

Riley Bulson
Dr. Mark E. Lococo
THTR 366
8 December 2025

Cogs in the Machine: Gender, Control and Defiance in Sophia Treadwell's *Machinal* and 1920s
America

The last sound the Young Woman hears before her execution in Sophia Treadwell's *Machinal* is the humming of an electric chair and the whispered clatter of typewriters and telegraphs. Her head is shaved to allow the electrodes to stick, she is strapped to the chair, and her pleaful cry is silenced by the application of electricity, thus abruptly ending the play. From its opening moments to its closing, *Machinal* by Sophia Treadwell deeply explores the relentlessly controlled bodies, labor, and desires of women in the 1920s, using the mechanized rhythm of society not only as an expressionist and episodic theatrical style, but as a social critique of post-industrial revolution America. When the play premiered on Broadway in 1928 at the Plymouth Theatre, audiences were struck by its ability to effectively reveal the policed and psychologically pressured life of women through its fragmented, stylized dialogue, and distorted settings. In modern society that becomes reflected in *Machinal*, freedom, passion, and autonomy demonstrate the intimate desires of women that are ultimately treated as subversive due to a culture that is determined to suppress female agency. Sophie Treadwell's *Machinal* is a product of the historical moment from which it was written, reflecting the social, economic, and cultural pressures faced by American women in the 1920s. By dramatizing the dehumanizing effects of industrial labor, the rigid expectations of marriage, and the exaggerated moral panic surrounding women who defy societal norms, Treadwell critiques a patriarchal society that constrains female voices and autonomy, turning the rebellion of the protagonist in the play into a powerful commentary on modern womanhood.

Machinal opens in a chaotic, distorted soundscape of machinery, where the acoustic environment of clacking typewriters, adding machines, and telephone sounds set the tone for the atmosphere of an ordinary office workplace. As characters begin to speak in fragmented, quick-paced dialogue creating a wall of sound, the audience is immersed in a world that feels overwhelming, claustrophobic, and overstimulating. As the unnamed “Young Woman” enters late for work, it can be interpreted that this cacophony of noise is representative of the suffocating sounds that exist in her mind. Consequently, the opening prioritizes introducing the theatrical technique of expressionism that will be used throughout the play to illustrate the Young Woman’s internal anguish. The Norton Anthology of Drama describes expressionism as “a literary and theatrical movement that originated in Europe just before the twentieth century but flourished from 1910 to 1925. ... Expressionist dramatists strove to emphasize the moral crisis of the modern, industrial world dominated by machines and masses of people [and included] other stylistic elements [like] the use of primal gesture (exaggerated emotive movement), punctuated dialogue (language that emphasizes various words or expressions), and theatrical design that includes exaggerated or distorted images.” Thus, Treadwell strives to demonstrate the incorporeal frustrations and pressures within the Young Woman’s emotional state in a sensorial way to convey truth that reaches beyond what the theatrical classification of conventional realism can accomplish.

Jennifer Jones, a scholar of theatre history and gender studies, argues that a central goal of Treadwell’s in writing *Machinal* was to provide a rivaling narrative to the public opinion to the outcome of the 1927 trial of Ruth Snyder. This trial which *Machinal* is loosely based on concerns Ruth Snyder and her lover Henry Judd Gray who were convicted for killing her husband and executed by electric chair, causing a media sensation. Though it was not the first

time a woman had been convicted for murdering her husband, it was the most followed case of its time. She examines *Machinal*, insisting that Treadwell's expressionist techniques function as a feminist strategy, allowing the audience to access the Young Woman's inner turmoil within a diegetic world that centers a society where she does not have a strong voice. Because she is trapped in being unable to express discomfort to her husband, boss, mother, and doctor, Treadwell chooses to use the theatrical form itself to portray a psychological reality. Jones states that, "*Machinal* is the testimony, disallowed by the court of law, that Treadwell wished to introduce into the court of public opinion. She sets forth her argument in a drama, not to prove Snyder's innocence, but to ask if perhaps there is another way of looking at the case, one that the all-male jury and predominantly male press corps did not understand" (Jones 486). Therefore, the audience can experience the Young Woman's emotional state through this expressionist form, and Treadwell gives them the role of a witness who may reveal the Young Woman as more than a criminal deserving of execution. Katherine Weiss, an American playwright and journalist, further emphasizes Jones's argument, demonstrating how the bodily and electrical imagery that Treadwell uses in *Machinal* heightens this effect, symbolizes psychological confinement, and challenges audiences to look further into the dramatized and sensationalized headlines, "Rather than demonizing them as many newspaper reporters had done, Treadwell uses the form of playwriting to explore the forces that propelled these women into desperate acts of murder, and the institutions that condemned them" (Weiss 5). Therefore, Treadwell uses expressionism to critique society, rather than provide an aesthetic.

