

*This essay examines Sophie Treadwell's *Machinal*, exploring how Helen's psychological collapse stems not from individual moral failing but from a culture that systematically silences women*

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To Be Free: The Feminist Tragedy at the Heart of *Machinal*

Sophie Treadwell's *Machinal* dramatizes the suffocating power of early twentieth-century social norms, especially those that control women's identities and bodily autonomy. This play was written during a period that had strict gender expectations alongside the rise of many technological advancements, and it exposes how these societal forces shape and ultimately destroy its protagonist, Helen Jones. Drawing from dramatic traditions that echo elements of Greek tragedy and later modernist drama, *Machinal* both inherits and transforms earlier thematic concerns, especially those involving fate, oppression, and societal constraint. The play's critique of gendered expectations also resonates with ongoing contemporary debates about autonomy, justice, and the policing of women's bodies. *Machinal* demonstrates how historical dramatic themes of societal control, their evolution across theatrical periods, and their contemporary relevance come together to show that Helen's psychological collapse and violent rebellion stem not from individual moral failing, but from a culture that systematically silences women.

The pages that follow provide historical context for Treadwell's writing and examine how *Machinal* inherits and reshapes classical dramatic themes. Then trace how these themes evolve across the dramatic history, especially in response to shifting social anxieties about gender and modernity. Next, a connection is made between the play's treatment of oppression, agency, and

violence to larger cultural issues, both in Treadwell's era and today. Finally, concluded by considering the play's enduring relevance and its contribution to modern feminist dramatic discourse.

Although *Machinal* is a work of American modernism, its core conflict echoes ancient dramatic traditions, specifically Greek tragedy. Similar to figures like Medea in Euripides' *Medea*, Helen is trapped within a rigid social order that restricts her choices and defines her worth by patriarchal expectations of the time. Her eventual act of violence mirrors this tragic heroine, whose destructive choices emerge when every path toward freedom is blocked (Euripides 198). Treadwell intensifies this classical structure through expressionist techniques, which Gainor states is "an aesthetic particularly suited to the representation of modern life," showing Treadwell emphasizing how the world around Helen becomes a mechanized system designed to destroy individuality (1169).

Scholars have noted how Treadwell's formal style heightens the psychological pressure on her protagonist. For instance, Weiss argues that Treadwell uses repeated imagery around machinery and electricity to show how Helen's body becomes a site of social control "the sound of machines, whether office machines, the radio, the doorbell, subway riveters, or the ringing of a telephone, arouses anxiety in Helen; they represent the bars imprisoning her" (Weiss 5). Weiss also notes how "The history of 'hysteria' and electricity... in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, women displaying g anxiety, sleeplessness, anorexia, irritability, nervousness, and desire – much like Helen who complains that she cannot eat, sleep and who suffers from nervousness and anxiety – were diagnosed as 'hysterics'" (Weiss 5). This emphasis on the female body as something judged and regulated aligns with theatrical themes surrounding fate, societal expectation, and the limits of agency.

Additionally, Treadwell's psychological portrayal of Helen echoes the tragic motif of internal conflict versus external obligation. Abed's psychoanalytic reading highlights that Helen's distress is exacerbated by cultural scripts dictating marriage, motherhood, and obedience with "everyone from the young woman's co-workers to her dependent mother urge Helen to escape the stresses of the urban workplace by accepting an offer of leisurely marriage from her boss. Helen realizes that her acceptance of this undesired marriage and 'the subsequent birth of a daughter has resulted not in liberation but an even more stifling form of domestic entrapment'" (Abed 8). These pressures mirror the ancient structures in which characters were forced into predetermined roles, suggesting that *Machinal* draws on historical drama and critiques how those oppressive patterns persist in our modern society.

