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Being "New Woman," Being "Everywoman": Analyses of Selected Plays by Sophie Treadwell

MA THESIS / DIPLOMOVÁ PRÁCE

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Declaration

Prohlašuji, že jsem tuto diplomovou práci vypracovala samostatně, že jsem řádně citovala všechny použité prameny a literaturu a že práce nebyla využita v rámci jiného vysokoškolského studia či k získání jiného či stejného titulu.

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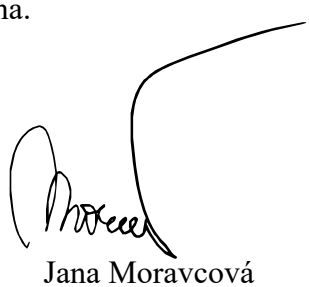

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Permission

Souhlasím se zapůjčením diplomové práce ke studijním účelům.

I have no objections to the MA thesis being borrowed and used to study purposes.

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Abstract (EN)

Questions surrounding women's roles in work, marriage, and institutional life remain as pressing today as they were a century ago. Despite legal advances, women across the globe continue to face unequal pay, limited reproductive rights, coercive domestic dynamics, and institutional forms of silencing. These conditions are not new; they are rooted in historical patterns of gendered subjugation that shaped modern life. The early twentieth-century playwright Sophie Treadwell captured these tensions with startling clarity. Her dramas confront the constraints imposed on women by economic systems, cultural scripts, and the ideological structures of family, law, medicine, or the media. This thesis explores four of Treadwell's plays – *Constance Darrow*, *The Eye of the Beholder*, *Machinal*, and *Ladies Leave* – to reveal how her theatrical work dramatizes the conflict between female autonomy and patriarchal containment. Moving across modes from realism to expressionism and satire, Treadwell interrogates how women are objectified, coerced, and fragmented by marriage, motherhood, work, and desire. *Constance Darrow* and *Machinal* examine the psychological and bodily toll of domestic repression; *The Eye of the Beholder* stages the female self as a series of projections shaped by others' gazes; while *Ladies Leave* offers a rare portrayal of resistance and escape. The analysis draws on feminist theory, existential philosophy, and political critique, engaging with Simone de Beauvoir, Judith Butler, Karl Jaspers, Angela Y. Davis, and others, to examine how Treadwell dramatizes women's struggle for subjectivity. By recovering and reinterpreting these plays, the thesis argues for Treadwell's significance not only as a formally innovative modernist but as a powerful feminist voice whose concerns remain deeply relevant. Her work makes visible the legal, domestic, emotional, and institutional structures that continue to shape and constrain women's lives.

Key Words: Sophie Treadwell, women playwrights, feminist theatre, modern American drama, personal identity, patriarchy and society

Abstrakt (CZ)

Otázky týkající se postavení žen v zaměstnání, manželství a dalších institucích zůstávají dnes stejně aktuální, jako tomu bylo před sto lety. Navzdory legislativním pokrokům ženy po celém světě stále čelí nerovným platovým podmínkám, omezeným reprodukčním právům, nátlaku v soukromém životě a systémovým formám umlčování. Tyto problémy nepředstavují nic nového – jejich kořeny sahají do historických struktur genderových nerovností, které formovaly moderní společnost. Dramatička Sophie Treadwell tato napětí zachytila s překvapivým vhledem. Její dramata tematizují, jak jsou ženy svazovány ekonomickými systémy, kulturními normami i ideologickými strukturami rodiny, práva, medicíny nebo médií. Tato diplomová práce se zaměřuje na čtyři hry Sophie Treadwell – *Constance Darrow*, *The Eye of the Beholder*, *Machinal* a *Ladies Leave* – a ukazuje, jak její dramatická tvorba odhaluje konflikt mezi ženskou autonomií a patriarchální nadvládou. V realistickém, expresionistickém i satirickém módu Treadwell analyzuje objektivizaci žen, jejich kontrolu a fragmentaci v manželství, mateřství, v pracovním životě a v romantických vztazích. Hry *Constance Darrow* a *Machinal* reflektují psychologické a tělesné důsledky domácího útlaku; *The Eye of the Beholder* inscenuje ženskou identitu jako soubor projekcí v očích druhých; a *Ladies Leave* přináší vzácné vyjádření odporu vůči útlaku a osvobození od něj. Analýza čerpá z feministické teorie, existenciální filozofie a institucionální kritiky počínaje Simone de Beauvoir, Judith Butler a Karlem Jaspersem až po Angelu Y. Davis. Práce tvrdí, že Treadwell je třeba chápat nejen jako formálně inovativní modernistku, ale především jako výrazný feministický hlas, jehož témata zůstávají naléhavá dodnes. Její dramata odhalují právní, domácí, emocionální i systémové mechanismy, které nadále utvářejí a omezují život žen.

Klíčová slova: Sophie Treadwell, dramatičky, feministické divadlo, moderní americké drama, osobní identita, patriarchát a společnost

Table of Contents

1. Introduction: Broadway's Bravest Woman

Although Jerry Dickey, in his introduction to Sophie Treadwell's essay "Writing a Play" asserts that she is "widely recognized as one of the most significant women dramatists of the first half of the twentieth century,"[1] her body of work remains largely unknown beyond specialized circles. For those who do encounter the dramatist, Treadwell's name tends to be remembered almost exclusively for her play *Machinal*,[2] an expressionist landmark of modern theatre. Other examples of plays by Treadwell or details on her life and career are often difficult to find without a thorough research. The *Oxford Companion to American Drama*, for example, offers but a few words about the piece – it characterizes it as an expressionist play,[3] however, there is no item on Sophie Treadwell herself,[4] and she is not even listed under "expressionism." The reasons for her historical omission may lie in several factors.

First and most obviously, having written prevalently in the first half of the twentieth century, Treadwell faced a fierce competition on Broadway. The originality, productivity and ferocity of Eugene O'Neill's writing was challenging to measure up against; even more so for a woman. Till this day, publications on modern American drama tend to omit Treadwell's name in favor of Eugene O'Neill or Elmer Rice. Secondly, her plays were rarely a success in her lifetime, and often they did not get produced. This was mostly due to her unwillingness to compromise, which may have contributed to an unnamed critic referring to her as "Broadway's bravest woman."[5] On the other hand, it may have also been a reason why her negotiations with

[1] Sophie Treadwell, "Writing a Play," in *The Routledge Anthology of Women's Theatre Theory and Dramatic Criticism*, ed. Catherine Burroughs and J. Ellen Gainor (London and New York: Routledge, 2023) 222.
[2] The thesis uses the following version: Sophie Treadwell, *Machinal* (London: Royal National Theatre and Nick Hern Books, 1993).
[3] Gerald Martin Bordman, *The Oxford Companion to American Theatre* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004) 406.
[4] Respectively, there is one, but the entry only states, 'TREADWELL, Sophie. See Machinal.' (Bordman: 624).
[5] Jerry Dickey and Miriam López-Rodríguez, *Broadway's Bravest Woman* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2006) 3.

the producers were often unproductive. As Jerry Dickey and Miriam López-Rodríguez observe in their study *Broadway's Bravest Woman*, although for instance *Ladies Leave* by Treadwell and *As Husbands Go* by Rachel Crothers[6] are rather similar in plot, Treadwell's play was a box-office failure, contrary to Crothers'.[7] They argue that this can be ascribed to the fact that Treadwell did not yield either from the urgency of pressing social issues voiced through her play or her demands on the public. "While Treadwell negates the use of American husbands as nothing but mere providers," they explain, "Crothers reaffirms their image, thus securing producers' support."[8] At the same time, Treadwell did not want to settle for other than Broadway productions, which might be the next reason for her authorial disappearance. In theatres outside New York, chances are the producers would have been more open to her ideas; yet it was Broadway Treadwell aimed at and did not want to leave. We can find evidence for this unwillingness to settle outside New York in her correspondence with the Russian drama critic Alexander Koiransky. In his letter to Treadwell from January 7, 1944, he wrote:

> Dearest Sophie, do make up your mind! Do you want your plays to be produced on Broadway? Well, then do not act as Edmond de Goncourt did, in writing beautiful plays, intrinsically obnoxious to the masters of the hour. Or know that you will write them for the pleasure and admiration of a handful of people who do not count.[9]

Dickey and López-Rodríguez attribute her persistence to Treadwell's "more than complex personality,"[10] which prevented her from joining such ensembles as the Provincetown Players, which would be more supportive of her innovative and critical plays. Such approach was adapted for example by Susan Glaspell and proved a successful creative strategy.[11] Finally, the innovative element of Treadwell's dramatic work in itself posed a certain obstacle. Perhaps

[6] Rachel Crothers, *As Husbands Go: A Comedy* (New York: Samuel French, 1931).
[7] Dickey and López-Rodríguez 3.
[8] Dickey and López-Rodríguez 4.
[9] Dickey and López-Rodríguez 3
[10] Dickey and López-Rodríguez 3.
[11] Barbara Ozieblo and Jerry Dickey, *Susan Glaspell and Sophie Treadwell* (London and New York: Routledge, 2008) 18.

paradoxically, her awareness of new literary tendencies and her effort to adapt them to the American stage made her work often illegible for critics and producers, who never knew what to expect. At the same time, her open critique of American society was not well received by audiences.[12] All these factors contributed to the fact that a predominant portion of Treadwell's work still remains undiscovered today.