In Episode One of *Machinal*, titled "To Business," Treadwell introduces to the audience the oppressive rhythm of the modern office utilizing the sounds such as overlapping voices, repetitive commands, and typing to reflect a soundscape of industrial labor. The Young Woman's

co-workers speak in quick commands or short statements that depersonalize them and demonstrate how the roles they inhabit are ultimately interchangeable amongst one another, mirroring the alienation from labor and product as a result of the industrial revolution and the treatment of women as interchangeable parts in a larger machine. In this space where individuality is reduced to routine, efficiency, and conformity, the Young Woman struggles to adapt and finds herself feeling suffocated and unable to breathe, “George H. Jones - straight - thin - bald - don't touch me - please - no - can't must - somebody - something - no rest - must rest - no rest - must rest - no rest - late today - yesterday - before - late - subway - air - pressing - bodies pressing - bodies - trembling - air - stop - air - late - job - no job - fired - late - alarm clock - alarm clock - alarm clock - hurry - job - ma - nagnag - nag - ma -- hurry - job - no job - no money - installments due - no money - money - George H. Jones -” (Treadwell 11). The passage uses an exhausting, repetitive rhythm that reflects the relentlessness of her daily routine, including stressors of both her personal and work life. The tumble of words creates a sense of suffocation and panic that demonstrates how industrial labor dehumanizes the female worker by turning their lives into a continuous cycle of obligation and fear. Historical context surrounding clerical work further illuminates the pressures faced by women in the 1920s during the industrial revolution.

Kim England, a geography professor at the University of Washington who researches feminist economic, social, and political issues, calls attention to the highly feminized and repetitive nature of clerical work in the 1920s as a result of the industrial revolution. She emphasizes that women became more creatively limited and less autonomous due to the reinforced hierarchical structures that formed as clerical work became more feminized. England's article titled “Women in the Office: Clerical Work, Modernity, and Workplaces”

explores how the widespread emphasis on feminized clerical work allowed women to become more policed, monitored, and controlled through their employment because of the precise and repetitive nature of the tasks they performed such as typing, filing, and stenography. Such roles demanded a level of obedience and emotional neutrality that imposed levels of psychological and social constraints for women navigating an industrialized society. Janine Solberg, an Assistant Professor of English at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst, offers a similar account, adding an emphasis on the dramatic shift in labor forces post industrial revolution, and the realities of gendered workplaces. She outlines that “differences in skill, education, and status among office workers were reflected in workplace hierarchies that incorporated separate tracks and job titles for men and women. Even within the comparatively truncated women’s ‘track,’ workers were organized into different classes– from file clerk and typist and the lower end, stenographer in the middle, and private secretary or female office manager at the upper end” (Solberg 6). The constrained and structured hierarchies in women’s labor functioned as a form of control and limitation that is emphasized by the Young Woman’s experience in *Machinal*.

Reports from the U.S. Department of Labor Women’s Bureau serve as primary sources, highlighting the rigid roles, long hours, and low pay of clerical work for women, the rise of capitalism, and the overall decline of housewife or domestic work like creating clothes, “The housewife found it cheaper and easier to buy these things from the stores than to spend many hours making them at home. The work necessary to carry on household activities decreased” (U.S. Department of Labor Women’s Bureau, 3). These reports illustrate how the changes brought on by the industrial revolution changed the shape of women’s work outside of the home and ultimately intensified the pressures felt by those involved in labor forces. Treadwell transforms these historical conditions into a theatrical expression of psychological oppression,

showing how industrialized labor both reflects and enforces the broader limitations placed on women in 1920s America. Treadwell writes the Young Woman to embody this sense of change and shift in pressure, as she is overwhelmed by the demands of her work, financial security, and the remaining domestic, or home-maker expectations placed on women. Treadwell transforms these statistical realities into a dramatic theatrical experience, making the realities of the dehumanizing effects of industrial labor for women and a lack of autonomy more tangible or understandable for audiences.

