machinal* and through the text, the main protagonist Helen calls the Young Woman who is described as "an ordinary young woman, any woman – ready – eager – for life – for love -. .... but deadened – squeezed – crushed ..... she is a woman innately unsuited to this mechanization of life" (Shafer, 1995:259). Then, she elaborates on describing her as:

Essentially soft, tender, and the life around her is essentially hard, mechanized. Business, home, marriage, having a child, seeking pleasure? all are difficult for her? mechanical, nerve nagging (Shafer :173).

Indeed, for Treadwell, the institutions of work, home, marriage, motherhood, and even the pursuit of personal satisfaction are all portrayed as mechanized and lacking genuine humanity. In this modern world, everything surrounding the young woman in Treadwell's play is machine-like, which causes her significant psychological unrest and compels her to struggle against it.

Treadwell creates a vivid and deeply emotional female character who is dissatisfied with her challenging circumstances and feels trapped and oppressed. Those around her, particularly her husband and mother, exert dominance and impose their own views upon her. The woman finds no one who attempts to understand her pain or sadness, which further exacerbates her psychological distress.

The second argument is that this play reveals the continuous cycle of the gender oppression woman experiences because of patriarchy. For Helen represents any woman suffers from oppression in marriage, home life and economic situation environments (Treadwell, 1993: xi; Bywaters, 1990: 99-101 in: Shlueter, 1990: 97). Therefore, Treadwell requests the change of woman's role through new freedoms like marriage out of love as Fass avers (1978: 69-71). The researcher believes that "*Machinal*" serves as a powerful critique of the dehumanizing and oppressive nature of society, particularly for women in the early 20th century as it highlights the consequences of denying

individual agency and the toll it takes on one's mental and emotional well-being.

## 2. Expressionistic Drama and Treadwell's Machinal

Expressionistic drama is a theatrical style that emerged in the early 20th century as a reaction against naturalism and realism. As an example of this type of drama, the play has sought to convey emotions, thoughts, and inner experiences through distorted and exaggerated techniques rather than replicating reality on stage. In fact, expressionism is particularly influential in the period between World War I and World War II, as it provides a way for playwrights and artists to reflect the anxiety, alienation, and turmoil of the time. Furthermore, expressionism is:

Decisively about cultural transformation. In social consciousness and ethical commitment, as well as artistic form and aesthetic philosophy, expressionism sought to .... renew its faith in humanity (Kuhns, 1997: 1).

Indeed, this type of drama is established before World War I, focuses on depicting social changes and evokes feelings of fear and unease among the audience. It serves as an art form that aims to generate empathy. Through the creation of particular characters, this form of drama is closely linked to expressionism, which often intertwines with themes of violence. However, this violence is employed to evoke sympathy and understanding from the audience. The audience is taken on a psychological journey that reveals the characters' struggles and presents a path for contemplation and reflection. Koritz remarks that:

Many criticized the standardized, inexpensive products made available through mass production and distribution, fearing that the production processes that made them would turn workers into mindless slaves of machine (Koritz, 2009: 7).

Expressionistic drama serves as more than just a form of entertainment. It functions as a medium to reveal personal conflicts and shed light on social problems. By employing expressive techniques, such as distorted visuals, heightened emotions, and symbolic representations, expressionistic drama delves into the inner psyche of characters, exploring their psychological states and struggles. Jerz states that it attracts the attention of society about “the seductive power of technology . . . the anxieties of an isolated individual, projected against the background of a modern society that is not only

mechanized but also eroticized, and even sanctified” (Jerz, 2003: 10). According to Encyclopedia Britannica, expressionism:

Depicts not objective reality but rather the subjective emotions and responses that objects and events arouse within a person. The artist accomplishes this aim through distortion, exaggeration, primitivism, and fantasy and through the vivid, jarring, violent, or dynamic application of formal elements (Encyclopedia Britannica : 91).

Indeed, Treadwell's utilization of expressionistic devices in her work aims to evoke fear and unsettle the subconscious minds of the audience, particularly women. By employing techniques such as distorted visuals, intense lighting, and surreal sound effects, she creates an atmosphere that is meant to elicit emotional responses and heighten the psychological impact of the play.

In *Machinal*, Treadwell takes the true story of Truth Snyder and transforms it into an expressive form that challenges conventional notions of adultery and murder. By presenting the story in an expressionistic manner, she seeks to explore the deeper human and societal implications behind these actions. Through this approach, Treadwell strives to offer a more profound and meaningful interpretation of the events, provoking the audience to reflect on the underlying social dynamics and psychological pressures that lead to such acts.