Despite that, the playwright work of Sophie Treadwell forms an important link in the development of women American drama. As Louis Evelyn Heck-Rabi explains in her summary of Treadwell's achievements:

> Although a failed, and forgotten, dramatist, the plays of Sophie Treadwell fostered the maturation and hybridization of the form of the American stage drama in its subject, structural, and scenic elements Her body of works forms the linking pin between plays by earlier woman dramatists concerned with provincial and domestic issues and later women dramatists who wrote in broader terms of the whole sphere of our society. Sophie Treadwell's plays functioned as agents-for-change in twentieth century American drama.[13]

Moreover, the themes at the core of Treadwell's plays are deeply connected with feminism and still resonate today. Her focus is mostly on women who either challenge the traditionally patriarchal societal system or conform to it, neither of these positions being without complications. Whereas the "New Woman," as Dickey and López-Rodríguez term the first character type[14], has to face disapproval and lack of understanding on most fronts, the "Everywoman" is abused and exploited to a point of hopeless desperation. Such characters remain relatable in the twenty-first century as well; although in the western world there is no longer need to fight for women's suffrage, misogyny is far from uncommon, whether the woman questions the system or complies. A similar observation is made by Judith E. Barlow in her introduction to *Machinal*, where she briefly speculates about the reasons for Treadwell's

[12] Dickey and López-Rodríguez 4.
[13] Louise Evelyn Heck-Rabi, "Sophie Treadwell: Subjects and Structures in 20th Century American Drama" (Dissertation, 1976) 16.
[14] Dickey and López-Rodríguez 9.

dismissal in the past as well as reasons for *Machinal*'s revival. She concludes that "the current scholarly and theatrical interest in Treadwell [...] in the United States is partly due to feminist efforts to write women back into the theatrical history[...], but it also stems from the fact that *Machinal*'s universe is uncomfortably like our own."[15]

However, it is not only the world of *Machinal* that spectators today might find familiar; Treadwell's dramatic repertoire extends far beyond the success of a single play. Her body of work comprises of more than thirty plays[16] that tackle themes no less profound than those explored in *Machinal*. Yet, until recently, the other plays have remained unpublished and much of her work is still difficult to access, archived in form of manuscripts at the University of Arizona.[17] Luckily, first attempts at remedy have already taken place; in 2006, Dickey and López-Rodríguez published three previously unpublished plays in by Treadwell: *Constance Darrow*[18]*, The Eye of the Beholder*,[19] and *Ladies Leave*.[20] In the words of the authors, these plays, "along with knowledge of her previously published and often-anthologized *Machinal*, […] offer a portrait of Treadwell as a dramatist who utilized both conventional and boldly innovative dramatic forms while consistently exploring feminist themes."[21] Nevertheless, the format of the publication does not allow for deeper analyses of these plays; which is what this thesis seeks to rectify.

[15] Sophie Treadwell, *Machinal* ix.
[16] Ozieblo and Dickey 93.
[17] See "Sophie Treadwell Papers," University of Arizona Libraries, https://lib.arizona.edu/special-collections/collections/sophie-treadwell-papers-0.
[18] Dickey and López-Rodríguez 80-132.
[19] Dickey and López-Rodríguez 133-139.
[20] Dickey and López-Rodríguez 140-198.
[21] Dickey and López-Rodríguez 97.

1.1 Themes and Secondary Sources

As indicated above, scholarly engagement with Treadwell's dramatic oeuvre remains uneven. While *Machinal* has gained substantial critical attention and serves as a frequent point of reference, the other plays this thesis focuses on – *Constance Darrow, The Eye of the Beholder,* and *Ladies Leave* – have received but a little academic scrutiny. Nevertheless, Dickey and López-Rodríguez's *Broadway's Bravest Woman*, in addition to publishing these plays, provides a valuable biographical and professional context for these lesser-studied works. Moreover, the book includes excerpts from her prose and, most importantly, her journalistic writing, which represents an essential source for understanding the thematic concerns that recur throughout her plays. Further contextual support can be found in Dickey and Barbara Ozieblo's publication, as well as in Dickey's *Research and Production Sourcebook*,[22] both of which offer useful reference points for in-depth analyses.

These publications broadly agree on the central themes that characterize Treadwell's dramatic output. For the purposes of this thesis, I will synthesize the recurring themes into several key categories that will structure the analyses of the four selected plays. However, these categories should not be understood as rigid or mutually exclusive. On the contrary, many of the identified themes intersect across multiple domains and are addressed as such in the thesis. For instance, the motif of marriage, which is an issue presented in all the analyzed plays, may be examined not only within the context of family dynamics but also through the lenses of patriarchy, women's rights, and the socio-economic structures of capitalism and the "free market."

[22] Jerry Dickey, *Sophie Treadwell: Research and Production Sourcebook* (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 1997).

1.1.1 Feminist Social Critique

To begin with, Treadwell's life and work are inseparably linked to feminist concerns, which must therefore be considered a central focus of her dramatic output. The position of women within a patriarchal society[23] emerges as a recurring theme across all the plays analyzed here. As the title of the thesis suggests, the important notions for the analyses are the terms "New Woman" and the "Everywoman." Both *The Eye of the Beholder* and *Ladies Leave* feature protagonists who embody the figure of the "New Woman" – a symbol of female independence, education, and professional agency. A useful theoretical framework for understanding this concept is provided by Ann Heilmann's *New Woman Fiction: Women Writing First-Wave Feminism*[24] which examines the emergence of the "New Woman" as both a literary archetype and a socio-political phenomenon intertwined with feminist discourse, education reform, and labor rights. As she points out, the new woman is "[t]he harbinger of cultural, social and political transformations"[25] recalling a quote from a 1986 article by Mrs. Morgan-Dockrell "Is the New Woman a Myth?" which notes that

> "[the] very word 'new', strikes as it were the dominant note in the trend of present-day thought . . . The new art, the new literature, the new fiction, the new journalism, the new humour, the new criticism, the new hedonism, the new morality . . . Of all these new facts and entities, the new woman appears . . . to be immeasurably the first in importance, the most abounding in potentialities and in common interest."[26]

To extend this discussion into the realm of theatre and performance, Sue-Ellen Case's *Feminism and Theatre*[27] offers essential insights into feminist approaches to dramatic representation.

Furthermore, Treadwell's affiliation with the Lucy Stone League, an organization advocating for women's rights, particularly the right to retain one's surname after marriage,

[23] Dickey and López-Rodríguez 8.
[24] Ann Heilmann, *New Woman Fiction: Women Writing First-Wave Feminism* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2002).
[25] Heilmann 1.
[26] Heilmann. 1.
[27] Sue-Ellen Case, *Feminism and Theatre* (London: Routledge, 2016).

offers further context for understanding the ideological influences that shaped her work. Relevant historical background on this movement is available in Andrea Moore Kerr's *Lucy Stone: Speaking Out for Equality*.[28] For grounding the discussion of domestic abuse and coercive control, Vivian C. Fox, "Historical Perspectives on Violence Against Women,"[29] and the UN Declaration on the Elimination of Violence Against Women[30] will be referenced.

1.1.2 The Family as Social Institution

The second major thematic concern in Treadwell's work centers on family dynamics and related psychological motifs. Dickey and López-Rodríguez provide an in-depth examination of how Treadwell's personal experiences, particularly her complex relationship with her parents, shaped the psychological profiles and interpersonal tensions within her characters.[31] Reflecting her own upbringing, the plays analyzed in this thesis consistently feature a domineering mother figure, an absent father, and a resulting ambivalence toward marriage. These familial configurations, according to Dickey and López-Rodríguez, contributed to a persistent sense of "faultiness" [32] in Treadwell herself; it is also a feeling that is often mirrored in her female protagonists.

Closely tied to both feminist and familial concerns is the recurring tension between personal identity and societal expectations or gendered stereotypes. This conflict frequently intersects with Treadwell's exploration of the fragility of the human condition, particularly

[28] Andrea Moore Kerr, *Lucy Stone* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1992).
[29] Vivian C. Fox, "Historical Perspectives on Violence against Women," *Journal of International Women's Studies* 4, no. 1 (November 2002): 15–34, https://vc.bridgew.edu/jiws/vol4/iss1/2.
[30] United Nations General Assembly, "Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women," A/RES/48/104 § (1993), https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/declaration-elimination-violence-against-women..
[31] Dickey and López-Rodríguez 5.
[32] Dickey and López-Rodríguez 7.

through themes of bodily and mental vulnerability. In *Machinal*, as the protagonist's thoughts are often stated out loud in a staccato manner, the inner turmoil of the protagonist is made explicit. For instance, Episode One ends in her disjointed reflections on the day's events; which signal her evident suffering by the demands of the modern urban way of life. She breaks down in murmuring, "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."[33] All through episodes One to Four, the protagonist's psyche seems to be deteriorating. In a less direct way, we can witness a similar process of decomposition in the final act of *Constance Darrow*, after a year of her marriage, having been submitted to her husband and forced into an abortion. Allusions to her declining health can be spotted in her mother's comments, "I'm going downstairs to the drug store and get her an iron tonic. She looks awful!"[34] as well as in her own desperate exclamation, "I can't think! It seemed as though I had some – rights – I –"[35]

Finally, her plays typically subvert the traditional notion of "home" as a safe or nurturing space. Instead, the domestic sphere is portrayed as a site of confinement and danger – a metaphorical cage or trap. This unsettling portrayal is especially prominent in *Machinal* and *Constance Darrow*, where the home becomes emblematic of repression and existential threat. Nevertheless, *Ladies Leave* offers an additional perspective on the notion, linking it to the general society's expectations about what a home means for men. As seen in both the character of Phil, the protagonist's lover, and her husband, Mr. Powers, they both view it as only complete with an in-house wife. Once Powers loses his wife, he admits, "I was home here – before."[36] Similarly, after the protagonist stopped being sexually interested in him, Phil exclaims, "I

[33] Treadwell, *Machinal* 11.
[34] Treadwell, *Constance Darrow*, in Dickey and López-Rodríguez 119.
[35] Treadwell, *Constance Darrow* 131.
[36] Treadwell, *Ladies Leave*, in Dickey and López-Rodríguez 186.

haven't got a home. Got an apartment!"[37] Catherine Lavender's notes on "The Cult of Domesticity"[38] frames the nineteenth-century domestic ideology, while Lisa Keister's *Inequality: A Contemporary Approach to Race, Class, and Gender* offers modern sociological data on marital power.

