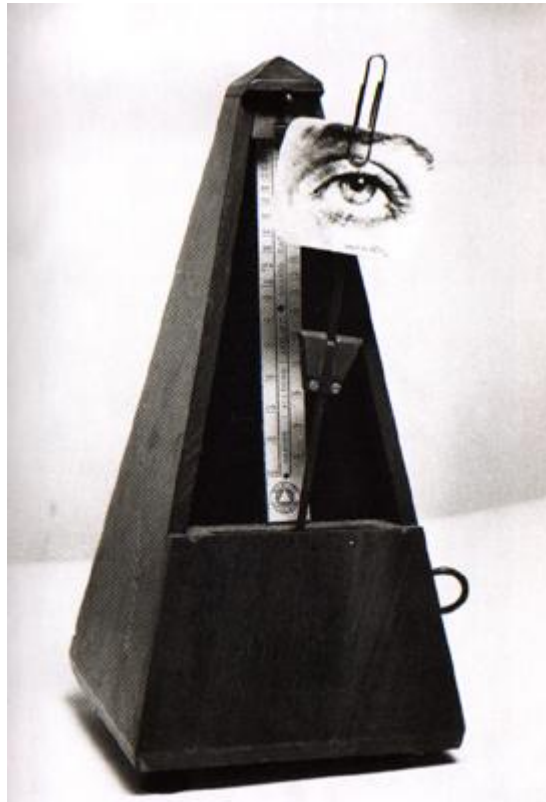


MACHINAL

By Sophie Treadwell



Object to be Destroyed (Indestructible Object), 1923. Man Ray

A Guide For Study

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MACHINAL: A STUDY GUIDE

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This Study Guide has a Purpose

I created this study guide to serve as a supplementary tool for understanding and examining *Machinal* by Sophie Treadwell. It is constructed to guide you through a literary and historical investigation of the play. Throughout, I will offer explanations about the historical or thematic significance of many of the scenes and suggestions for further discussion. This study guide should invite you to think critically about the play: its themes and structure but it should also ask you to think about where *Machinal* fits into the scope of contemporary American life.



P1. Sophie Treadwell, 1925

Who is Sophie Treadwell?

Sophie Treadwell (1885-1970): Though Sophie Treadwell never achieved the fame of many of her male colleagues, today she is considered one of the most accomplished writers and dramatists of the early twentieth century. Educated at the University of California at Berkley in 1902, she earned a degree in French while pursuing interests in acting and writing. Following her tenure there, Treadwell began writing for the *San Francisco Bulletin* and other publications including: *Harper's Weekly* and the *New York Tribune*. During World War I, she traveled to Europe as one of America's first female war correspondents and she was the only journalist permitted to interview Pancho Villa at his hideaway in Canutillo during the Mexican Revolution. Treadwell's first Broadway play, *Gringo* debuted in 1922. Following its success, she went on to write a number of other plays including: *O Nightingale*, *Machinal*, *Ladies Leave*, *Lone Valley* and *Plumes in the Dust*. *Machinal*, which is loosely based on the famous murder trial of Ruth Snyder and Judd Gray, is considered the best in her oeuvre. The play first opened on Broadway in 1928 and featured a young Clark Gable. Treadwell also penned the novels, *Hope for a Harvest* and *One Fierce Hour and Sweet*. In 1970, she died in Tucson Arizona and the majority of her works and papers were donated to the University of Arizona.

Sophie Treadwell's Mission

This “Mission Statement” is printed at the beginning of *Machinal*. As you watch or read the play, think about the techniques that Sophie Treadwell used to achieve her purpose.

THE PLOT is the story of a woman who murders her husband- an ordinary young woman, any woman.

THE PLAN is to tell this story showing the different phases of life that the woman comes in contact with, and none of which she finds any place, any peace. 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 to her – mechanical, nerve nagging. 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 is her undoing.

The story is told in nine scenes. In the dialogue of these scenes there is an attempt to catch the rhythm of our common city speech, its brassy sound, its trick of repetition, etc.

Then there is, also, the use of many different sounds chosen primarily for their inherent emotional effect (steel riveting, a priest chanting, a Negro singing, jazz band, etc.), but contributing also to the creation of a background, an atmosphere.

THE HOPE is to create a stage production that will have “style” and at the same time, by the story’s own innate drama, by the directness of its telling, by the variety and quick changingness of its scenes, and the excitement of its sounds, to create an interesting play.



P2. Scene from *Machinal* on Broadway, 1928.

Realism vs. Expressionism: Why Style Matters

If we define **style** as the way in which something is expressed, written, or performed, how would we describe the style of speech in *Machinal*; natural, conventional, and realistic or choppy, short, disjointed, and frantic? Which adjectives describe the majority of things you see on TV or in the movies?

Much of what we see on television and the movies is considered Realism. **Realism** can be defined as a style in the theater that seeks to depict life just as it is. Realism relies on our understanding of reality and the psychological experience of human beings. It is perhaps the most predominant genre because it appeals to people's sense of self (people want to watch stories they can relate to or recognize). Interestingly, plays with supernatural elements or outlandish scenarios can still be categorized as works grounded in realism.