The machine of society, as depicted in *Machinal*, represents one of the most common devices used during that period of expressionistic drama. It symbolizes the dehumanizing influence of modern industrial society, where individuals often feel trapped and oppressed by the mechanical routines and societal expectations placed upon them. By portraying the machine as a dominant force, Treadwell critiques the dehumanization and loss of individual agency caused by societal mechanisms. Through using mechanical sound effects, off stage voices and influential images, Treadwell reflects the inner mind of the protagonist, the Young Woman or Helen (Jerz: 42). Therefore, the sounds she used are considered not only as attacking environment but:

They are also the voices of the Young Woman's fragmented, dissociative state. She is as mentally crowded as she is physically in the subway . . . The



voices of the other office workers dramatize a confused stream of self-hostility, internalized judgment and panic (Cotsell: 278).

It is evident that using expressionistic elements help Treadwell to create a distinct world of mechanized oppression; a world of Helen's emotions as subjected to the machine of society that attempt to crush woman. In overall, Treadwell's use of expressionistic devices serves to create a heightened emotional and psychological experience for the audience, while also offering a deeper exploration of social issues and human experiences within the context of the machine-dominated society.

### 3. Oppression and Psychological Suffering in the Play

*Machinal* reinforces the analysis of the modern patriarchal orders to reveal in what way both intimate and institutional constructions cause woman's destruction physically and psychotically as well. Treadwell 's aim is to expose the life and motives of isolated and trapped woman in society. The title of the play, *Machinal* comes from a French word describing automatic or mechanical acts. It is a play of nine episodes; each one exposes a part in the young woman's life. In only one part, this young woman finds peace, freedom, happiness, friendship and meaning in life. Whereas, the famous episode depicts the way she kills her husband and finally her own death (Gillis, 2002:1). In this play, Treadwell seeks to expose the real individuality of the American family and defects of society in order to criticize the capitalism and attack the social forces that imposed on woman (Dickey, 1997:14).

In modern society, woman suffers from various kinds of violence, one of them is the domestic one formed by power and control first from the family's members and then from the husband. In fact, woman is motivated by the idea of marriage just to guarantee her future in a time of economic dejection. *Machinal* presents a rebellion against the world of unhappy marriage. Through the conversation between The Young Woman, Helen and her mother, we notice that at the beginning Helen refuses to marry the Boss as she longs for love whereas, the mother feels happy:

Young Woman: Ma! Listen! Listen! - There's a man wants to marry me .

Mother: (Stops clattering-sits) What man?

Young Woman: He says he fell in love with my hands .

Mother: In Love! Is that beginning again! I thought you over that!  
(Treadwell, 1993:15)

In fact, marriage should be formed on concentration and contemplation especially if the woman is so young or psychologically troubled as John Santrock remarks (2007 :18). Though, the Young Woman marries the Boss, this marriage is failed as it is based on the mother's illusion that money will secure her daughter's life and future. It is obvious that her mother plays an important role in destroying her daughter's life as she concentrates on financial things without taking into consideration Helen's feelings. The mother only thinks on solving their economic problems no matter the means she used and regardless the pain, sadness or suffering may cause to her daughter; "Her mother is a selfish nag whose chief interest is in being supported by the Young Woman. Her character symbolizes the crass materialism and false moral standards of society" (Shafer :260). She shows no concern for emotional failure as the main concern is her benefit ignoring her daughter's need of love. Being a tough and cold, the mother always sees her daughter's act so strange and calls her crazy instead of understanding the reasons:

Mother: You're crazy.

Young Woman: Oh, Ma!

Mother: You're crazy!

Young Woman: Mom--if you tell me that again I'll kill you! I'll kill you!

Mother. If that isn't crazy! (Treadwell:19)

The mother is so frustrated at her daughter as the latter does not want to understand her mother's idea that marriage to a decent man is a "necessity not a choice in life, and the idea of emotionally fuelled marriage is 'crazy' (Treadwell: 17-18). The term crazy emphasizes the fact that marriage out of love is socially unacceptable as the society concentrates on material things and discards emotions and love.