By grounding her expressionist play in recognizable character archetypes, Treadwell positions *Machinal* within a long lineage of theatrical works that explore the consequences of systems stronger than individual will. While *Machinal* draws inspiration from many classical themes, Treadwell reworks them to reflect the anxieties of the early twentieth century. Industrialization, shifting gender norms, and the increasing presence of technology dramatically changed the cultural landscape of the 1920s. These modern pressures shape Helen's environment in ways distinct from her ancient influences.

Strand points out that even the title, *Machinal*, evokes industrialization and signals a world where human behavior is increasingly shaped by industrial rhythms, "Treadwell coined a new word as the title of her play... In the very act of describing from within the oppressive nature of discourse, she moves a step beyond it" (Strand 2). The fragmented dialogue, rhythmic repetition, and claustrophobic scenes illustrate how modern life dehumanizes those who fail to conform.

Ancient plays often focused on divine forces or cosmic fate, *Machinal* replaces supernatural determinism with social factors. The “fate” that ultimately destroys Helen is not the will of the gods but the expectations of the society she lives in, such as marriage as a necessity for women, motherhood as a duty, and women's sexual purity as a moral obligation. Helen clearly cannot stand these expectations, and the first time she has the urge to resist on her honeymoon, she is refusing her new husband's advances, telling him “No! Please! Please don’t!” as he tries to walk in on her while she’s changing (Treadwell 1191). Once Helen rejects these many different expectations throughout the play, the consequences unfold with tragic inevitability, reminiscent of Greek drama yet rooted in distinctly modern fears of losing individuality, bodily autonomy, and the mechanization of human relationships.

Treadwell’s play also represents a shift in how women’s rebellion is conceptualized. In classical drama, female violence often reinforced patriarchal warnings about disorder, but in *Machinal*, Helen’s violence becomes an indictment of the system that created her suffering. We can see this in Episode 8, where Helen finally confesses to the murder of her husband, saying, “I did it! I did it! I did it!” and insisting that it was “To be free” (Treadwell 1223). This evolution reflects broader twentieth-century theatrical trends in which women characters increasingly challenge social norms rather than simply exemplify them. Even though this was written nearly a century ago, *Machinal* resonates strongly with ongoing conversations about gender, autonomy, and justice. The social conditions that suffocate Helen continue to shape the discussions we have about women’s rights today.

Weiss argues that Treadwell stages Helen’s body as a battleground where societal demands are inscribed “Even though she often loses her battles and as such caves in, succumbing to marriage, maternity, confessing in court, and even in the concluding episode, having her hair

cut, Helen always resumes the fight against the patriarchal machine” (Weiss 8). This interpretation aligns with contemporary debates about reproductive rights, sexual agency, and the policing of women’s bodies in both public and private spaces. Helen’s inability to control her own life mirrors the struggles many women still face when attempting to assert autonomy against the established social norms.

Treadwell’s critique of legal and judicial systems also remains sharply relevant. The swift condemnation of Helen after her crime highlights how justice often reinforces existing social hierarchies rather than evaluating individual circumstances fairly. This is reflected in the way the judge and prosecuting attorney speak about Helen as though she is guilty from the start, saying things like “It doesn’t seem strange to you that this bottle held in the big dark hand of one of those big dark men left no mark! No print! That doesn’t seem strange to you?” (Treadwell 1220). In discussions about criminal justice reform, domestic violence, and gender bias in the courts, similar patterns persist. *Machinal* serves as a powerful lens through which to examine ongoing struggles for gender equality and personal freedom, and its themes stretch across decades.

Through its expressionist form and searing social critique, Sophie Treadwell’s *Machinal* bridges the gap between ancient dramatic themes and modern feminist concerns. The play reworks classical tragic motifs to expose how early twentieth-century expectations surrounding gender and conformity shape and ultimately destroy Helen Jones. By connecting historical drama, the evolution of theatrical themes, and contemporary discussions of autonomy and justice, we can see that Helen’s tragic outcome is not an isolated moral failing but the result of systemic oppression. *Machinal* endures because it forces audiences to confront how societal structures shape individual lives, revealing that the struggles reflected in Helen’s story remain deeply relevant today.

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