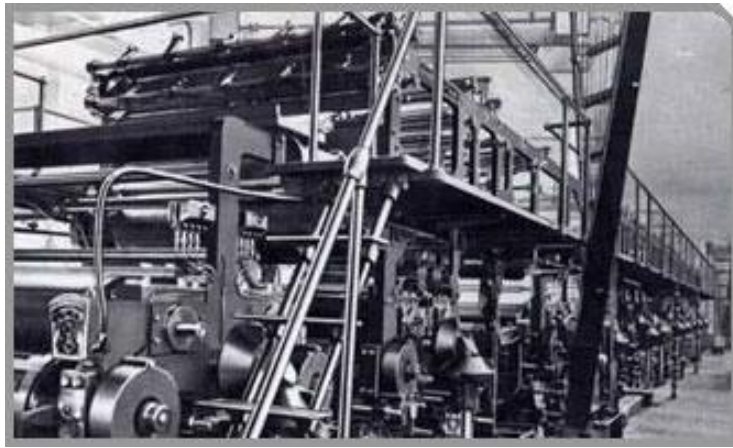


P3. A scene from *The Office* on NBC.



P4. An image from *Spiderman*, soon to be on Broadway.

Though the predominant genres in the theater at the beginning of the twentieth century were Realism and **Melodrama** (a genre that is meant to stimulate the emotions of the audience and is often romantic and sentimental), Sophie Treadwell wrote *Machinal* in a style called **Expressionism**. The Expressionist movement originated in Europe just before the twentieth century, but flourished from 1910-1925, spurred by the overwhelming social and political upheaval caused by World War I. Expressionist writers diverged from other dramatists because they sought to face the ugliness of the war and the otherwise celebrated industrial boom.



P5.

In the early 1900s, machines and machinery were becoming more commonplace, as was mass production. Henry Ford, for example, had invented the assembly line in 1914 and increased productivity by speeding efficiency without expanding his labor force. Changes like Ford's, relied heavily on the labor of the middle class, the increased use of machines, and the drudgery of physical labor required to work these machines.



P6. Workers in the Expressionist film, *Metropolis* 1926.

The mechanization of labor and its correlation with war created a sense of impersonal conformity and an intense fear that somehow the machine would consume humanity. Therefore, Expressionist dramatists attempted to emphasize the moral crisis of the collective. They did so by utilizing a number of stylistic devices to underscore the universality of human emotion such as primal gesture (exaggerated emotive movement) or punctuated dialogue (language that emphasizes various words or expressions). Expressionism assumes that basic human needs and expressions unite people from all backgrounds.

In *Machinal* (which means mechanical in French), you will notice that no one is given a clear identity. Many of the characters are defined by their occupation. This device elucidates the idea that the Young Woman's struggle can be the plight of any woman. Her journey is a series of confrontations in a reality faded by convention. The world of the play is seen through her eyes and she struggles to find enlightenment despite the mechanization of American life: work, marriage, family life, etc.

Playwrights and directors also demonstrate the mood of an Expressionist drama in the staging of the play. **Mood** can be defined as the atmosphere or emotional condition created in a play's scene. In *Machinal*, the mood of the play is intended to feel stifling and mechanical. The director of *Machinal* tries to convey this by creating stage pictures in which the Young Woman looks overwhelmed by the quick and impersonal actions of all of the people around her. Additionally, the set is intended to look stark, chilling, and unrealistic. In the last episode of the play, the focal point on stage is a machine, the electric chair.

What Do You Think?

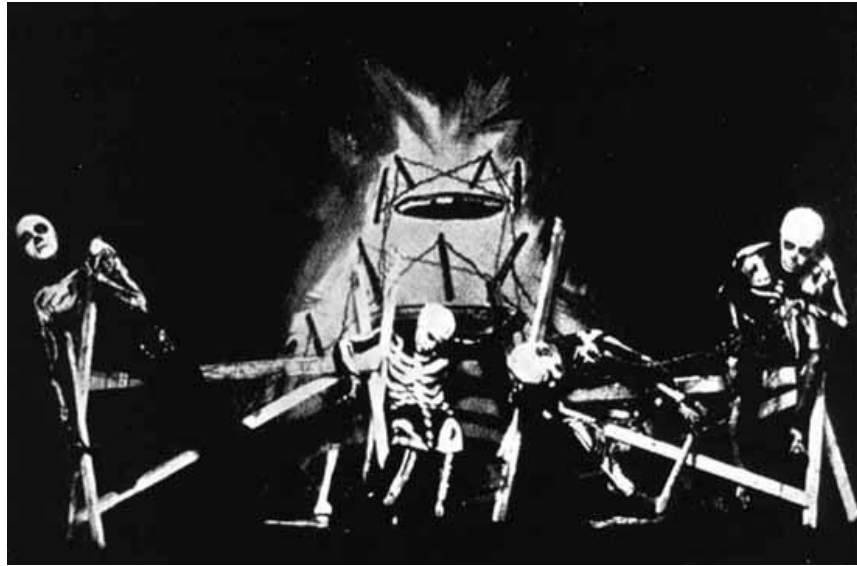
Pictured here are some Expressionist sets. A **set** provides the background or performance space in a play. Sets are intended to represent the world of the play.

What do these sets tell you about the play?

What do these sets tell you about the internal struggle of the **protagonist**, or central character?



P7. Design for *The Great Highway* by August Strindberg, 1909.



P8. Scene from *Transformation* by Ernst Toller, 1918.



12. BRUCKNER, *Elisabeth von England*. Berlin, 1930 (Reinhardt)

P9.