As a matter of fact, woman experiences gender oppression through restrictive tradition of marriage (Bywaters, 1990:97, 99 in: Shlueter, 1990: 97) seen clearly in Helen's mother consideration of marriage that is not about love but for survival. For the mother, choosing a husband must base on his ability to provide the daily life's necessities such as "clothes, feeding and paying for the bills" (Treadwell: 17). From the mother speech, the complete dependence of woman upon man and the restrictive morals the society

imposed on woman when deciding to get married is so evident. Not only Helen but all women in the entire world feel that their private needs are neither being understood nor taking into consideration because of oppression that hinders meeting their needs. For Helen, marriage is the only way through which she can escape from machine and from being crushed by boredom of work that makes her thinks "hurry-job-no job-no money-installments due-no money-money-George H. Jones-money" (Treadwell:11).

Furthermore, the play concentrates on discussing the economic abuse / the low –paying of the working woman that not covers her simplest needs. Hence, woman thinks of escaping through other acceptable slavery like marriage. Just in the case of Helen whose mother, the submissive woman considers selling her daughter to the Boss as a worthy solution to end their economic problem. To secure her life, Helen has no other choice but to accept loveless marriage from an insensitive man.

In Helen's strident workplace, the Boss asks to marry her but she deters in time other women prefers marriage for security (Gillis: 3). The idea of marriage inspired woman socially and psychologically at the time of economic depression to guarantee her life and future. Because the Young Woman has no success in work and her relationship with her mother is disturbed, she thinks to find an escaped way.

In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, Treadwell's representation of an oppressive machine is to reveal a resistance to the urgent progressions in technology. She portrays an ordinary woman with feminine emotional needs who is mechanized by a modern male world and oppressed by her society into a loveless marriage for security. Her idea of portraying The Young Woman is to create a story of how a young and ordinary woman could come to such a terrible end; a woman that alienated from herself, finding no peace in any place. Such a woman is frustrated, unable to find happiness and love she badly seeks.

The play opens in a business office where employees work to the continual noise of their adding machines and typewriters. Through inventing the gossip device, Treadwell makes the audience learn that the Young Woman lives with her mother only and she has no social life except the Boss who is kind with her (Gillis,2002: 2). In order to avoid the crowd of the subway and walk in fresh air, she leaves her work late. This shows her softness and inability to bear the life around her which is hard and mechanized. Dickey said that modern society depends on working woman that "fractured her notions of a unified self to such a degree that violence and



murder emerged as legitimate responses” (Dickey, 1999: 86) meaning the way to get married and later becomes a mother are paved by suffering, discomfort and even disorder since marriage is regarded as an economic and social needs only. Dickey’s main concern is to reveal how “Working Woman and Violence in Jazz Era American Drama, how the society discusses woman entering the workplace and a breaking of woman's sense of self and the familiar machinery” (Dickey: 89).

In the first episode ‘To Business’ Helen fails to thrive the haste and power of modern life, struggling to end her work on time. Her tiredness in the face of modernity is shown clearly in her last words at the end of the episode “no rest–must rest–no rest–late today–yesterday–before–late–subway–air–pressing.... late–job–no job–fired–late–alarm clock–alarm clock–alarm clock–hurry–job ...” (Treadwell: 12), here the two words ‘late’ and ‘no rest’ show that she is a very nervous, exhausted and psychological distressed woman that plague so many modern women.

Helen’s suffering from emotional abuse due to the bad and wrong choice of a husband causes her psychological suffering; telling her mother that her marriage is definitely a failure one because she does not love him" I don't love him" (Treadwell:17). In ridiculing her daughter, the mother said" Love!... what does that amount to! Will it clothe you? Will it feed you? Will it pay the bills? (Treadwell:17). From this conversation, we notice that for the mother money is more important than love, feeling and emotions on the contrary to her daughter who needs concern and compassion.

Everyone around Helen encourages her to accept this marriage regardless love in order to escape all the stresses of the workplace and the difficult situation. She realizes that her acceptance of this marriage will be "the subsequent birth of a daughter has resulted not in liberation but an even more stifling form of domestic entrapment"(Gainor &Dickey, 2005: 46). Her role as a wife and mother has made her an isolated woman with no feeling just to obey society's beliefs. She thinks that love can come with marriage talking with herself; " You must be in love, mustn't you Ma? That changes everything, doesn't it – or does it? Maybe if you just like a person, it's all right – is it?" (Treadwell :18).