1.1.3 Cultural Logics of Capitalism and Consumerism

Another significant thematic thread running through Treadwell's work is her ongoing critique of capitalism. As Dickey and López-Rodríguez observe,

> Treadwell's critique of American capitalism, especially as represented by the rise of the large corporation had been long-standing. In her first Broadway play, *Gringo*, Treadwell had condemned the ill effects of American corporate interests in Mexico, a chord she would repeatedly strike in her journalistic essays. Two of her finest plays, *Machinal* and *Hope for a Harvest*, similarly portray the mechanization, disillusionment, and even helplessness of the individual in a corporate-controlled society.[39]

In addition, Treadwell seems to have identified the entanglement of business, finance, and the systemic oppression of women, today well elaborated in many feminist works. The issues of capitalist power to weaken women's position in society is evident not only in *Machinal*, but also in *Constance Darrow*, implicitly in *The Eye of the Beholder*, and most prominently in *Ladies Leave*. These plays suggest that Treadwell recognized and critiqued the economic injustices embedded in capitalist structures, particularly as they affect women, well before such critiques became commonplace in academic and socio-political discourse. Her work anticipates concerns that are now addressed more explicitly in contemporary texts such as Martha E.

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[37] Treadwell, *Ladies Leave* 194.
[38] Catherine Lavender, "Notes on the Cult of Domesticity and True Womanhood," Archive.org, 1998, https://web.archive.org/web/20141028040827/https://csivc.csi.cuny.edu/history/files/lavender/386/truewoman.pdf.
[39] Dickey and López-Rodríguez 34.

Gimenez' "Capitalism and the Oppression of Women: Marx Revisited"[40] or Angela Y. Davies' "Women and Capitalism: Dialectics of Oppression and Liberation," which concludes that "women's liberation movement may assume its well-earned and unique place among the current grave-diggers of capitalism."[41]

Moreover, Treadwell also relentlessly exposes how society treats women as objects. This is most prominently seen in *Ladies Leave,* where both the protagonist's husband and her lover work for a women magazine and consequently think of women as product-buyers, therefore stereotyped objects seeking improvement of their façade. A theoretical framework that resonates with Treadwell's insights into the commodification and objectification of women can be offered in Jean Baudrillard's *The Consumer Society: Myths and Structures*,[42] especially Chapter Eight, "The Finest Consumer Object: The Body." Theodor Reik's popular psychoanalytic essay then provide the consumer-psychology angle (love marketed like cosmetics) in *Ladies Leave*. A different perspective on commodification of woman bodies is offered by Ann Jones' *Women Who Kill,* particularly relevant for *Machinal*, which links sensationalist press coverage to the commercial exploitation of female deviance. The connection of these texts to the plays underscores the enduring relevance and prescience of Treadwell's critique, highlighting the ways her dramatic work continues to speak to contemporary feminist and economic debates.

[40] Martha E. Gimenez, "Capitalism and the Oppression of Women: Marx Revisited," *Science & Society* 69, no. 1 (January 2005): 11–32.
[41] Angela Y. Davis, "Women and Capitalism: Dialectics of Oppression and Liberation," in *The Angela Y. Davis Reader*, ed. Joy James (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 1998) 175.
[42] Jean Baudrillard, *The Consumer Society: Myths and Structures* (Los Angeles: Sage, 1970).

1.1.4 Modernity, Acceleration, and Change

Finally, the thematic strands discussed above can be viewed as converging under the broader umbrella of modernity and transformation. These themes are evident not only in the content of Treadwell's plays but also in their formal innovations. David Krasner's *A Companion to Twentieth-Century American Drama*[43] and Brenda Murphy's *The Cambridge Companion to American Women Playwrights*[44] offer valuable overviews of these two dimensions: contextualizing both the evolving themes and the experimental forms that characterize much of early twentieth-century American drama.

Famously, Treadwell's work is frequently associated with expressionism, particularly *Machinal*, which remains her most critically acclaimed play. However, as Dickey and López-Rodríguez caution, "to remember Treadwell solely as an expressionist playwright discredits the range and complexity of her contributions and provides a false picture of her career as a dramatist."[45] The experimental qualities of *Machinal* are explored in depth in Julia A. Walker's *Expressionism and Modernism in the American Theatre*,[46] while Katherine Weiss's essay "Sophie Treadwell's Machinal: Electrifying the Female Body"[47] offers a focused feminist reading of the play's formal strategies. The critical frameworks provided by both scholars not only enrich interpretations of *Machinal*, but also open new avenues for analyzing *The Eye of the Beholder*, a play which, while largely overlooked, exhibits its own experimental qualities and could easily lend itself to expressionist staging.

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[43] David Krasner, *A Companion to Twentieth-Century American Drama* (Malden, Ma: Blackwell Pub, 2005).
[44] Brenda Murphy, *The Cambridge Companion to American Women Playwrights* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).
[45] Dickey and Rodríguez 96.
[46] Julia A. Walker, *Expressionism and Modernism in the American Theatre* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005).
[47] Katherine Weiss, "Sophie Treadwell's 'Machinal': Electrifying the Female Body," *South Atlantic Review* 71, no. 3 (2006): 4–14.

At the center of Treadwell's dramaturgy lies a profound engagement with the idea of transformation. Her belief in "the ability of the individual to provoke change,"[48] a principle she adopted from Karl Jaspers' *Philosophy of Existence*,[49] is central to the motivations of many of her protagonists and constitutes a recurring theme across her body of work. This notion reinforces her commitment to portraying personal transformation as a form of resistance against societal constraints. Additionally, a rare and invaluable insight into Treadwell's own theoretical perspective can be found in *The Routledge Anthology of Women's Theatre Theory and Dramatic Criticism*, which includes her above-mentioned essay "Writing a Play." This piece offers a unique glimpse into her understanding of playwriting as both an artistic and philosophical endeavor.

1.2 Approach and Structure

Drawing these threads together, this thesis seeks to broaden the discussion around Treadwell's oeuvre by examining a selection of her lesser-known plays, including *Constance Darrow*, *The Eye of the Beholder*, and *Ladies Leave*, along with her best-known dramatic piece *Machinal*. All these works weave together Treadwell's personal experiences and journalistic insights to explore themes that remain strikingly relevant today and as such allow for investigating the broader scope of her contributions to American drama. The thematic concerns underpinning this analysis were explored in detail in the preceding section; what follows is a concise synthesis of those key areas.

In *Broadway's Bravest Woman*, Dickey and Miriam López-Rodríguez highlight how Treadwell's female protagonists often oscillate between two archetypal positions: the meek

[48] Dickey and López-Rodríguez 16.
[49] Karl Jaspers, *Philosophy of Existence* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1997).

"Everywoman," who silently suffers in the patriarchal system, and the unconventional "New Woman," who openly breaks down societal conventions.[50] Through these character types, Treadwell engages with themes significant to her work as well as to her personal life and philosophy, including those of the position of women in a patriarchal society, family influences on an individual, critique of capitalism, and impacts of modernity on everyday life. The aim of this thesis is to analyze how the above-mentioned plays navigate these issues, arguing both for their historical and contemporary relevance.

While it is true that Treadwell's work strongly foregrounds women's issues – and given both her social activism and personal experiences, these concerns clearly lie at the heart of her ideological motivations – her thematic scope extends beyond feminism alone. One significant analytical framework that this thesis does not adopt, but which offers considerable potential, is that of Latino/a studies. Given Sophie Anita Treadwell's cultural background – her father was partially of Mexican descent and raised in Mexico – her relationship to questions of racial and ethnic identity was complex.[51] As Dickey and López-Rodríguez explain, "Sophie grew up in a family environment that encouraged her to bury her Mexican ancestry, an issue she treats openly in her novel *Hope for a Harvest*."[52] Exploring this novel in conjunction with culturally inflected references in her dramatic work, such as *Gringo*[53] or *His Luck, La Cachucha*[54] could yield valuable insights into questions of identity, heritage, and cultural erasure in her writing.

Another potentially fruitful area of analysis might be found in her portrayal of cultural experience across geographical spaces she frequently inhabited: the rural West and the urban

[50] Dickey and López-Rodríguez 9.
[51] Dickey and López-Rodríguez 25.
[52] Dickey and López-Rodríguez 25.
[53] Sophie Treadwell, *Gringo* (1922, unpublished play manuscript, Sophie Treadwell Papers: 1905–1969), Special Collections, University of Arizona Libraries, Tucson, AZ.
[54] Sophie Treadwell, *La Cachucha* (1915–1918, unpublished play manuscript, Sophie Treadwell Papers: 1905–1969), Special Collections, University of Arizona Libraries, Tucson, AZ.

metropolis. As Dickey and López-Rodríguez note, her travelling between the two areas – particularly the Californian farm she grew up in and New York City – left a palpable mark on her work, reflected in plays such as *Highway*[55] and *Hope for a Harvest*,[56] which engage with agrarian settings, in contrast to the urban landscapes depicted in the works analyzed in this thesis.

Additionally, it is true that some scholars have questioned the artistic quality of Treadwell's lesser-known works.[57] However, it seems rather one-sided to assess the value of her work on the basis of its contemporary reception or commercial success. Limiting discussions of her contributions to theatre to *Machinal* alone seems reductive. This thesis contends that her broader body of work presents radical and relevant ideas that merit closer scholarly examination. By shedding light on Treadwell's underexplored plays, this thesis hopes to contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of Sophie Treadwell's impact on American theatre and feminist discourse.