Treadwell extends her theatrical commentary surrounding the mechanization of modern life post industrialization to the domestic realm, presenting marriage as a machine much like work that is designed to control and surveil women. In Episode Two titled “At Home” of *Machinal*, the Young Woman has a tense conversation with the Mother on the subject of marriage, “I’ve always thought I’d find somebody - somebody young - and - and attractive - with wavy hair - wavy hair - I always think of children with curls - little curls all over their head - somebody young - and attractive - that I’d like - that I’d love - But I haven’t found anybody like that yet - I haven’t found anybody - I’ve hardly known anybody - you’d never let me go with anybody and - ... I’ve never found anybody - anybody - nobody’s ever asked me - till now - he’s the only man that’s ever asked me - And I suppose I got to marry somebody - all girls do -” (Treadwell 19). The Young Woman goes on to discuss her feelings of claustrophobia and resentment in her relentless routine of work, and feels reluctant to enter into marriage, because she believes it is another form of confinement. In Episode Three titled “Honeymoon,” the Young Woman expresses more discomfort as the Husband tries to kiss her, “(*sitting*). Then come here and give us a kiss. (*He puts her on his knee.*) That’s the girlie. (*He bends her head down, and kisses her along the back of her neck.*) Like that? (*She tries to get to her feet.*) Say - stay there!

What you moving for? - You know - you got to learn to relax, little girl - (*Dancers go off. Dim lights. Pinches her above knee.*) Say, what you got under there?” and the Young Woman says “Nothing.” (Treadwell 23). The Young Woman’s physicality as outlined in the italicized stage directions implies that she is reluctant and uncomfortable with the Husband’s attempt at creating an intimate moment with her, and the Young Woman feels as though marital intimacy is a mechanized routine she must endure, rather than simply partake in.

Treadwell’s illustration of how marriage mirrors the mechanization of the workplace is contextualized and reinforced by historical dialogues regarding the institution of marriage, its relation to the restriction of women’s autonomy, and the implications of divorce in a modern sense. Stephanie Coontz, an American historian and author known for her expertise in the “traditional family”. In her article titled “The Origins of Modern Divorce”, she emphasizes how women were culturally looked down upon if they expressed unhappiness in their marriage, and their dejection was not acknowledged, but rather viewed as unusual or unhealthy. However, the idea that a marriage should be built on a foundation of love was, overall, a radical presumption and “many women and men found more intimacy in same-sex friendships than in courtship of marriage” (Coontz 10). Coontz’s analysis divulges how marriage was seen as a stabilizing force for society rather than a reciprocal partnership, and ultimately highlights the Young Woman’s feelings of discomfort and alienation by her marriage in *Machinal* as she tries and fails to articulate her feelings that are constantly misunderstood by the Husband, the Mother, and society as a whole. Even as marriage evolved into the modern concept we know today where “many marriages became more satisfying, intimate, and passionate than couples of the past would ever have dared to hope for, ... higher expectations of marriage created greater disappointments when marriage failed to deliver the satisfactions promised by popular culture and the growing

profession of marital advice experts” (Coontz 11). Coontz communicates that the Young Woman’s feelings about her marriage are not an oddity, but rather the manifestation of a societal and cultural institution that is fundamentally structured to limit female autonomy and reflect the dehumanization and mechanization seen through industrial labor.

In Episode Five, titled “Prohibited” and Episode Six, “Intimate”, the Young Woman experiences genuine autonomy for the first time, and Treadwell’s writing style shifts notably from short staccato beats to legato phrases, with imagery becoming less machine-like. The Young Woman begins to speak in a much more relaxed state with the men at the bar, embodying an emotional presence that is missing from prior episodes. The Young Woman sees that the Man is relaxed, easy-going, and unregulated, marking a stark contrast from the Husband and her co-workers at the office. The affair between the Young Woman and the Man represents the Young Woman making a choice rooted in desire rather than duty and serves as an escape or liberation from the societal and cultural containers she is forced into. This surge of independence for the Young Woman touches on the twentieth century anxieties about what is referred to as the “New Woman”, or a woman who is more independent than ever, sexually autonomous but is seen as socially dangerous because of the perceived threat on male authority and the stability of existing social norms, “The New Woman was a definition of identity, helping to explain the process of women finding space in the public arena” (Maloni 880). Therefore, the Young Woman’s affair represents an assertion of female bodily autonomy that was seen as dangerous within the restrictive norms of twentieth century womanhood. Through the Young Woman’s affair, Treadwell aims to portray the concept of sexual freedom as both addictive, yet threatening to reveal how acts of liberation like these made women vulnerable in a society that regulated female behavior.

In Episode Seven, titled “Domestic”, the Husband is found dead and Treadwell strongly implies that the Young Woman participates in his murder, though his death is not explicitly staged according to the script. Then, in Episodes Eight, titled, “The Law” and Episode Nine, “A Machine”, the Young Woman’s rebellion is made public in a spectacle that ends in capital punishment. The Young Woman is silenced as the courtroom, reporters, and journalists speak over her in a chorus creating a wall of sound much like the opening of the play in the office and in the historical Ruth Snyder trial. The execution chamber serves as a literal mechanization of punishment, revealing the media and legal systems as judgement machines that can condemn female deviation from societal expectations to preserve the patriarchal order.