As a matter of fact, Helen is different from her husband. The absence of love creates gap between them, even their interest is different. He concentrates on reading about economic success whereas, Helen reads about woman’s story of suffering, escaping the married life either by killing herself or her husband and the possibility of freedom through revolution; "Girl turns

on gas . . . Woman leaves all for love . . . Young wife disappears" (Treadwell: 55). By using these enthralling conventions, Treadwell suggests Helen's choice and draw both the threat and freedom that can be resulted from that awful choice. Moreover, the difference between them causes the emerging of rebellious woman consciousness (Bywaters: 107). Her husband is considered a physical embodiment of explicit and organized oppression. He always reminds Young Woman that she is lesser.

The bad-mannered of her husband and his insensitive to her silence, makes her feels that she is cornered and caged woman.

Young Woman: . . . . . Can't we go out for a little while?

Husband: Out? What for ?

Young Woman: Fresh air—walk—talk (Treadwell:24).

It is evident, that the Young Woman finds difficulty in social relationships due to her oppressed life. She tries to challenge "the isolation from the roles she is forced to play and her lack of emotional authenticity" that caused her psychological abuse as Dickey states in his book "*The Expressionist Moment: Sophie Treadwell* (1999: 66-81). Helen suffers from emotional abuse as she only experiences two emotional feelings, desolation and hopelessness. At the beginning, she is a trapped working woman in an office which is replaced by another living hell, a loveless marriage that causes her despair for being a wife and mother.

Helen's failure marriage arouses her to have relationship with the first man she meets who talks about love and freedom. This relationship is regarded as a compensation for her failed marriage regardless all the dangerous consequences that might happened. At the beginning, he tells her the story of his escaping from the prison in Mexico after killing the prisoners with a bottle filled with stones. Then, he begins to seduce her by telling beautiful words about love:

First Man: You're different from girls like that other one – any guy will do her. You're different. . . . . an angel. Just like an angel" (Treadwell: 43).

After hearing these words which tempted her since she never hears such words from her husband, she feels happy and free from the submission of life

that of non-opposition. Only during her meeting with the strange man, Helen experiences the sense of freedom. John Santrock (2007:475) avers that love-deprivation has great effect on woman's emotion and psyche that can lead to depressing thoughts and self- condemnation. The idea of killing her husband begins to dominate her thinking as his story of killing to be free inspired her greatly; "I had to get free 'didn't I?" (Treadwell:40). Here, the bottle symbolizes freedom for her and becomes the instrument she used to kill her husband.

Young Woman represents woman who seeks independence and freedom in a male-dominated society. Her mechanized and oppressed life has driven her to commit this dangerous act. Here, Treadwell portrays woman's failure into a disturbed psychology to her destruction and defeat as her main concern is to reflect the troubled psychology of Helen's life due to her love-deprivation especially during the trial when the lawyer asks her about her husband's death:

Lawyer: Now, Mrs. Jones [Helen], will you tell the jury in your own words exactly what happened on the night of June 2nd or the morning of June 3rd last, at the time your husband was killed.

Young Woman: I was awakened by hearing somebody, something- in the room, and I saw two men standing by my husband's bed (Treadwell:64).

It is obvious that when the work boss exploits woman by imposing marriage without love, definitely the result will be failure and separation (Santrock, 457).

In the court, Helen confesses her crime screaming; "I did it! I did it! I did it!" and when asked why, she states: "To be free" (Treadwell:75). Throughout her conversation with the judge, Helen tells the main reason that pushes her to kill her husband:

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 don't divorce him?

Young Woman: Oh I couldn't do that! I couldn't hurt him like that! (Treadwell:75).

Her ironical answer she gives herself the freedom to kill him but not to offend him reveals her distress psychology. Therefore, Treadwell main intention is to discuss the emotional reality of Helen in order to shed light on the troubled consciousness and psychology of woman's love deprivation and oppression in modern world for Helen is neither abnormal nor insane; on the contrary she is an ordinary woman, wife and mother but damaged by the social machine (Ben-Zvi, 1992:142). Being a repressed, oppressed and dominated woman by many social forces particularly man, she struggles to be an independent woman despite of her great faults. As a matter of fact, the economic problems play an important role in woman's psychology and affect social relationships especially marriage (Papalia and et al, 2004:510). Hence, Helen is considered the voice that encourages the oppressed and marginalized woman due to man –dominated authority to protest strongly; as the economic depression of American society affects people negatively for living in complete poverty and deprivation (Hansel and Damour, 2008:46). So, the unemployment and poverty affect woman's situation and cause her disordered psychology which absolutely influence her act. Therefore, killing her husband is regarded as an opportunity to express her protest against all types of chains.