An Exercise in Creativity

Draw a set with one of the following parameters:

What might a set look like if a man felt imprisoned by his job?

What might a set look like if a grown woman felt trapped in the body of a child?

What might a set look like if a man murdered his father and was wracked with guilt?

What might a set look like if a young woman felt she had no power?



P10. Scene from the movie, *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*, 1920.

Theater History Fun Fact: Movies filmed in the early 1920s were primarily shot on sets. Watching early movies provides a lens for understanding theater at that time.

To learn more about Expressionism, check out these movies:

Faust. Dir. F.W. Murnau. DVD. 1926.

Metropolis. Dir. Fritz Lang. DVD. 1926

The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari. Dir. Robert Wiene. DVD. 1920.

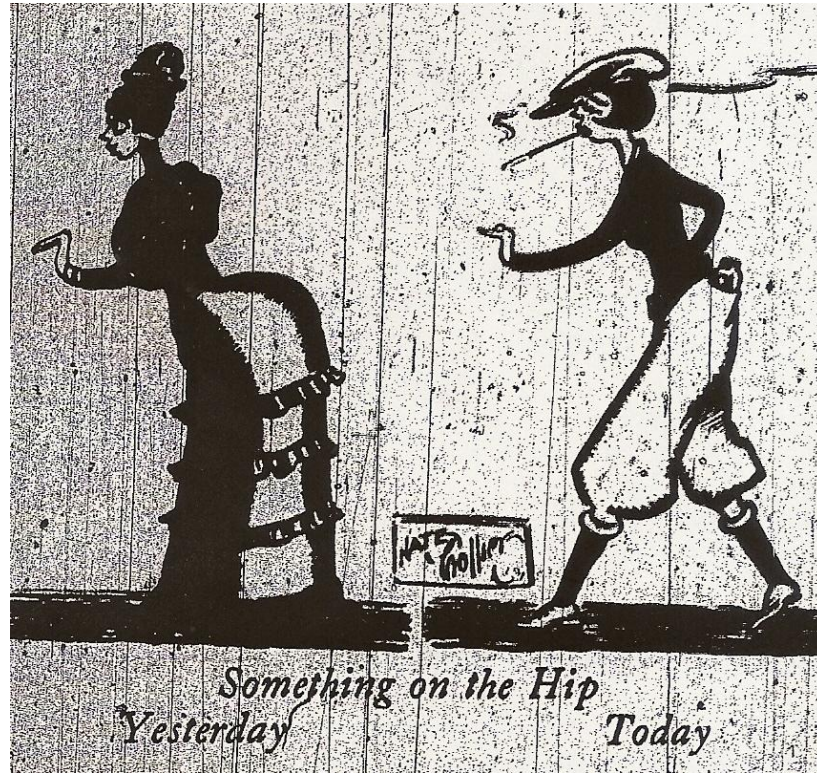
Expressionism that is Distinctly American

When dramatists like Sophie Treadwell brought the Expressionist genre to the Broadway stage in the 1920s, they sought to capture the spirit of a new cultural American era. After World War I, technological advances bolstered American industries and the nation's wealth nearly doubled. Families suddenly gained more leisure time, became more prosperous, and in some cases, gained a renewed sense of patriotism. Writers, artists and musicians sought to find the rhythm and identity of this new American sensibility and language (both from a positive and negative perspective).

This meant leaving an age that was initiated and dictated by Europeans. Americans left the **Victorian Age** (the period when moral propriety reigned, as did Queen Victoria) in the dust and jazz came to represent the United States. Jazz, with its unconventional rhythms, spontaneity, and distinctly American roots represented a society built on mechanical innovations and business but also a society made up of a diverse body of people.

Sophie Treadwell writes in her mission that she wishes to capture the honest cadence and speech of her time and that the dialogue in *Machinal* is not weighed down by lengthy speeches or euphemisms. In fact, many characters use abbreviated dialogue or slang to get their points across quickly and efficiently. Today, we use slang all of the time but the emergence of modern slang took off in the 1920s. Ann Douglas in her book, *A Terrible Honesty: Mongrel Manhattan in the 1920s*, writes:

“America became the source of much of the English-speaking world’s slang in the twentieth century, and slang is **dyphemism**, the substitution of a more brutal and graphic word for a conventional or polite one. This concept of a brutal, convention–defying language really reflects the nature of the time. The era preceding the Jazz Age was dominated by Victorian morals and euphemism, a mild word replacing an offensive one, peppered the American language. During this age of morality, ‘legs’ was considered a vulgar term and ‘limbs’ was used instead. In contrast, the preferred Jazz Age term for ‘legs’ was the slang term ‘gams.’”



P11. *The New Yorker*, March 1925.

Here is a list of slang terms that emerged in the 1920’s, some of which appear in the play, *Machinal*. How many of these expressions do we still use?

- All Wet - Describes an erroneous idea or individual, as in, “he’s all wet.”
- Applesauce - An expletive; same as horsefeathers, as in “Ah applesauce!”
- Bee’s Knees - An extraordinary person, thing, idea; the ultimate.
- Berries - That which is attractive or pleasing; as in “It’s the berries.”
- Big Cheese - The most important or influential person; boss. Same as big shot.
- Bluenose - An excessively puritanical person, a prude.
- Bump Off - To murder, to kill.
- Carry a Torch - To have a crush on someone.
- Cat’s Meow - Something splendid or stylish; similar to bee’s knees; the best or greatest.