As outlined above, the primary methodological framework employed in this thesis is a feminist critical approach. However, certain aspects of the analysis also call for the integration of complementary theoretical perspectives. Notably, gender studies provide a valuable foundation for examining societal expectations placed on the protagonists, as well as the gendered stereotypes and biases they confront. In this context, Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* and Judith Butler's theoretical work offer insightful tools for articulating the questions that Treadwell's drama frequently poses. In addition, psychoanalytic theory is occasionally drawn upon, particularly in relation to Treadwell's philosophical views shaped by

[55] Sophie Treadwell, *Highway* (1944, unpublished play manuscript, Sophie Treadwell Papers: 1905–1969), Special Collections, University of Arizona Libraries, Tucson, AZ.
[56] Treadwell, Sophie. *Hope for a Harvest: A Play in Three Acts*. (1941, Sophie Treadwell Papers: 1905–1969), Special Collections, University of Arizona Libraries, Tucson, AZ.
[57] Dickey and López-Rodríguez 4.

Karl Jaspers[58] and Theodor Reik,[59] which are manifested in the plays in themes such as parental influence, manipulation, and self-transformation. Basic observations from Jaspers' psychiatric studies[60] or Reik's developments of Freudian psychoanalysis offer further interpretive depth.

Structurally, the thesis provides a detailed analyses for each of the plays. The first play to be analyzed is *Constance Darrow*, the earliest of the selected works. Written between 1908 and 1911, a period marked by significant personal transitions in Treadwell's life,[61] the play reflects her experiences of navigating the demands of caring for her ill mother, engaging in a developing courtship with her future husband, and pursuing a professional career. Thematically, the play is preoccupied with the trap marriage can become for a woman, but also with the choices a woman is or is not allowed to make in a marriage; whether they concern her career or, for instance, childbearing. Ultimately, it serves as a stark reflection of the societal treatment of women in the early decades of the twentieth century. The chapter on this play will be divided into several thematic subcategories: marriage (addressing the manipulative, possessive and violent aspects of it), women and work, and free will in terms of capitalism.

The second play to be analyzed is *The Eye of the Beholder*, a one-act experimental piece copyrighted in 1919.[62] This play provides four perspectives on a woman, presented by four different characters, ultimately claiming none of the outside viewers is able to comprehend her in her complexity. It is an important milestone in Treadwell's search for innovative dramatic expressions; although not a fully expressionist play, it showcases a daring move towards the style later polished in *Machinal*. On stage, the protagonist is never portrayed as her true self,

[58] Dickey and López-Rodríguez 16.
[59] Theodor Reik, *Of Love and Lust. On the Psychoanalysis of Romantic and Sexual Emotions* (New York: The Noonday Press, 1957), https://archive.org/stream/in.ernet.dli.2015.60891/2015.60891.Of-Love-And-Lust-On-The-Psychoanalysis-Of-Romantic-And-Sexual-Emotions_djvu.txt.
[60] Karl Jaspers, *Philosophy of Existence* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1997).
[61] Dickey and López-Rodríguez 72.
[62] Dickey and López-Rodríguez 74.

but herself through the eyes of other characters. This is reflected not only in the dialogues, but, innovatively, also in the costumes, each suited to the idea of Mrs. Wayne in the mind of each of the other characters. Sadly, as with many other plays by Treadwell, *Beholder* has never been performed; although challenging in production, the result could be, presumably, impressive. The subdivision of the chapter follows the internal logic of the play itself: each section examines how a pair of characters perceives the protagonist. The first part explores the perspectives of Marcia's husband and her lover, while the second turns to the views of his mother and Marcia's own mother, each pair forming the basis of a separate subchapter.

Chronologically, the next play is *Machinal*. First performed on Broadway in 1928,[63] it is considered Treadwell's magnum opus. The reasons are several: it undoubtedly experienced most popularity at the time of its release as well as of its revival in 1990s;[64] the scale of this nine-act allows for a deeper immersion into the protagonist psychology; and the expressionist set, along with music and sound effects produce a captivating impact on the audience. A part of the analysis of this particular play is devoted to the expressionist devices and the effects they produce. Furthermore, thematically, the thesis focuses on topics underdeveloped in the other plays: mechanization of one's life and the fight of an individual against institutions. Underlying these topics is a sustained interrogation and the ultimate revelation of the unsettling potential in the figure of the "Everywoman."

The last play to be analyzed, *Ladies Leave,* premiered only a year after *Machinal.*[65] Inevitably, contrasts and connections were made between the two plays, leading some to view it as *Machinal* in reverse[66] and a very lukewarm critical reception at the time. Nevertheless, *Ladies Leave* should stand independently as neither in form and not quite in themes does it copy

[63] Treadwell, *Machinal* back cover page.
[64] Treadwell, *Machinal* back cover page.
[65] Dickey and Lopez-Rodríguez xiv.
[66] Dickey and Lopez-Rodríguez 77.

Machinal. First of all, the play is not a tragedy at all; rather, as the title suggests, it is a "Modern Comedy of Morals."[67] Indeed, morals, especially false morality is at the center of Treadwell's interest here. Therefore, after a brief introduction and context for the play, one subchapter will be devoted to the hypocritical nature of morality in consumer society, both women and men. The next part will evolve around the topics of modernity and change, and the notion of a "home" in this context.

[67] Treadwell, *Ladies Leave* 140.

2. *Constance Darrow*: Staged Autobiography

Despite Treadwell being often associated with expressionist drama, her play *Constance Darrow* clearly aligns more closely with the conventions of realism. As Dickey and López-Rodríguez note,

> Although Treadwell would never claim, as her contemporary Rachel Crothers once did, that realism is "the highest form of dramatic writing," it would be irresponsible to ignore that a major portion of her dramatic output remains within the "well-made" realistic mode.[68]

Constance Darrow is unmistakably part of this tradition. Written between 1908 and 1911, the play draws heavily on Treadwell's personal struggles during this formative period of her life. She began writing it while working as a typist for Helena Modjeska,[69] a position she took after a series of setbacks in her early career, including unsuccessful attempts at performing in vaudeville and a short-lived teaching job.[70] Her work on the play continued after she moved to San Francisco in the summer of 1908 to care for her ailing mother. Most likely, to help cover household expenses, her mother also took on a small job;[71] a significant act due to its stigmatizing nature at the time. Its social implications – challenging the expectations that the employed child would naturally be the provider of the family as well as the potential issue drawn from the fact that the child is a woman – are addressed in the play. Later in 1908, Treadwell also met her future husband, a well-known sports-reporter William O. McGeehan. This encounter projected most heavily on the play; her anxieties about whether a woman could sustain both a marriage and a career became a central theme in *Constance Darrow.* However, they also had a profound emotional impact on herself, as observed by Dickey and López-Rodríguez. "The ultimate result of [Treadwell's inner turmoil at the prospect of a married life],"

[68] Dickey and López-Rodríguez 71.
[69] Dickey and López-Rodríguez 69.
[70] Dickey and López-Rodríguez 69.
[71] Dickey and López-Rodríguez 72.

they say, "was a significant loss of confidence and a brief stay in a sanitarium in 1910."[72] As Dickey and López Rodríguez observe, she was deeply concerned by the possibility of becoming the weak figure she saw in her mother, helpless and fully dependent;[73] yet another "Everywoman." Her nervous breakdown occurred just six months after her wedding. The following year, in 1911, the play – then retitled *High Cost* – was completed and signed under the name Sophie Treadwell McGeehan, one of only two plays in which she used her married name. These experiences are deeply embedded in the fabric of the play. It could be said, albeit with some degree of exaggeration, that the work offers a strikingly candid portrayal of a pivotal chapter in Treadwell's own life.

The play unfolds over the course of one year in a single kitchenette apartment and is structured in three acts, each marking a stage in the protagonist's psychological and relational transformation. The first act introduces Constance as a self-assured working woman supporting her widowed mother. Initially aligned with the "New Woman" ideal, she begins to yield to traditional domestic expectations following pressure from her fiancé, Ben Collier, who insists on marriage and ultimately rejects her desire to keep working after being married. This marks the beginning of her lean into the "Everywoman" role. By Act 2, Constance is married, unemployed, and increasingly subordinated to Ben's patronizing authority. Her former self-confidence erodes as she tries to impress her old employer with domestic skills and offers patronizing advice to her neighbor Nan, a single working woman who voices skepticism about marriage and housework. Constance's growing emotional fragility is underscored when her pregnancy is revealed and quickly dismissed by Ben, who pressures her into terminating it. In the final act, Constance's psychological decline is clear. She is physically weakened and emotionally subdued. When her former job is unexpectedly offered back to her, she experiences

[72] Dickey and López-Rodríguez 72.
[73] Dickey and López-Rodríguez 5.

a brief resurgence of hope. However, Ben, perceiving her renewed ambition as a threat to his authority, blocks her at every turn, finally resorting to physical intimidation and the threat of abandonment. The play ends with Constance silenced and resigned to domestic confinement.

Constance Darrow is yet another one of Treadwell's plays that has never been staged. Apart from the factors outlined in the introduction of this thesis, the play's realist framework may have further contributed to its marginalization. While essentially a tragedy, the play contains several scenes that verge on the comedic, which may have complicated its reception or staging. This is particularly evident in the second act, where certain domestic situations, despite their emotional urgency for Constance, are likely to elicit laughter from the audience. One such instance occurs during the dinner preparations, when Constance burns the meal and hastily replaces it with food taken from her neighbors, who ultimately save the evening. These tonal shifts, however, are not necessarily flaws but may be understood in light of Treadwell's own artistic criteria. In a 1923 note, she outlined the essential components of an effective play, which were "unity of theme, freedom from all extraneous matter, veracity of motive, contrast of characters, clearness of exposition, probability of incident, logical coherence, swift movement, culminating intensity of interest."[74] In this context, the moments of comic relief can be seen as purposeful contrasts, amplifying the play's emotional stakes and contributing to the dramatic rhythm Treadwell valued.