Woman is oppressed in modern world so Helen is considered as a kind of everywoman in society. For that reason, the name Helen never mentioned until the trial when the lawyer calls her to stand. To have financial freedom is the main reason that pushes Helen to marry the Boss; "money – no work – no worry – free! – rest – sleep till nine – sleep till ten – sleep till noon – now you take a good rest now – don't get up until you want to" (Treadwell:12). It is obvious that without thinking carefully, she follows the path drawn by her mother, society and money that leads to her desolation. She compares her marriage to her childhood dog; "Vixen crawled off under bed – eight – there were eight – a woman crawled off under the bed – a woman has one – two three four" (Treadwell: 31). By making such comparison, she reduces woman's value to that of an animal connecting "the woman to dog as breeding animals in an inescapable bond of biological determinism" as Barbara Bywaters observes (1990:105).

Treadwell used workplace and marriage to illustrate the oppressed and isolated woman in society that pushes her to commit a violent act by killing her husband. A question can be posed is that why woman kills her husband? It is clear that trapped woman in loveless marriage and the ill-treated either physically or emotionally push her to conduct this horrible act as in a moment of despair, Helen "turns against her husband .... hears voices urging her to kill herself or someone else" (Hamilton, 1899: 557) Here, Treadwell intends to expose the violence inherent in modern social various institutions. Helen's difficult situation affects her psychology. At the beginning she chooses marriage without love to escape from economic problems. Then, she decides to escape from loveless marriage by killing her husband. Ginger Strand observes that Helen is alienated by the roles others have given her (1992:164). He also states that *Machinal* is a play about the law of language that "ultimately sentences the protagonist not only to death, but to silence" (Strand :163).

Treadwell wants to illustrate that oppression and the absence of love hinder woman from facing the realistic life. Helen believes that her husband is the origin of all her pain, problems and suffering so, she finds no other way but to kill him. Hence, in order to arouse sympathy in the audience, Treadwell makes the lover leave each other (Gewirtz and James, 2003:105). Helen is abandoned by the man whom she thinks he loved her. Instead of finding happiness and true love, she becomes a distressed woman. Jennifer Jones (1994:492) asserts that love is very necessary in marriage and life but sometimes it causes lovers' downfall just like Helen whose love gives her the idea of how to kill her husband and causes her destruction.

Though, Treadwell knows that Helen is a killer but she wants to show the private life of an oppressed woman in loveless marriage. Helen neither loves her husband nor her daughter, unable to fit the role of wife and mother; but she finds an alternative worse love that caused her tragic end. Hence, death becomes a form of escape for her. Therefore, she creates a sympathetic woman who is prevented from finding her own happiness. To discuss woman's relationship with the outer world, Treadwell concentrates on the nature of woman that is simple, kind on the contrary to life around her that fills with various evils; "The woman is essentially soft, tender, and the life around her is essentially hard, mechanized. Business, home, marriage, having a child, seeking pleasure—all are difficult..." (Bywaters: 15).

This violence is deeply connected to patriarchal structures that support male dominance within society. Such structures devalue and victimize



women, perpetuating their subordination. The experience of violence and oppression significantly influences a woman's behavior and thinking. It can lead to a sense of dehumanization, where women are treated as objects or machines devoid of emotions and autonomy:

The only freedom available to the young woman is outside the dominant structures of society.... Because her act was authentically her own, she will accept her new role as a criminal. But, if that role places her outside the structure of oppressive gender norms, it also places her back into the interpolating structure of the law.... there is no freedom from the gender-prescribed roles that society imposes upon women (Abrar and Margetts, 2000: 219).

Consequently, Treadwell depicts the machinery of married life as a type of modern hell.

As an expressionistic play, *Machinal* focuses on representing the inner and subjective world of emotions and personal experiences more than the concrete external reality. Throughout her life, Helen has many changes; the marriage, the killing and finally the criminal accusation. In addition, the pressures of modern life, the psychological burden of being a woman in a male-dominated society, and feelings of isolation and desertion threaten her life and affect her psyche clearly.