Cheaters - Eyeglasses.
 Crush - An infatuation.
 Dogs - Feet.
 Drugstore Cowboy - A guy that hangs around on a street corner trying to pick up girls.
 Flapper - A stylish, brash, hedonistic young woman with short skirts and shorter hair.
 Flat Tire - A dull witted, insipid, disappointing date. Same as pill, pickle, or drag.
 Frame - To give false evidence, to set up someone.
 Gams - A woman's legs.
 Giggle Water - An intoxicating beverage; alcohol.
 Gin Mill - An establishment where hard liquor is sold; bar.
 Heebie-Jeebies - The jitters.
 High-Hat - To snub.
 Hoofer - Dancer.
 Hotsy-Totsy - Pleasing.
 Jake - OK, as in, "Everything is Jake."
 Jalopy - Old car.
 Joint - A club, usually selling alcohol.
 Kisser - Mouth.
 Line - Insincere flattery.
 Moll - A gangster's girl.
 Neck - Kissing with passion.
 Ossified - A drunk person.
 Pet - Same as neck, but more so.
 Pinch - To arrest.
 Pushover - A person easily convinced or seduced.
 Ritzy - Elegant (from the hotel).
 Scram - Ask someone to leave immediately.
 Sheba - A woman with sex appeal.
 Speakeasy - An illicit bar selling bootleg liquor.
 Spiffy - An elegant appearance.
 Stuck On - Having a crush on.
 Swanky - Ritzy.
 Swell - Wonderful. Also; a rich man.
 Take for a Ride - To drive off with someone in order to bump them off.
 Upchuck - To vomit when one has drunk too much.
 Whoopee - To have a good time.



P12

This list has been compiled from <<http://www.geocities.com/MotorCity/Lane/6341/History/slang.html>>.

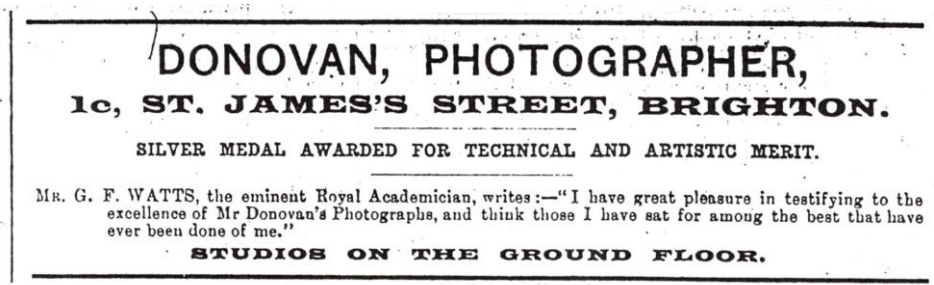
An Exercise in Creativity

How does contemporary slang represent our current decade?

Look at a number of popular magazines and find examples of slang or terms that represent our time. Do you think that texting and emailing will change our everyday speech, or has it already?

The Changing Identity of the Female and the Rise of Psychological Advertising

In the beginning of the twentieth century, America's businesses saw a shift in technological innovation as did the American home. Women were no longer required to devote their whole lives to domestic duties (making food, clothing, soap, medicines, in addition to raising children) or in the case of wealthy women, no longer required to supervise servants to do so. A number of technological innovations made life at home a little more comfortable including: the telephone, the toaster, and the radio. Women took on the role of consumer and conversely the icon for psychological advertising (before psychological advertising, ads relied on testimonials). Linking happiness and the ideal female became a common ruse for emphasizing a product's merits. This conflict has perpetuated the feminine struggle to live up to idealized images of themselves.



P13. A testimonial ad from 1897

The changing icon of femininity is illustrated below in two ads for Coca-Cola. The woman on the left is a Gibson Girl, reminiscent of a Victorian beauty. The woman on the right is from the Jazz age.

P14 The Gibson Girl, 1908



P15. The Flapper Girl, 1926







THE FLAPPER AND THE GIBSON GIRL



As the Jazz Age flapper smoked and drank her way to infamy she trounced upon the feminine icon of the previous era, the Gibson Girl. The Gibson Girl, immortalized by illustrator Charles Gibson, idealized women as the keepers of hearth, home, and morality. Following is a side-by-side comparison of these two contrasting images of womanhood:

Gilded Age “Gibson Girl” 	VS.	Jazz Age “Flapper” 
The late nineteenth century and early twentieth century	Era of Reigning Popularity	The nineteen-twenties
Long, feminine curls worn in a bouffant or chignon	Hairstyle	Boyish bob emphasized by the cloche hat
Coffee or tea	Favorite drink	Bathtub gin
Hourglass, emphasizing femininity	Figure	Curveless and androgynous
Respectable floor length	Skirt-length	Scandalous knee length
Finding a suitable mate and creating a welcoming home environment	Favorite Activities	Drinking, smoking, dancing and petting
Corsets, bustles, and pantaloons	Undergarments	Step-ins and rolled stockings
None for respectable women, worn only by actresses and prostitutes	Make-up	Worn by fashionable women. Red lipstick and black ringed eyes preferred.
World War One	Reign-ending event	The Depression

This chart was created by Aimee Davis and printed with her permission.

What do You Think?

Identify the “perfect woman” in advertisements now.

What does she look like?

What makes her feminine?

How do we expect her to act?