Before turning to an in-depth thematic analysis, a brief comment on the play's title should be added. Both titles – the original *Constance Darrow*, and the later version *High Cost* – are meaningful in light of the play's content. While Dickey and López-Rodríguez chose to publish the play under its original title, Treadwell's decision to rename it *High Cost* arguably

[74] Sophie Treadwell, "Russian Theory of Acting," typed notes, ca. 1923, MS 124, box 2, folder 13, UALSC. Quoted in Dickey and López-Rodríguez 71.

strengthens the autobiographical dimension. The nervous breakdown she suffered in 1910 offers a poignant parallel to the emotional and psychological decline Constance experiences in Act 3. The notions of "probability of incident" and the inevitable "culmination" of the narrative, as Treadwell emphasized in her 1923 reflections on dramatic structure, seem both anticipated and underscored in the title *High Cost*. Dickey and López-Rodríguez claim that the original title more directly reflects one of the play's central concerns – the transformation of a woman's identity and autonomy through marriage. However, this assertion is open to question. The revised title conveys this very theme as well, while also suggesting a critical stance: that the personal cost of married life may be too great. In this sense, *High Cost* not only captures the play's emotional and narrative trajectory, but also deepens its feminist implications. For the sake of clarity, this thesis adheres to the title used by Dickey and López-Rodríguez; however, a disclaimer seems appropriate.

2.1 Marriage as the Crisis of Female Subjectivity

In line with the analytical framework outlined in the introduction, marriage emerges as the central thematic concern of the play. In Treadwell's portrayal, marriage is not only a social expectation, or perhaps even a societal demand, but also a deeply oppressive institution. As was mentioned above, the play is driven by her personal anxieties about the potential loss of her own identity within marriage. At various points, these concerns are voiced directly by the characters, such as Mr. Mathews in Act 2, who openly comments on the dispossessing nature of the marital bond.[75]

The impact of marriage on a woman's identity is portrayed as both profound and far-reaching, touching multiple aspects of a woman's life. One of Treadwell's primary concerns

[75] Treadwell, *Constance Darrow* 72.

appears to be the legal ramifications of the marital union. Within the framework of the period, a married woman was effectively subsumed under her husband's authority: he was the one to make decisions, including those affecting her autonomy as an individual. Choices related to career fulfillment or reproductive rights were, in practice, determined by the husband.[76] Even seemingly cosmetic matters, such as the loss of a woman's birth surname, carry symbolic weight in this context, as they are emblematic of the broader erasure of identity. Beyond legal and symbolic dimensions, the play also underscores another serious implication of marriage, perceptible at the climactic moments of each act: the threat of domestic violence. This includes not only physical abuse, but also psychological coercion used to manipulate women into submission. Treadwell's concern with such mechanisms of control recurs across all four plays analyzed in this thesis. It is also a theme of enduring relevance, as domestic violence remains a pressing issue today, which is, sadly, often minimized by policymakers and met with skepticism or blame by the broader public.

2.1.1 Symbolic and Material Possession in the Marital Bond

The possessive aspect of marriage is portrayed in the play in three domains. First, as previously noted, the idea of a woman losing her sense of self in marriage is already present in the symbolic weight of a surname change. In the early twentieth century, it was common and largely unquestioned for a woman to abandon her birth name in favor of her husband's upon marriage.[77] Treadwell herself initially also adopted her husband's surname; this phase of her life, however, appears to have been brief. While *Constance Darrow* was copyrighted in 1911, along with another early play, *The Settlement*, under the name Sophie Treadwell McGeehan, her journalistic work from 1914 onward was again published under Sophie Treadwell. The

[76] Fox 27.
[77] Moore Kerr 41.

message behind this reversion clearly echoes the example of Lucy Stone, who, according to Kerr, was "adamant [in the] insistence upon retaining her birth name."[78] Although at the time of writing the play, the Lucy Stone League was yet to be founded, its mission was clearly a crucial issue for Treadwell even then. It is powerfully expressed not only in *Constance Darrow*, but also in *Ladies Leave*, particularly through the characters of Zizi and Mrs. White. In Constance Darrow, the protagonist's discontent is visible in her response to Mr. Mathews' casual remark about her name change,

> MR. MATHEWS: [You're] married – let me see – about two months now, isn't it? You should have forgotten you ever had another name by this time.
> CONSTANCE: I have to wait a little longer. *(Uneasily.)*[79]

The bracketed stage direction reveals her discomfort, suggesting that, for Constance, the loss of her name is not merely procedural but deeply personal. This alludes to the tension between a woman's autonomy and societal and bureaucratic rigidity of the period. Although there was "no law that requires a wife to take her husband's name,"[80] as Stone noted back in her lifetime already, it was still expected, and sometimes, painfully demanded. Conditions had changed but a little by Treadwell's time. Women who chose to retain their maiden names after marriage often faced bureaucratic challenges, an example of which can be the case of Ruth Hale who, in 1921, applied for a U.S. passport under her maiden name; which was refused by the State Department, insisting on issuing the passport in her husband's name (an incident eventually leading her to found the Lucy Stone League).[81] These "New Women," such as Stone or Hale, who voiced their concerns against unequal social norms, can themselves be viewed as

[78] Moore Kerr 95.
[79] Treadwell, *Constance Darrow* 106.
[80] Moore Kerr 203.
[81] Kevin Fitzpatrick, "Ruth Hale the Iconoclast," Algonquin Round Table, April 25, 2022, https://algonquinroundtable.org/ruth-hale-the-iconoclast/.

"discursive marker[s] of rebellion,"[82] as Heilmann defines the term. Challenging the patriarchal ideal of womanhood,[83] their effort could be perceived as highly suspect.

Another possessive dimension of marriage depicted in the play can be seen in Ben's control over his wife's career choices. Constance is not necessarily portrayed as overtly career-driven, though in the opening scenes of Act 1, she could be interpreted as such. However, it soon becomes apparent that she is susceptible to Ben's idealized vision of domestic life and can be persuaded to conform to it. By the second and third acts, though, it is clear that Constance longs for her former job. This longing, however, is not rooted in ambition or a desire for professional success, nor is it purely driven by economic necessity, despite her occasional references to financial concerns. Rather, it stems from her existential need to "have something,"[84] as she expresses, or "to be somebody […], to be a human being."[85] The ability to reclaim one area of autonomy represents a potential counterbalance to the overwhelming control Ben exerts over every other aspect of her life. Her connection to work thus becomes the one domain in which she continues to resist, and through which she departs most clearly from the "Everywoman" archetype. In the final act, she directly challenges Ben's authority, rejecting his reasoning and manipulative tactics. It is only when he resorts to coercion, both physical and psychological, that Constance is ultimately defeated and relinquishes her last claim to independence.

Thirdly, *Constance Darrow* offers a powerful commentary on women's reproductive rights and, as Dickey and López-Rodríguez note, serves as a testament to Treadwell's thematic "exploration of women's maternal roles."[86] In the early twentieth century, a husband's legal and

[82] Heilmann 2.
[83] Lavender 2.
[84] Treadwell, *Constance Darrow* 130.
[85] Treadwell, *Constance Darrow* 126.
[86] Dickey and López-Rodríguez 73.

social authority extended to his wife's body; reproductive decisions were largely his to make, with the wife's wishes often disregarded. Both the legal and medical institutions were deeply entrenched in patriarchal structures, leaving women with little agency over matters as personal as pregnancy and childbirth. In *Machinal*, Treadwell depicts a woman being coerced into motherhood, which was a common experience at the time.[87] In contrast, *Constance Darrow* portrays a far less frequently documented but equally oppressive scenario: a forced abortion. The scarcity of such accounts in historical records is largely attributable to the illegality and heavy stigma surrounding abortion, as well as to the widespread belief that marital relations, even when coercive, were private and beyond public scrutiny. Available sources suggest that one of the most common reasons for a husband to pressure his wife into terminating a pregnancy was financial hardship,[88] which is also the case of Ben and Constance in the play. With birth control largely inaccessible or unreliable, abortion was often seen as a last measure, one that some husbands demanded even against their wives' will. In this context, *Constance Darrow* gives a unique perspective on a seldom-addressed facet of reproductive oppression, foregrounding the emotional and ethical costs borne by women with little control over their own bodies.

2.1.2 Coercion, Gaslighting, and the Gendered Dynamics of Control

In addition to the topics discussed above, *Constance Darrow* is notable for its bold depiction of the abusive dimensions of marriage. Domestic violence remained a deeply taboo subject in the early twentieth century, and, as Vivian C. Fox notes in "Historical Perspectives on Violence Against Women," "[t]here is a strong consensus among many historians of women

[87] Jessica Ravitz, "The Surprising History of Abortion in the U.S.," CNN, June 27, 2016, https://edition.cnn.com/2016/06/23/health/abortion-history-in-united-states/index.html.
[88] Ravitz https://edition.cnn.com/2016/06/23/health/abortion-history-in-united-states/index.html.

that it was not until the 1970's that effective action discrediting violence against women was achieved."[89] Social stigma, inadequate legal protections, and prevailing beliefs that domestic issues were private matters contributed to the chronic underreporting of abuse and the lack of prosecution for perpetrators. As a result, surviving documentation of domestic violence from this period is limited[90] and often centered on high-profile cases in which the victim retaliated.[91]

Treadwell's engagement with this theme is most palpable in *Machinal*, which draws inspiration from the real-life case of Ruth Snyder, a woman who murdered her abusive husband. A similar trajectory is found in Susan Glaspell's *Trifles*, based on the case of Margaret Hossack, who was likewise accused of killing her husband. These dramatizations of gendered violence offered a radical critique of the domestic sphere at a time when such narratives were rarely acknowledged.[92]

It is important to clarify that this thesis views violence in accordance with the United Nations Declaration on the Elimination of Violence Against Women, which states that violence includes

> [a]ny act […] that results in […] physical, sexual or psychological harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty whether occurring in public or in private life.[93]