In this play, Treadwell confirms the difficult struggle woman still faces not only in America but in the entire world. Woman is forced in loveless marriage; surviving in a jobless world for woman who is deprived from her simplest right and having no way to escape the patriarchal machine. She would still be controlled by the male-dominated society. Bywaters remarks that; "woman would be subordinate in every sense, legally, physically, emotionally, and economically, to a man she does not love or respect" (Bywaters: 21). Hence, *Machinal* reveals the struggle for achieving woman's identity despite the oppression she feels in society that forces many dislikable things like loveless marriage due to economic problems; "Treadwell used [Ruth] Snyder as a point of departure for dramatic indictment of a society whose masculine laws and orientations stifled the emotional needs of women" (Dickey, 1997: 11). Because of her oppressions, Helen dithers between the idea that "all women get married, don't they? and the importance of loving the person she marries" (Treadwell: 16). "You must be in love, mustn't you, Ma? . . . May be if you just like a person it's all right" (Treadwell:18). Moreover, she needs money to live in time she hates her job.

Her conflict affects her thinking that either to complain the oppression of society or to face them in order to achieve all the things she desires.

In modern world, woman is reduced to the level of machine. Helen is forced into many mechanical roles; worker, wife and mother. Even at the end of the play she is killed by another machine; the electric chair. So, killing her husband is the only way to free herself and him from sadness and unfaithfulness that troubled their marriage. In fact, marriage and motherhood bring Helen no happiness for her only need is the illusionary freedom through an illegal affair with another man that becomes deadly. But, despite of the mechanization of American life, the young woman struggles to find lighting. Helen begins to rebel against social system but her struggle causes her tragic end. Treadwell emphasizes both the struggles of woman in a male dominated society as the spirit of expressionism; "confusion of inner and outer reality is the perfect medium for presenting the life of a young woman who asks an impersonal society 'Is nothing mine?'" (Barlow, 1993: viii).

This play is regarded as a symbol for woman's independence but only after horrible suffering of being forced into dislikable life:

Helen becomes an Everywoman who leads a life of submission and powerlessness and is continually forced to make choices that only lead her from one form of subjugation to another . . . Treadwell doesn't offer Helen's solution as either viable or logical, but she does make it understandable" (Shafer: 263).

All the people around her do not recognize her pain or understand her confusion. Her marriage is like a jail, which she exchanges for a real prison after killing her husband. Helen wants to escape the prison of her marriage to find peace in her life. This rebellious drama conveys that woman's revolt can lead "to one moment of freedom before the patriarchal machinery crushes the revolt" (Bywaters :97). Through the journey of the Young Woman, Treadwell warns the audience against the dangers of an impersonal, woman-subjugating society. The Young Woman's collapse represents the possible consequence for women, a tragedy that could affect any woman who feels trapped by her life, if loveless marriage is forced on woman and with no change in her life.

Treadwell reveals the humanity of individual against aggressive society in which woman struggles to find way that has no place for her and no one can help her. Jeffery Nevid states that the story of this play not about an American woman who killed her husband but " about an American or generalized capitalist city that killed a woman, and, moreover, killed one of many as it decisively kills each person . . . [who] deviates from the norm"( Nevid , 2003:28). Young Woman does not have the ability to break free of the fast-paced world around her that has taken everything from her; her identity, happiness and drives her to be a killer.

Helen wants peace, love, happiness and freedom but crushed by the severe machine of society. Hence, the value of wifehood and motherhood imposed on her and the need to support herself and her mother become the main obstructions. In fact, Helen suffers from many internal emotional obstacles that increase her conflicts; "Internal obstacles are deeply involved in the character's sense of right and wrong, good and bad, pleasure and pain" (Treadwell:59). This is precise true of this Young Woman who wants to escape her unhappy marriage and find peace in her life.

Until she meets her lover, she does not know whether this is the peace she seeks or not to change her life:

In a mechanical, ordered environment.....The Young Woman is not driven by an intellectual search for identity or cosmic meaning, but, so far as she manages to articulate, she desires simply 'Peace. Rest and peace.' To achieve it will assuage her personal unhappiness in the face of a vague feeling that there must be something more to life (Jerz: 49). Here, Treadwell reflects the unbearable status of a woman in time affected by unemployment and poverty which create troubled and chaotic psychology and that lead to woman's disastrous end. Moreover, she concentrates on a family as a kind of society which is responsible for woman's depression that might victimize herself through her unbalanced psychology.