Women and Electricity

At the very beginning of the twentieth century, gas was primarily used in the home for cooking, water heating, and lighting. However, advances in electric power were constantly being refined and new electrical wonders dazzled a consumer-hungry culture. These innovations were presented at the many world's fairs and women stood by to help showcase their merits. They became the obvious emblems of the Electrical Age and were subsequently featured in print ads as well. It was also fashionable for women to model or dance at music halls, covered in tiny electric lights.

When electricity became a mainstay in the modern American home, women were encouraged to use electric appliances to fulfill their domestic duties. Ads beginning at the end of the 1920's through the 1950's showed women enjoying the benefits of using these appliances.



P16. *My Electric Girl* sheet music, 1922.

Women and Cigarettes

From The *E Pluribus Unum* Project



In the Camels ad above, two friends speak in confidence about smoking. In the Chesterfield ad on the left the female protagonist remarks, “I really don't know if I should smoke” and goes on to say “Women began to smoke, so they tell me, just about the time they began to vote”(Women won the right to vote in 1920). The Chesterfield woman however does not smoke because of women’s **suffrage** (suffrage is defined as the right to vote), but rather for pleasure. In fact, the new modern woman of the 1920's, represented in the ads above, sought to distance herself from the matriarchal ideology of the suffrage movement. She was more interested in having a good time and reveling in her equality by participating in activities thought too taboo for women. The Camels ad makes the same appeal, but more succinctly. There is little attempt to mask the explicitly sensual rhetoric.

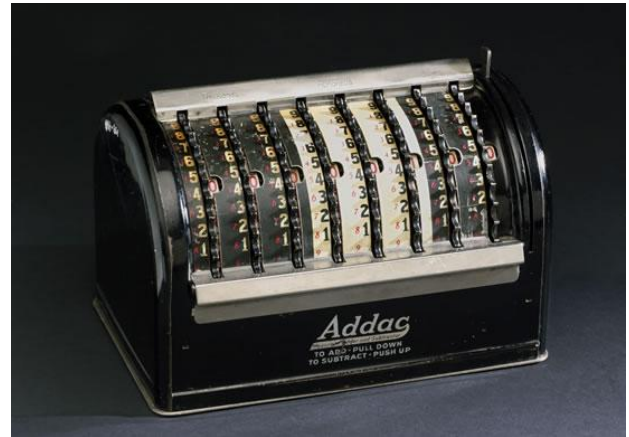
The Single Girl Must Work

Not every woman could be a Gibson girl or a flapper and the general expectation for young women at the beginning of the twentieth century was to marry and have children. Though some women saw working as a means of empowerment, those women who did not marry were often forced to enter the work force for economic reasons. Many women saw it as a place to retreat when you could not get married. Betty Israel in her book, *Bachelor Girl* writes: “the average (working) girl was not trying to reshape the world . . . she was trying for the time being, to advance in the office and earn more money.”

In the nineteenth century, 95% of women remained in the home. After World War I, it became increasingly common to see women doing clerical work in a place of business. In 1870, less than 1 percent of all clerical workers were women. By 1900, the Labor Department estimated that more than 100,000 women worked as stenographers, typists, and secretaries. By 1920, more than 25% of all secretaries were women, and by 1965, the figure was 92%. In *Machinal*, the Young Woman works as a **stenographer**, a person who takes dictation in shorthand. It was also common for women to work as telephone operators. In 1902, the Bell Telephone System employed 37,000 female switchboard operators, with the rationale that women had voices that were “more calming” and “more patient” than men.



P17. Switchboard operators



P18. An adding machine commonly used in the office

An Exercise in Creativity

What are some other jobs that we think of as “women’s work”?

Research the history of the profession. Identify why these professions are common to women.

On Marriage in the 1920s



P19. "Would you marry a man who lied to you?" *Chanticleer* (February 1929).

It Had to Be You, 1924
by Isham Jones and Gus Kahn

It had to be you, it had to be you
I wandered around, and finally
found
The somebody who
Could make me be true,
And could make me be blue
And even be glad, just to be sad
Thinking of you

Some others I've seen,
Might never be mean
Might never be cross,
Or try to be boss
But they wouldn't do
For nobody else, gave me a thrill
With all your faults, I
Love you still
It had to be you, wonderful you
It had to be you

An Exercise in Creativity

What do the lyrics of this song suggest about love in the 1920's?

Examine the song lyrics from three popular songs today. What do they suggest about love and dating in 2008?

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Young people were encouraged to marry for LOVE but consider the following....

From the book, *Middletown, a Study in Modern American Culture* by Robert and Helen Merrell Lynd.

Marriage is prohibited (these guidelines change from state to state):

Between whites and blacks

For an insane person, imbecile or epileptic

For a person having a transmissible disease

For a person under the influence of liquor or drugs

For a woman under the age of sixteen and a man under the age of eighteen

A Woman should be:

“A good home-maker”

“A good mother”

“A social pace-setter”

“A good cook”

“A good housekeeper”

“Good looking”

“Well groomed”

“Pure”

“Morally better than men”

A Man should be:

“A good provider”

“Sober and never cruel”



P21 Wedding Photo, 1930.

On Divorce...