While *Machinal* emphasizes the psychological and sexual pressures endured by the Young Woman, *Constance Darrow* focuses primarily on the psychological manipulation, closely aligned with what is today commonly described as "gaslighting," and coercion. Though

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[89] Fox 27.
[90] For an overview see Carolyn B. Ramsey, "Domestic Violence and State Intervention in the American West and Australia, 1860-1930," *Indiana Law Journal* 86, no. 1 (2011): 186–254, https://www.repository.law.indiana.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1030&context=ilj.
[91] As an illustration can serve the Mae Talbot case, see Carolyn B. Ramsey, "A Diva Defends Herself: Gender and Domestic Violence in an Early Twentieth-Century Headline Trial," *Saint Louis University Law Journal* 55 (2011): 1347–68, https://scholar.law.colorado.edu/faculty-articles/175.
[92] Despite that, both *Machinal* and *Trifles* were successful upon their premieres and praised by critics (See Ozieblo and Dickey 57-70 and 146-167.)
[93] United Nations General Assembly, *Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women*.

physical violence is never depicted explicitly, the presence of physical threat becomes increasingly tangible as the play progresses. Each act follows a recurring structural pattern, escalating in a conflict between Constance and Ben. In the first act, Ben's manipulative tendencies are subtly introduced. By Act 2, this manipulation becomes more overt, with the stage directions hinting at physical menace. Finally, in Act 3, Ben's control reaches its peak as he physically prevents Constance from leaving the apartment and threatens to abandon her, effectively asserting complete dominance. An analysis of these three climactic moments sheds light on Treadwell's ground-breaking portrayal of intimate relationships on the early twentieth-century stage.

A closer examination of the conclusion of Act 1 reveals the early signs of coercive dynamics in Constance and Ben's relationship. At this point, they are still an unmarried couple, and up to their dispute, Ben does not exhibit any overtly abusive behavior. He appears attentive, offering to help with domestic chores, writing poetry for Constance, admiring her singing, and showing a general willingness to accommodate her views. However, this demeanor begins to shift the moment the topic of marriage arises. His initial impatience quickly escalates into frustration, as captured in his abrupt questioning,

> BEN: When are we going to have anything definitely settled?
> CONSTANCE: Why, it is settled, Ben!
> BEN: But when? When? I want to know when!
> CONSTANCE: Ben, dear, I told you just as soon as we can see our way clear.
> BEN: I can't endure this much longer, I tell you.[94]

When Constance suggests that their relationship is satisfactory as it stands, Ben begins to apply psychological pressure. "It hurts me to see you going on working in an old office. […] You ought to have a home and someone to take care of you,"[95] he says, subtly reframing her independence as undesirable. This tactic begins to destabilize her confidence in her own

[94] Treadwell, *Constance Darrow* 93.
[95] Treadwell, *Constance Darrow* 93.

decisions. Despite the fact that these feelings are not Constance's own, Ben insists on convincing her, "You mustn't bear it!"[96]

It is worth noting that Constance is not categorically opposed to the idea of marriage. A part of her appears to be seduced by the romantic ideal of the "Everywoman" archetype – a life of domesticity, love, and stability. Her hesitation is rather rooted in reason; she is acutely aware of the emotional and financial challenges that come with marriage. As she explains, the shift in relational dynamics that occurs once partners live together may bring more than just logistical changes,

> BEN: […] You know the old saying, two can live cheaper than one.
> CONSTANCE: But it isn't true.
> BEN: *(Teasing.)* How do you know? Have you been married before, Miss Darrow?
> CONSTANCE: I have supported two.
> BEN: But the two weren't a married two. You've left love out and that's the alchemy.
> CONSTANCE: *(Earnestly.)* That is just what I have been trying to tell you.[97]

Constance demonstrates an intuitive understanding that love may not be enough to preserve equality and respect within a marriage. As her resistance persists, Ben escalates his tactics. He attempts to guilt her into compliance, "[H]ow can you keep me so wretched? […] You can think of your mother, but you can't think of me!"[98] Finally, when emotional appeals fail, he resorts to direct coercion, threatening to leave unless marriage is agreed upon. In response, Constance pleads with him to stay. The following stage direction – that he "crushes her to him"[99] – is telling. It signals the use of physical force (which could be interpreted as affection) as dominance. Constance, overwhelmed, finally consents to marriage; a "yes" that is extracted through a combination of psychological manipulation, guilt, and physical assertion.

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[96] Treadwell, *Constance Darrow* 94.
[97] Treadwell, *Constance Darrow* 94.
[98] Treadwell, *Constance Darrow* 95.
[99] Treadwell, *Constance Darrow* 95.

The second act stands in stark contrast to the first, particularly in Ben's attitude toward his wife. The shift in their dynamic reveals that psychological harm has become a routine aspect of their relationship, resulting in a steady erosion of Constance's self-confidence. This is demonstrated in several moments, including the dinner scene where, when guests encourage her to sing, Ben abruptly dismisses her, "Why, Constance can't sing."[100] His belittling attitude extends beyond his wife to women in general. In both public and private conversation, he makes disparaging remarks, such as, "Any man's a damn fool to make such a goat of himself over a woman, any woman,"[101] a statement that not only contradicts his earlier behavior when courting Constance, but also reveals his internalized misogyny.

The act's emotional climax occurs after Constance quietly reveals to Ben that she is pregnant. Overcome with joy, she expresses a profound sense of purpose, envisioning motherhood as a source of fulfillment beyond the monotony of housework. "Just think, every person that is born – all the millions and millions that exist – I suppose their mothers felt as wonderful as I do now! […] It's all to be mine!"[102] Ben, however, quickly tempers her enthusiasm. Urging her to "consider this"[103] and "think about this a little as well as feel,"[104] he once again launches into a pattern of psychological manipulation. Merging emotional coercion with practical objections, he frames her excitement as irrational and shortsighted, which is a reversed echo of the reproach he took in Act 1. He introduces a litany of hypothetical threats, such as, "Suppose I lose my job! […] Suppose I get sick!"[105] followed by a moral argument that paints the pregnancy as irresponsible, "[T]housands of children might well wish they never were born."[106] His intention is clear: to instill fear and doubt, undermining Constance's sense

[100] Treadwell, *Constance Darrow* 111.
[101] Treadwell, *Constance Darrow* 112.
[102] Treadwell, *Constance Darrow* 114.
[103] Treadwell, *Constance Darrow* 114.
[104] Treadwell, *Constance Darrow* 116.
[105] Treadwell, *Constance Darrow* 115.
[106] Treadwell, *Constance Darrow* 116.

of agency. This time, however, Constance reaches a breaking point. In a moment of resistance, she delivers a powerful monologue that lays bare the psychological toll of their marriage,

> [y]ou can stand there and talk to me like this! And I sit here and listen and listen and listen and don't scream out! There you are and here am I! And this is our marriage! What are you making of me? […] Why didn't you leave me alone? I was contented enough! But you persisted and persisted and persisted! You took me, I say!"[107]

In that moment, she seems uncontainable, her voice no longer suppressed. She goes further still, turning Ben's rhetoric against him and attacking his sense of masculinity,

> [I]f you can't make enough for us as it is, go out and get it somewhere. Go and get for us, for yours! The world is all around! You're a man, aren't you? Wage slave! You're a man, aren't you, as well? You're a man!

Having lost the upper hand in the argument, Ben – mirroring his behavior at the end of Act 1 – resorts once again to physical domination. As indicated in the stage directions, he "[h]olds her in chair and overpowers her spirit by his physical strength."[108] Constance is silenced once more, not only by force, but by a combination of manipulative techniques and emotional coercion. Although Ben attempts to console her in the aftermath, his assurance that they will go on "living just the same"[109] ultimately reads as an assertion of control. Constance, deprived of autonomy and hope, is left violated by the realization that nothing will change.

Eventually, Act 3 presents Constance as emotionally depleted, frail, and chronically unwell. Nan, with characteristic bluntness, attributes this deterioration to Constance's marriage, "You seem to have lost all your nerve!"[110] she remarks, a seemingly casual comment that nonetheless captures the deeper truth of Constance's condition. Her physical and emotional collapse appears to be the result of continuous psychological abuse and coercion, culminating

[107] Treadwell, *Constance Darrow* 116.
[108] Treadwell, *Constance Darrow* 117.
[109] Treadwell, *Constance Darrow* 117.
[110] Treadwell, *Constance Darrow* 121.

in the forced abortion. Although the procedure is not staged, its presence looms heavily in the background as a traumatic violation of Constance's bodily autonomy, one presumably arranged by Ben through a complicit doctor. The secrecy surrounding it, even from her closest ones, such as Nan and her own mother, further underscores the extent to which reproductive trauma remained unspoken, veiled by cultural taboos.