Before her execution, Helen asks to see her daughter for teaching her about life; "Wait! Mother, my child; my little strange child! I never knew her! She'll never know me! Let her live, Mother, Let her live! Live! Tell her-"(Treadwell: 81). In addition, her last words "Somebody! Somebody and something" (Treadwell:83) confirm that her desire for love and freedom is

failed since it leads to her tragic end but she still needs peace. This illustrates that throughout her life and even after her death, Helen is an isolated woman but she requests somebody not only tells her daughter to live and enjoy life but all the younger women who like to free themselves and their society as well (Gainor & Dickey:48). Hence, this play represents the modern woman who protests against not only man's domination but against any kind of oppression in society. It is obvious that not only the murder of her husband is a violent act but her execution as well. She is completely isolated and alone in this modern world. Even the coworkers, like Telephone Girl, see her as an outsider not on the same social level.

Unfortunately, in modern society woman has limited and subordinate role because of man and society who do not appreciate her mind. Helen's husband takes her as a wife only and her lover seduces and leaves her. Moreover, in the court, she is surrounded by men only, the lawyer, the judge and the reporters. Even, before her execution she only meets men, the priest, barber and executioner. Treadwell believes that the world controlled by only men, woman's violence appears to be sane though her behavior is insane just like in Helen's case. Only through leaving this world Helen feels free and happy; meaning that death is the sole choice giving her moment of happiness. She hopes to find peace in the afterlife; telling the priest that she feels free after killing her husband,

I've been free, Father! For one moment – down here on earth – I have been free! When I did what I did I was free! Free and not afraid! .....Young wife disappears, and Prisoner escapes" (Treadwell: 53,80).

Each stage of Helen's life is emphasized by noise and scary force whether in the office with the human voices creating an 'office machine or the world's noises during her hospital visit; meaning that she cannot escape society as she never finds a way to get rid of the machine even when she tries to free herself by killing her husband she is sentenced to death by electric machine; the first reporter asks, "Suppose the machine shouldn't work!" and the second reporter responds, "It'll work!—It always works!"(Treadwell: 91) this clarifies that anyone tries to get rid of society's bound will meet his/ her tragic end definitely.

#### 4. Dehumanization and Loss of the Individual Agency

*Machinal* deals with the gendered notions of silencing, destruction and defeat. The Young Woman is unable to find her voice in modern society. For creation, Treadwell insists on using silence to highlight the existence of woman's voice that has been silenced by society which seems as a machine against which Helen struggles but now can be given a voice. Firstly, dehumanization and objectification of women are shown throughout the play as the "Young Woman" is depicted as a mere cog in the machine of society, stripped of her individuality and treated as an object rather than a human being. She is consistently referred to by labels such as "Young Woman" and "Young Girl," emphasizing her generic identity, which further contributes to her dehumanization. The dehumanization is also seen in how she is confined to societal roles, such as being a wife and mother, without any consideration for her own desires and aspirations.

Secondly, the loss of individual agency is seen via the "Young Woman's agency" which is constantly eroded by societal expectations and pressures. From her unfulfilling job to her loveless marriage, she finds herself trapped in a life she did not choose. The play portrays her as a passive figure, pushed along by the expectations and norms of the time, unable to break free from the constraints imposed upon her. Her lack of agency is evident in the way she is forced into a marriage she doesn't want, which leads to her infidelity and later, her crime of murdering her husband. In this process, societal mechanisms is reflected as Treadwell uses various symbols and settings to illustrate the impact of societal mechanisms on the "Young Woman". For instance, the workplace where she operates a typewriter represents the dehumanizing nature of modern industrial society. The constant sound of the typewriter throughout the play reflects the monotony and soul-crushing reality of her existence. The trial scene also serves as a powerful mechanism of society's judgment, where she is put on trial not just for her actions but also for her defiance of societal norms.

Therefore, "*Machinal*" serves as a powerful critique of the dehumanizing and oppressive nature of society, particularly for women in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. It highlights the consequences of denying individual agency and the toll it takes on one's mental and emotional well-being. By depicting the Young Woman's struggles and ultimate rebellion, Treadwell invites audiences to reflect on the importance of preserving individuality and



challenging societal mechanisms that seek to dehumanize and control individuals.

## 5. Conclusion

This paper has provided a comprehensive analysis of Treadwell's portrayal of female figures during the machine age. Helen, the protagonist in *Machinal*, and the broader themes of oppression and its impact on women's psychology. Treadwell indeed presents Helen as a reflection of the oppressive American mechanized society, much like the playwright herself felt victimized and oppressed.