The public spectacle as seen in the Young Woman’s trial and the Ruth Snyder trial demonstrate society's distortion and turning of the female experience into something that can be criticized. This transformation from inner turmoil to public spectacle is embedded in *Machinal*, and the feminist forces that emerge from the play are brought to light through staging choices in addition to the expressionist form that Treadwell utilizes. Director Natalie Abrahams in the Almeida Theatre’s Resource Packet from their 2018 adaptation of Sophia Treadwell’s *Machinal* notes that there is a challenge and creativity required to stage *Machinal* in a way that accurately demonstrates emotional volatility and the Young Woman’s inner turmoil, “The thing that is so tricky about this play is that Sophie Treadwell is so ahead of her time in the way she writes with cinematic jump cuts and blackouts that take you from scene to scene. You go from an office to a tenement apartment and then to a honeymoon suite in a hotel in Florida and then you’re on a maternity ward. We really wanted to serve that sense of propulsion [and asked] how do you create these kind of juggernauts, this woman being pushed from moment to moment?” (Almeida Theatre Resource Packet 13). Production materials like these highlight how expressionist staging

as described by Treadwell is interpreted and adapted in modern productions of *Machinal*, emphasizing how the form Treadwell writes in becomes integral to the feminist core of the play, rather than serving as an experimental stylistic choice. These expressionist techniques serve as the visual and auditory step away from traditional realism in order to critique and expose the truths and effects of a patriarchal society on women's independence and autonomy.

In conclusion, Sophia Treadwell's seminal play *Machinal* serves as both a product of the historical moment from which it was written, and a strong resistance to the social, economic, and cultural pressures that American women in the 1920s faced. She exposes the dehumanization and mechanization of industrial labor and marital expectations through expressionist form, illustrating how women's rebellion was made a societal and cultural example using mass judgement and spectacle. In its condemnation of gendered norms and policed women's autonomy, *Machinal* continues to shape the landscape of contemporary feminist works and modern womanhood while remaining a powerful commentary on systems emerging or reinforced in the twentieth century that served to control women. Ultimately, Sophia Treadwell's works remain influential because they remind audiences that the struggle for self-determination, equality, and autonomy for women still remain relevant and urgent today.

Works Cited:

Almeida Theatre Machinal Resource Pack,

almeida-theatre-assets.s3.amazonaws.com/uploads/2023/01/Machinal-Resource-Pack.pdf

Accessed 8 Dec. 2025.

Coontz, Stephanie. *The Origins of Modern Divorce*. 1st ed., vol. 46, Family Process, 2007.

England, Kim. "Women in the Office: Clerical Work, Modernity and Workplaces." *The*

Routledge Companion to Modernity, Space and Gender, Routledge, Mar. 2018,

www.researchgate.net/publication/326679064_Women_in_the_Office_Clerical_Work_Modernity_and_Workplaces. Accessed 8 Dec. 2025.

Gainor, J. Ellen, et al. *The Norton Anthology of Drama. Volume 2, the Nineteenth Century to the Present*. 3rd ed., W. W. Norton & Company, 2018.

Jones, Jennifer. "In Defense of the Woman: Sophie Treadwell's Machinal." *Modern Drama*,

University of Toronto Press, 3 July 2013, doi.org/10.1353/mdr.1994.0054. Accessed 8 Dec. 2025.

Maloni, Ruby. "DISSONANCE BETWEEN NORMS AND BEHAVIOUR: EARLY 20TH

CENTURY AMERICA'S 'NEW WOMAN.'" *Proceedings of the Indian History*

Congress, vol. 70, 2009, pp. 880–86. JSTOR, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/44147735>.

Accessed 8 Dec. 2025.

Solberg, Janine. *Taking Shorthand for Literacy: Historicizing the Literate Activity of US Women in the Early Twentieth-Century Office | Literacy in Composition Studies*,

licsjournal.org/index.php/LiCS/article/view/787/. Accessed 8 Dec. 2025.

Treadwell, Sophie. *Machinal*. Nick Hern Books, 2018.

Weiss, Katherine. "Sophie Treadwell's 'Machinal': Electrifying the Female Body." *South Atlantic Review*, vol. 71, no. 3, 2006, pp. 4–14. *JSTOR*,

<http://www.jstor.org/stable/20064750>. Accessed 22 Oct. 2025.

"Women at Work: A Century of Industrial Change." *United States Department of Labor Women's Bureau*, Government Printing Office, 1933,

fraser.stlouisfed.org/files/docs/publications/women/b0115_dolwb_1933.pdf. Accessed 8 Dec. 2025.