Over the course of the act, Constance begins to slowly reclaim a sense of agency. There is a brief moment of hope that she might seize control of her future. Given Ben's previous emphasis on financial constraints, one might expect he would be persuaded by the practical economic benefits of her returning to work. Yet when she presents the idea, framing it in terms of savings and support for the household, his response is dismissive and hostile. Rather than viewing her decision as rational, Ben perceives it as a threat to his masculinity. The notion that his wife might earn enough to buy things on her own appears, in his eyes, to strip him of his traditional male authority. Therefore, Constance adjusts her approach, emphasizing financial planning and insurance. Still, Ben refuses to engage with her reasoning, instead insisting on the sanctity of home and home-made meals. When she finally asks him directly whether he opposes her return to work, he offers a definitive answer, "[Y]ou are not going to do it!"[111]

Constance pleads; from exhaustion and a deep need for self-worth. She explains how unendurable the constant domestic labor has become. However, Ben responds, as always, with condescension and manipulation, "Just like a woman! In one breath you want to go to work at a man's job in an office! And yet you say you can't do a little housework in a two-room apartment […]!"[112] He continues to undermine her confidence, casting her as too fragile to

[111] Treadwell, *Constance Darrow* 129.
[112] Treadwell, *Constance Darrow* 129.

manage employment, alluding to her poor health. At this point, Constance reaches a breaking point, erupting in a searing monologue,

> [W]here has [my health] gone? Answer me that! Where has it gone? You take my work away from me! You take my children away from me! You take my health! And then you sit there and eat and eat and say no to everything I propose![113]

Her outburst is met, once again, with mockery. Ben seizes upon her emotion to frame her as irrational, perhaps even unhinged. He patronizes her with lines such as "Hush […] My dear child […] I know best,"[114] using a familiar strategy to reassert control. But Constance does not yield. She understands now with clarity that this opportunity to work and thus to reclaim her identity is her last chance to feel "human" again.[115] Sensing his persuasive tools are failing, Ben shifts tactics once more, layering guilt onto his condescension; however, Constance's reply remains sharp and rejecting,

> BEN: […] Am I not worth a little consideration at your hands? Have I not been a good husband to you? Have I ever stayed away one night for dinner before this? Don't I give you all I earn? Have I ever been unfaithful to you?
> CONSTANCE: Oh, I don't know! I don't care! […] You make such a virtue of just common decency![116]

Realizing he has exhausted every rhetorical device, Ben reverts to physical dominance. He grabs her shoulders, forces her into a chair, and looms over her, embodying the threat of violence. The stage direction invites the audience to anticipate a blow. But instead, Ben plays what becomes his final and most manipulative card, "I go away!"[117] he announces. This abrupt shift reveals his calculated strategy. He has correctly gauged that Constance, despite her fleeting defiance, may not be emotionally prepared to live independently. A year of psychological erosion has left her dependent on the very structure that oppresses her. Though she may long

[113] Treadwell, *Constance Darrow* 129.
[114] Treadwell, *Constance Darrow* 130.
[115] Treadwell, *Constance Darrow* 126.
[116] Treadwell, *Constance Darrow* 130.
[117] Treadwell, *Constance Darrow* 131.

for freedom, she is no longer equipped to grasp it. She has moved too far from the archetypal "New Woman" rather towards being a victim of sustained abuse, forcibly contained within the role of the "Everywoman." In the broader context of Treadwell's dramatic oeuvre, the ending of *Constance Darrow* strongly echoes the trajectory of *Machinal*, implying a bleak future for women who attempt to assert autonomy within a society that persistently denies them the right to self-determination.

2.2 Working Woman and Social Respectability

In a distinct way, *Constance Darrow* also explores the attitudes toward working women, both single and married. While some historical perspectives on this issue were previously touched upon, this section aims to expand on the broader context. According to data presented in *The First Measured Century*,

> [i]n 1900, only 6 percent of married women worked outside the home, usually when their blue-collar husbands were unemployed. Among wives with children at home, very few worked at all. Almost half of single women held jobs, but they usually stopped working when they married or, at the latest, when they got pregnant, and most never worked for pay again. About a third of widowed and divorced women worked, typically out of economic necessity. Never-married women with children were virtually unknown.[118]

Treadwell vividly dramatizes the social realities of each of these groups – single, married, and widowed women through the characters of Constance, Mrs. Darrow and Nan. In the first act, the audience is introduced to a household composed of two women who represent distinct categories of the workforce: Constance, a single woman employed as Mr. Mathews's personal assistant, and her mother, a widow who does not work but manages the household. Through their interactions, Treadwell captures the economic and emotional difficulties older

[118] Ben Wattenberg, "The First Measured Century: Book: Section 2.8," Pbs.org, 2025, https://www.pbs.org/fmc/book/2work8.htm?utm.

women, widowed or divorced, faced when attempting to enter the workforce. During one exchange, Constance bluntly tells her mother, "You aren't trained for anything!"[119] in an attempt to discourage her to search for employment, which would necessarily be unattractive. The line underscores the structural lack of opportunity that left many women unprepared for paid labor after years of dependency.

Mrs. Darrow accepts the prospect of work which may not be quite pleasant with quiet resignation, remarking, "There's always something unpleasant about anything a woman does to earn money."[120] Constance, however, disagrees, perhaps idealizing the notion of meaningful labor. Yet despite her mother's willingness to contribute, Constance ultimately prevents her from accepting a job offer. Though not as direct as Ben's prohibition of Constance's employment in the third act, her objection serves the same purpose. This dynamic between mother and daughter mirrors, albeit less intensely, the control and minimization Constance herself later experiences in her marriage. Her dismissive response, "Let's not go all over that again, dear,"[121] echoes Ben's exact words when Constance raises the topic of her abortion in Act 3.[122] These repeated phrases point to Treadwell's dramaturgical attention to thematic as well as linguistic symmetry, fulfilling her emphasis on "culminating intensity of interest." [123]

Constance's attitude toward her mother is also deeply tied to her own internalized gender roles. Having taken on a traditionally masculine role in the household, that is, earning a salary and supporting her mother, she also expects the same "freedom"[124] a man has. Regarding gender equality, this attitude proves to be problematic as Constance does not put herself and her mother on the same level; instead, she identifies with the role of male provider and projects a restrictive,

[119] Treadwell, *Constance Darrow* 86.
[120] Treadwell, *Constance Darrow* 85.
[121] Treadwell, *Constance Darrow* 83.
[122] Treadwell, *Constance Darrow* 130.
[123] Treadwell, "Russian Theory of Acting," quoted in Dickey and López-Rodríguez 71.
[124] Treadwell, *Constance Darrow* 87.

gendered expectation onto her mother, whom she deems suited to domesticity. Therefore, although her critique of gender inequality is legitimate, Constance stays within the frame of the traditional nineteenth-century scheme, [125] and ultimately reinforces a binary system that defines women's role as domestic and men's role as professional, with little space for crossover.

Nevertheless, the play resists offering a monolithic view of unmarried working women. Constance's neighbor Nan Nicol, another single working woman, represents a different perspective. Nan, a stenographer from Mr. Mathews' office in her thirties, does not romanticize her job. Early in the play, she jokes that Constance is "one of those strange females who actually loves her work."[126] Nan dislikes housework, delegating domestic responsibilities to her suitor Terrence. Although other characters keep giving her plenty of advice, she is content and takes pride in her independence, stating plainly, "Nan can look out for herself."[127]

Nan offers a more pragmatic counterpart to the type of working woman represented by The Telephone Girl in *Machinal*. Her work, while tedious, serves a practical purpose. She adapts to the boredom at work without complaint, saying, "Sometimes I think I'll scream [of boredom]! But I don't do it!"[128] Her job is part of a larger, calculated plan. In the second act, she tells Constance of her strategy to marry a wealthy man, ideally someone like Mr. Mathews, revealing her view of the workplace as a means to social mobility,

> What chance does a girl have in an old office, anyway? She's just part of the office furniture. […] Oh, I can tell you I've often thought if some of those rich men around there could ever get a pipe at me with a girl background – a house background – I might have a chance. But no! I'm always entered carrying that stenographer handicap![129]

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[125] Lavender https://web.archive.org/web/20141028040827/https://csivc.csi.cuny.edu/history/files/lavender/386/truewoman.pdf.
[126] Treadwell, *Constance Darrow* 81.
[127] Treadwell, *Constance Darrow* 98.
[128] Treadwell, *Constance Darrow* 98.
[129] Treadwell, *Constance Darrow* 99.

Nan definitely does not fit the mold of the sentimental "Everywoman" longing for romance and children. When Constance asks whether she wants children, she responds with evident disgust, "Of course not!" Later, when the opportunity arises, she uses every means available to secure Constance's former position – not out of ambition for status, but to improve her chances of marrying Mr. Mathews. Even Ben comments on her cleverness, "Nan was wise in her cradle."[130] While Nan's ultimate goal remains marriage, her methods reflect agency, calculation, and realism rather than romantic idealism. However, Treadwell avoids idealizing any one model of womanhood in the play. Though she herself embodied the "New Woman" ethos in many ways, her writing reveals an acute awareness of its risks. While Mrs. Darrow, as a representative of the "Everywoman," may not be a figure Treadwell endorsed, she is nonetheless granted a measure of dignity. Nan, the opportunist, is not celebrated either, but her survival tactics are acknowledged as clever and, within their context, perhaps justified. Generalizations are difficult and, as the play seems to be warning, potentially reductive.

Most importantly, as Constance marries after Act 1, it is her deprivation from work most of the play focuses on. In the early twentieth century, a wife working outside the home could be seen as a source of shame for the husband – a signal of his economic failure and a challenge to his masculine role as provider. According to *The First Measured Century*, such arrangements were stigmatized, and husbands feared that working wives might undermine not only the household's domestic harmony but also their own social respectability.[131] This anxiety was rooted in the broader cultural framework of the "cult of domesticity," a dominant ideology in the white middle-class society of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The ideal woman under this model, as Catherine Lavender notes, embodied "four cardinal virtues: piety, purity,

[130] Treadwell, *Constance Darrow* 128.
[131] Wattenberg https://www.pbs.org/fmc/book/2work8.htm?utm.

submission, and domesticity."[132] In *Inequality: A Contemporary Approach to Race, Class, and Gender*, Lisa Keister observes "[t]he cult of domesticity set forth and ideal in which women – virtuous women, that is – do not labor outside the home [as they] were considered to be too pure to work outside the home."[133] Thus, similar to the rebellious "New Women" who refused to adapt their husbands' surnames, working women were seen not only as unfeminine but also as potentially morally compromised. There was also the concern of the "double burden," the belief that no woman could work outside the home and still maintain proper domestic care. Reducing the women into this ideal, which in fact is a fitting description of the "Everywoman" archetype, is an ever-present thread in most plays by Treadwell: it is the case of Constance, of The Young Woman in *Machinal*, and definitely of the characters of Mrs. White and the first-act Zizi in *Ladies Leave.*

Given the legal and social imbalance between husband and wife, her autonomy in matters of work was clearly contingent upon her husband's approval. Constance repeatedly tries to explain that her desire to work is not merely financial. "It isn't only the money,"[134] she tells Ben. Yet he dismisses her, just as she once dismissed her mother's wish to "[earn] a little something – not being so dependent."[135] The psychological and physical toll of being denied meaningful work is portrayed with raw honesty. The emotional strain, the loss of identity, and the gradual deterioration of self-worth form a powerful critique of a social order that equated womanhood with domestic confinement. These themes also resonate in *Ladies Leave*; in *Constance Darrow*, however, they are given full voice, indicting the culture that punishes women for seeking fulfillment beyond the walls of their homes.