An increase in divorce cases took place between the end of the nineteenth century and the mid-20's. In order to be granted divorce, the grounds for divorce almost always had to be identified. Some reasons for divorce were adultery, abandonment and cruelty. Cruelty was often the most cited cause for divorce. In fact between 1919 and 1922, it served as the rationale for 52% of the total divorce cases reviewed in Robert Lynd's *Middletown*, a study of familial life in 1920's America.

It is significant that the Defense Attorney in Episode Eight points out that the Young Woman had a happy marriage. She was not abandoned, nor cheated on, nor was she treated cruelly. Perhaps, that is why she never asks for a divorce.

The language for the Young Woman's psychological and emotional void simply does not exist. She clings to the phrase, 'to be free', which does not articulate a concrete reasoning. It becomes clear that language itself is part of the machine. Treadwell demonstrates this in the first scene to establish the world of the play and it takes on menacing force by the end of *Machinal*.

Being on the Outside

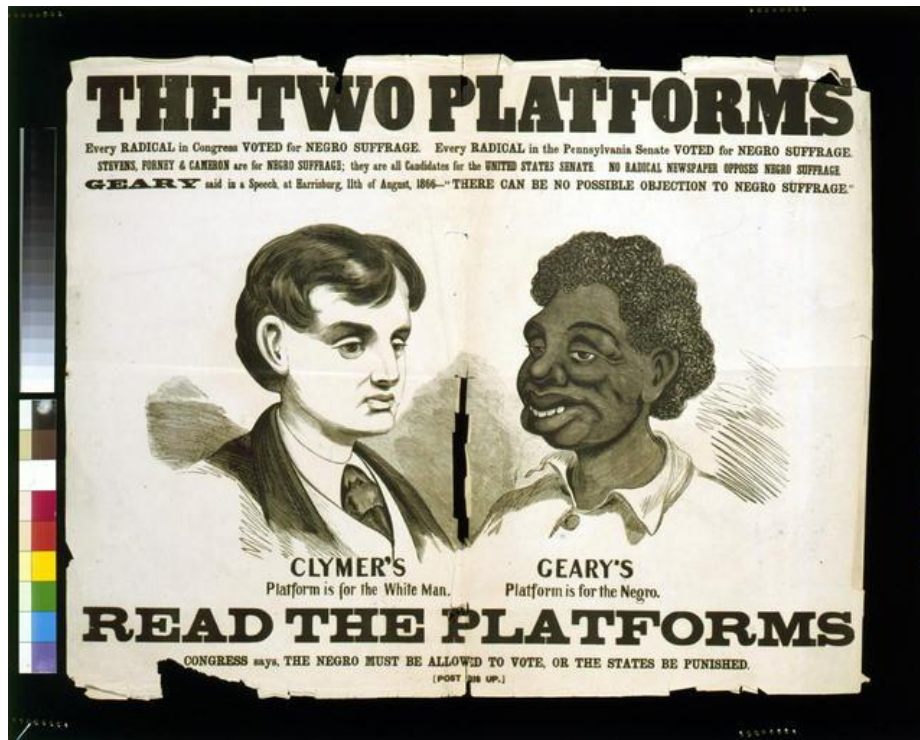


P22.

The only time the Young Woman experiences a sense of freedom in *Machinal* is during her encounter with the lover. The lover is an outsider: he is from the frontier and has spent much of his time in Mexico, and is therefore intricately connected to a world outside the status quo. Indeed, all through *Machinal*, there are allusions to the divide between those living within existing power structures and those who have found themselves on the margins of society. These allusions point toward the torrid history of American ethnic, racial, and gender relations.

Throughout American history, countless ethnic groups have been persecuted, condemned, and denied equal footing with men of Western European descent in the United States. At the start of the century, the United States temporarily brought large-scale immigration to a halt. In response to World War I, Congress passed a provisional measure limiting immigration in 1921 and finally a permanent restriction law called the Johnson-Reed Act in 1924. The Johnson-Reed Act codified the alleged superiority of white Americans of northern and western European backgrounds by imposing immigration quotas based upon national origins.

In this era, African Americans were experiencing other forms of oppression. The **Fifteenth Amendment**, which stated that the "right of citizens of the United States to vote shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or by any State on account of race, color, or previous condition of servitude," had been ratified in 1870. Though in word the Amendment granted African American men the right to vote, racial discrimination and Jim Crow laws prevented them from gaining any real voice in government. Additionally, propaganda campaigns in the North and South sought "to demonstrate that blacks in office would be ruinous to the sanctity of the United States government".



P23. From the Library of Congress, a poster attacking black suffrage, 1866

Women of all colors also struggled to have their voice heard in the United States. The Young Woman's affinity to the African American spiritual sung near the end of the play suggests the implication of a shared struggle between both black and white women. During the women's suffrage movement, which began in the late 1800's and continued into the twentieth century, many black women campaigned with whites to gain the right to vote. This shared vision, however, created numerous points of contention. There was a pervasive fear that white women's votes would cancel out the votes of African American men and women. On the flip side, many southern suffragists felt that black women should not be given the right to vote at all.

In 1920, when the **Nineteenth Amendment** was passed, women of all colors were given the right to vote but like their male counterparts decades before, African American women were disenfranchised by violence and racial prejudice.

P24



The Law



P25. Ruth Snyder



P26. Her lover, Judd Gray



P27. Her husband, Albert Snyder

Machinal is loosely based on the murder trial of Ruth Brown Snyder and Judd Gray.

Ruth Brown Snyder was the daughter of Scandinavian immigrants. The family adopted the last name, Brown, to sound more American.