The play highlights the presence of violence and oppression in various aspects of a woman's life, manifesting in physical, psychological, and social forms. Treadwell condemns the societal oppression of women, which ultimately leads to Helen's tragic end. In modern society, women often sacrifice their individuality in pursuit of a respectable marriage. Helen, under these oppressive circumstances, finds herself alienated and miserable in her loveless marriage. The continuous presence of mechanical sounds and industrialized settings further shape her life, characterized by isolation, boredom, and unrest.

Despite her attempts to assert her identity and independence, Helen faces insurmountable difficulties. The forces imposed on her by family and society deeply affect her psychology. She is compelled to marry a man she does not love to secure her future due to economic problems, trapping her in a marriage that becomes akin to a prison. Living under complete oppression, she sees no way out except through committing a violent act that leads to her downfall and death.

Treadwell emphasizes that when a woman is forced into a loveless marriage, it can cause immense suffering, leaving her feeling trapped and desperate. The play illustrates the tragic consequences of oppressive circumstances, highlighting the psychological distress and the potential for drastic actions. While Helen's act of killing her husband is morally wrong, she believes she is doing something right in challenging the explicit oppression she has endured. The oppression inflicted upon women can drive them to commit awful and morally wrong acts.

Treadwell's intention is not limited to depicting the plight of American women alone but aims to portray the universal struggle of women in any country. Helen represents the archetype of everywoman in modern society, subjected to abuse and feeling trapped in her marriage. Treadwell seeks to present a new kind of woman— independent, intelligent, and enthusiastic

about work— but highlights how various forms of oppression, whether patriarchal, individual, or institutional, hinder her progress. The play underscores the strong connection between oppression and women's psychology, shedding light on the detrimental effects on their lives and actions.

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## **التجريد من الإنسانية وفقدان القدرة الفردية بواسطة الآليات المجتمعية في مسرحية صوفي تريديويل الالي**

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### **مستخلص البحث:**

بالكاد تُعامل صوفي تريديويل على أنها كاتبة مسرحية تعبيرية ذات نزعة إبداعية جذرية لإظهار مخاوف النساء من الحرية وإيجاد صوتهن في المجتمع الحديث. لذلك ، في هذه الورقة ، تم توضيح مسرحية صوفي تريديويل "الالي" وتصويرها التجرد من الإنسانية ، وفقدان القدرة الفردية ، والآليات المجتمعية ، والأمومة والولادة في المستشفى كمثال فريد للحركة الفنية التعبيرية في الأدب. من خلال التركيز على مفهوم "الأمومة" ، تستكشف المؤلفة كيف تتوافق تجربة بطل المسرحية المؤلمة بعد الولادة مع الاهتمامات المعاصرة حول الولادة والأمومة وفقدان القدرة الفردية والرعاية التوليدية. وتجادل بأن الطريقة التي تستجيب بها الشخصيات لمحنة المرأة الشابة تعكس اتجاهًا سائدًا لآزدراف مخاوف المرأة من الولادة أو نسبها إلى "الضعف" أو "الإرهاق العصبي" للمرأة العصرية. تسلط مسرحية تريديويل الضوء على شرعية مخاوف النساء فيما يتعلق بالولادة بينما تتحدى فكرة أن الارتقاء العقلي يمكن أن يعالج قلق الأم. هذا الجانب من المسرحية حيوي في تقديم نقد اجتماعي نسوي ، والتشكيك في الأعراف والتوقعات المجتمعية الموضوعة على النساء أثناء الولادة. علاوة على ذلك ، يؤكد البحث على كيفية بتوسيع هذه المسرحية "الالي" نقدها إلى ما وراء الأمومة والولادة لمعالجة القضايا الأوسع للتسلسل الهرمي الأبوي الحديث وعلاقتها بالخطابات التكنولوجية ونزع الصفة الإنسانية من خلال استكشاف تقاطع الهياكل الحميمة والمؤسسية في المسرحية ، يكشف الباحث أيضًا عن التأثيرات التي يمكن أن تحدثها هذه الأنظمة على النساء. لتعزيز الحجج ، يقدم البحث أمثلة محددة لتوضيح كيف تصور تريديويل استجابات الشخصيات لمحنة المرأة الشابة وتمثيل الشخصيات الطبية.

**الكلمات المفتاحية:** المرأة ، الهيمنة ، المجتمع ، المعاناة ، النضال ، الاضطهاد