Before she met Albert Snyder, Ruth lived in Queens and worked as a telephone operator. When they married, she no longer had to work. As a housewife she spent her days at home and so began an affair with a corset salesman named Judd Gray.

Ruth and Judd conspired to kill Albert in hopes of acquiring a considerable amount of insurance money. They did so, with a blow to the head. When Snyder and Gray were arrested and put on trial, the whole nation followed the court case, in much the same way people followed the OJ Simpson trial.

WIDOW ON STAND SWEARS GRAY ALONE KILLED SNYDER AS SHE TRIED TO SAVE
New York Times; Apr 30, 1927; ProQuest Historical Newspapers The New York Times (1851 - 2004)
pg. 1

WIDOW ON STAND SWEARS GRAY ALONE KILLED SNYDER AS SHE TRIED TO SAVE HIM

LIFE MENACED, SHE SAYS

Forced to Aid Alibi After
Dragging Slayer From
Husband, She Asserts.

REPUDIATES CONFESSION

Counsel Tries to Show Duress
—Witness Weeps Thrice in
2-Hour Story of Life.

ON STAND AGAIN MONDAY

Gray Is Alert for First Time—
His Lawyer Lays Basis for
an Insanity Plea.

Below are excerpts from the New York Times: April 30, 1927.

Mrs. Ruth Brown Snyder testified yesterday that she not only took no part in the murder of her husband, but that she fought to save his life. She found Henry Judd Gray kneeling on the back of the sleeping man, hitting him with the sash weight, and she dragged him off, according to her story.

Then Gray, pistol in his hand, threatened to kill her if she interfered with him while he chloroformed the unconscious man and strangled him with picture wire. She was marked with blood from her fight with Gray and other circumstances were so much against her, she declared, that she decided that her only chance of safety was join with Gray in the scheme to make it look as if the crime had been perpetrated by burglars

This is the main outline of the narrative told by Mrs. Snyder to the jury which is trying her and Henry Judd Gray in the Queens County Supreme Court, for the murder of Albert Snyder, art editor of Motor Boating, at his home in Queens Village on March 20. She testified for two hours yesterday. She will take the stand for further direct examination at 10 o'clock on Monday morning.



P28. The Snyder home in Queens Village, Long Island

Weeps Three Times on Stand

She wept three times. Her first tears were shed when she said her husband had reproached her when Lorraine was born because the child was not a boy. She cried again and buried her face in her handkerchief when she said she and her husband had quarreled incessantly. The rival who stole his affections, according to her story was a dead sweetheart of his named Jessie Geshard.

The third time she wept was when she described herself as dragging Gray from the body of her husband.

At other times her composure was perfect, too perfect, perhaps to have an ideal effect on the jury. She was very precise, very decisive. In denying some of the worst charges, her voice had an aggressive and angry ring. She spoke in low tones. She was never shrill, even when in a fighting mood. Her enunciation was clear.

Mrs. Snyder wore the same mourning costume in which she regularly appeared in the courtroom. She wore a long black satin coat with a small black fur collar over her black dress. About her throat she wore a set of black glass beads. A little – very blond hair was allowed to appear under her small black felt hat with about an inch of brim. Her hands were bare. She had a tiny linen handkerchief.

Titters over Testimony.

The courtroom took a frivolous view of the examination when Mrs. Snyder told of her housekeeping. She did all her own housework. She made all the draperies. She stored the basement shelves with preserves. She was accounted a good cook.

The first distinct titter in the courtroom was provoked by the mention of the preserves. Later there was another titter, when Mrs. Snyder, with a slightly, self-righteous air, said she never smoked. The audience in the courtroom apparently was composed very largely of women who did, and there was a great deal of nudging and eyebrow lifting over Mrs. Snyder's implied attitude toward the habit. The spectators, in fact, formed a typical Broadway audience, sophisticated and cynical. All kinds of major and minor Broadway celebrities had found their way into the courtroom, squeezing all, except a very few influential citizens of Queens and the particular friends of the court attendants and the policemen on duty.

During the greater part of Mrs. Snyder's testimony the courtroom was rippling with suppressed laughter. Only once did this become general enough to attract the attention of the Court, who promptly threatened to clear the room. But on every bench in the courtroom were two or three jesters whispering ironical comments.

Jurors Watch Spectators

The attitude of the courtroom was generally not one which could communicate sympathy for the witness to the jurors. The twelve men listened with profound expressions. But when she had the second and more prolonged spell of crying they avoided gazing at her. Instead they looked about the courtroom. Some jurors appeared to look wonderingly at the well-controlled merriment and gay spirits, which seemed to animate the 1,500 people in the immense room.

After Mrs. Snyder had stopped crying and was again giving testimony in a calm voice, some jurors let their eyes rove about the courtroom. The crowd was frankly eager to see how the jurors took it, and the jurors were obviously interested in how the courtroom took it.

The net effect of her testimony was hard to gauge. Feeling in the beginning had been heavily against her. The witness seemed to have some success in overcoming this. It was generally admitted that Mrs. Snyder's story had brightened her prospects to some extent, provided that she is not crushed on cross-examination. Some of the spectators, for the day only, regarded her story convincing.

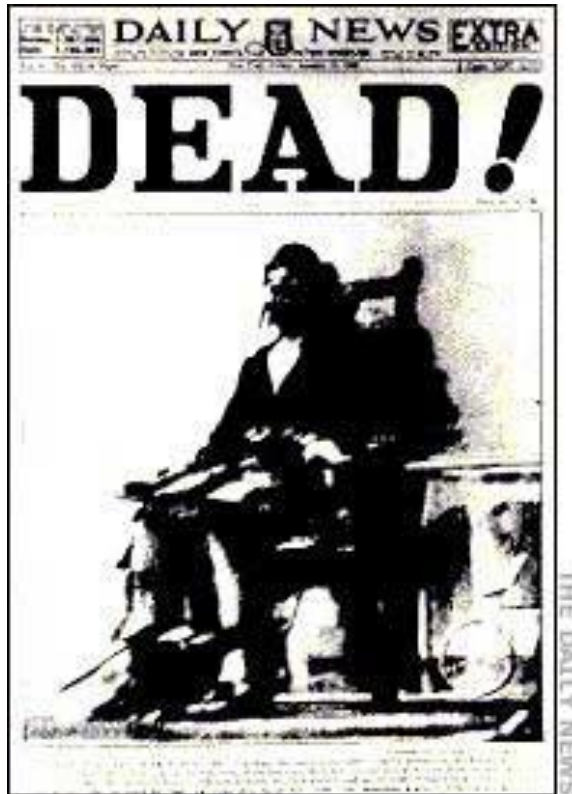


P29. Photographers waiting outside the courthouse for the verdict, 1927.

What do You Think?

What is similar about the account offered in the *Times* and Treadwell's play? Ruth Snyder's appearance is addressed with considerable detail. Do women in the media continue to be scrutinized in the same way today?

The Death Machine



P30.

In 1928, Ruth Snyder was executed by the electric chair for the murder of Albert Snyder. Twenty-four witnesses watched her die, including a number of reporters. It was typical practice to allow reporters to witness executions, though they were not allowed to take photos.

The Daily News, knowing this to be the case, solicited Thomas Howard, a photographer from the Chicago Tribune to take a photo of Snyder in the electric chair. Howard, who was not identified as a photographer by the law enforcement officers of Sing Sing was able to stand with other reporters in the witness room. He wore a miniature camera with a release strapped to his ankle, which ran up his pant leg and into his pocket. He took a photo of Snyder once the electric chair was activated, by tugging on his trousers and exposing the camera lens.

On January 13, 1928, the photo ran on the front page of the Daily News. The Daily News sold one million extra copies that day.

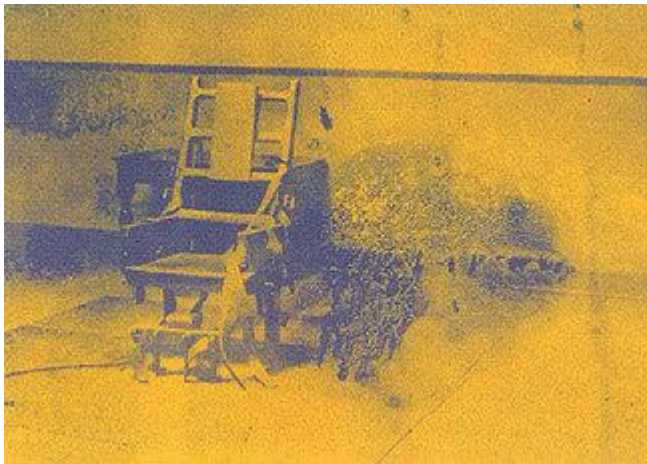
The New York Times also ran a cover story on the execution without a photo. The reporter described the execution in this way:

Twenty-four witnesses packed in four church benches borrowed from the prison chapel, looked on. The white room with its silver-guilt pipes and radiators, was glaringly lighted.

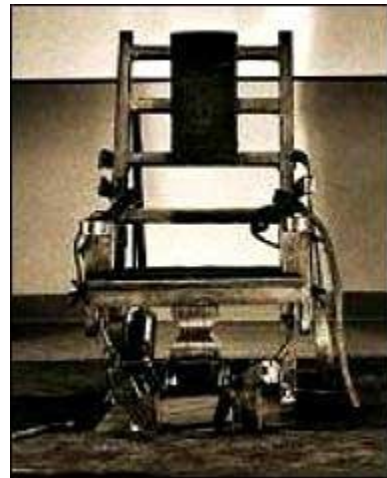
Prison attendants and physicians lined the room, gazing at the figure strapped in the chair. The priest returned to the side of the room, still praying audibly. After adjusting the apparatus, the gray-haired man walked to a little room opening the execution chamber and took his place before the switchboard.

Warden Lawes gave a signal and the current was turned on. The priest continued to read in a low voice. There was no other sound except that of the radiator of the super-heated room, which rattled and whined incessantly.

Ages seemed to pass. The current had actually been on two minutes when the warden gave another signal. The switch was turned off and the body suddenly relaxed.



P31. Andy Warhol's Electric Chair



P32. Electric Chair at Sing Sing

The electric chair was originally intended to take the spectacle out of execution; a stark alternative to very public hangings. Designers, including Thomas Edison, hoped that electrocution would be simple, private, and painless. Edison described the process in this way, "Touch a button, close the circuit, it is over." Once the electric chair was adapted by the state, the opposite proved to be true. Executions became elaborate spectacles of death, which involve complex machinery, hooded victims, and the assistance of priests and engineers.

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