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[132] Lavender https://web.archive.org/web/20141028040827/https://csivc.csi.cuny.edu/history/files/lavender/386/truewoman.pdf.
[133] Lisa Keister, *Inequality: A Contemporary Approach to Race, Class, and Gender* 229.
[134] Treadwell, *Constance Darrow* 131.
[135] Treadwell, *Constance Darrow* 85.

2.2.1 Capitalism: Gendered Logic of Labor

The figure of the working woman in *Constance Darrow* becomes even more compelling when examined within the broader context of capitalism. Through her characters, Treadwell demonstrates a keen awareness of the interconnectedness between capitalist structures and patriarchal norms, a point noted also by Dickey and López Rodríguez.[136] She reveals how the free-market system is fundamentally ill-suited to accommodate women's needs and, in fact, systematically exploits them. Having written the play by 1911, Treadwell's insight into this relationship was remarkably ahead of its time, anticipating ideas later theorized by scholars such as Angela Y. Davis. In her essay "Women and Capitalism: Dialectics of Oppression and Liberation," Davis argues that capitalism does not merely marginalize women; it actively depends on their oppression. She highlights the role of the nuclear family and the division between productive (paid) and reproductive (unpaid) labor as central mechanisms through which capitalist economies function.[137] Historically, women contributed to social production through vital, community-based work. However, under capitalism, their labor was confined to the domestic sphere, rendering it economically invisible. Necessarily, "there occurs under capitalism a […] dialectic between the potential equality of women, inherent in the apparatus of production, and the inevitable domination of women implied in (but not confined to) the family."[138] That is why, although housework is essential to the functioning of the labor force, capitalism renders it as producing no exchange-value; therefore, it is excluded from the formal economy. This erasure is further justified by framing domestic labor as "natural," rather than economic, which is an ideological move that isolates women and reinforces their subordination.

[136] Dickey and López-Rodríguez 15.
[137] Davis 160-161.
[138] Davis 163.

As Davis argues, women's oppression is not an unfortunate byproduct of capitalism, but rather a structural feature that sustains the system itself.[139]

These themes find clear expression in *Constance Darrow*. Ben, in particular, can be read as a personification of capitalist logic. He frequently invokes economic reasoning to justify his decisions, many of which diminish or directly harm Constance. This pattern is evident already in Act 1, during a casual evening conversation with Constance. When she expresses concern about her mother's unhappiness, Ben quickly attributes the issue to market forces,

> CONSTANCE: […] It makes me wretched to think about Mommie sometimes, that she can not be happy.
> BEN: There is nothing you can do. It's economic conditions. The high cost of living again![140]

This passage aligns closely with Davis's central argument that under capitalism, "the oppression of women assumes a decisive social dimension and function."[141] By framing caregiving, homemaking, and nurturing as "natural" roles for women,[142] capitalism not only devalues these forms of labor but also normalizes them as essential features of femininity. This ideological construction allows Ben to absolve himself of responsibility for Constance's marginalization. Rather than acknowledging his complicity in maintaining her subjugation, he presents the situation as a given, refusing any individual fault. This belief enables him to rationalize his behavior throughout the play. From this perspective, Ben's insistence that Constance remain at home after marriage is not merely a personal preference but an expression of internalized social norms. "I want you to be at home, home!" he insists. "I want to know you're there, dear, while I'm at work […] sort of looking for me."[143] His language reveals a

[139] Davis 172.
[140] Treadwell, *Constance Darrow* 92.
[141] Davis 160.
[142] Davis 163.
[143] Treadwell, *Constance Darrow* 95-96.

possessive attitude masked as affection. Yet what he seeks is not companionship, but stability and surveillance: a proof of ownership and control.

Ben, then, can be understood as a representative figure of patriarchal capitalist ideology. His worldview is shaped by two linked values: status and ownership, which together serve as the criteria by which he evaluates people and relationships. Moreover, even within the sphere of what Davis calls "social production,"[144] that is, the unpaid labor necessary to sustain the labor force, Ben extends this logic to an extreme. His opposition to Constance's pregnancy, culminating in a coerced abortion, reveals that even the potential expansion of their family is subject to his desire for personal comfort and social standing. The physical and emotional toll on Constance is irrelevant to him; what matters is the preservation of his lifestyle and authority. In this sense, Ben does not simply enact patriarchal capitalist norms; he intensifies them.

In addition to her broader critique of capitalism and patriarchy, Treadwell also draws attention to specific, material inequities embedded in capitalist practice. Such inequities are directly addressed by Davis, who explains,

> As a dependent being, as someone else's "inorganic extension," the price of women's entry into production was surplus exploitation (grossly inferior wages) and jobs which, on the whole, were far less fulfilling than even the stultifying labor assigned to men. […] if and when women's participation in social production becomes viable and necessary, the capitalist contracts the purchase, not of 'abstract labor-power in general' but rather of an already socially stigmatized female labor-power.[145]

Davis underscores that even when women enter the workforce and perform similar tasks as men, their labor is not appreciated equally. Instead, it is devalued through gendered assumptions and social stigma, which both reflect and perpetuate patriarchal ideologies. Similar observations are made by Martha E. Giménez. In her essay, "Capitalism and the Oppression of

[144] Davis 163.
[145] Davis 171.

Women," she claims that "structural constraints [of capitalism] affecting how propertyless men and women can make a living […] are the material basis for the structured inequality between men and women."[146]

Treadwell makes this critique visible in *Constance Darrow*, particularly in addressing the gendered pay gap and the broader devaluation of women's labor. Although Constance's job as a personal assistant is consistently framed as important and demanding – she herself claims to "do[es] a man's work and earn[s] a man's salary,"[147] – the illusion of equity is quickly dispelled in the first act. When Ben attempts to persuade her to marry him, he notes, "Aren't you […] comfortable on your salary? […] don't I make more?"[148] This brief remark reveals that, despite her sense of professional responsibility and competence, Constance is still paid less than her male counterpart. Treadwell here engages with the realities of women's early entry into the workforce, foregrounding inequities that were only beginning to be publicly discussed at the time. Furthermore, Constance's contributions are consistently diminished both by others and, increasingly, by herself. In the third act, Ben refers to the income she might bring to the household as "superfluous,"[149] signaling his fundamental disregard for her professional aspirations. By this point, even Constance begins to internalize this minimization, reflecting, "Being a stenographer's hardly a career,"[150] although in the previous acts she takes "pride in [her] success, in the responsibility."[151] The erosion of self-worth and ambition is thus shown to be not merely personal, but systemic.

Treadwell also draws attention to structural barriers that prevent women from securing meaningful employment in the first place, particularly the lack of accessible training and

[146] Gimenez 24.
[147] Treadwell, *Constance Darrow* 87.
[148] Treadwell, *Constance Darrow* 94.
[149] Treadwell, *Constance Darrow* 129.
[150] Treadwell, *Constance Darrow* 125.
[151] Treadwell, *Constance Darrow* 94.

education. In Act 1, Constance remarks on her mother's limited options, "[T]here is actually nothing she can do except the commonest and meanest kind of work."[152] She uses this as justification for discouraging her mother from taking a job she deems demeaning. What she fails to recognize at that stage is that this same vulnerability awaits any woman who leaves the workforce, especially after marriage. In fact, Constance herself becomes emblematic of this trajectory. By Act 3, she too faces the challenge of re-entering a professional sphere.

Nevertheless, even if Constance were allowed to resume working, the play hints at the impossible expectations she would face. Ben's demands for a fully domestic wife have not changed, and Constance would likely be expected to shoulder both professional and household labor. Giménez addresses this dilemma in her essay, "Female workers have, in addition to paid work, unpaid domestic work."[153] Davis expands on this as well: she argues that capitalism places working women in a paradox as they are expected to participate in the workforce without being given the time, support, or recognition needed to thrive, let alone to train for or attain positions of real influence or satisfaction.[154]

In conclusion, admittedly, Constance's uncritically optimistic view of returning to work stands out as a possible point of tension within the otherwise realist framework of the play. As the preceding analysis has shown, the prospect of employment is fraught with complications; not only because of the inherent difficulties of balancing paid labor with domestic responsibilities, but also due to the complete lack of support from her husband. This optimism may reflect Treadwell's own youthful outlook at the time of writing; nevertheless, it may alternatively serve to highlight Constance's personal naïveté. Her enthusiasm echoes the idealism she expresses in Act I, when she quotes Mr. Mathews's critique of capitalist

[152] Treadwell, *Constance Darrow* 91.
[153] Gimenez 23.
[154] Davis 171-172.

determinism, “He said that there is something in life itself, too powerful, too elusive, too volatile for all your economic conditions.”[155] At this point, Constance seems to believe in that elusive “something” – a belief that briefly resurfaces in Act 3. In this light, her hopeful outlook can be read not as a departure from realism, but as a subtle expression of it: a realistic portrayal of a woman clinging to possibility in a world structured to deny her freedom.

[155] Treadwell, *Constance Darrow* 92.

3. *The Eye of the Beholder*: Four Perspectives on a Woman

Copyrighted in 1919, *The Eye of the Beholder* is yet another of Treadwell's plays that has never been published or staged, despite its thematic richness, formal innovation, and concise length. As Dickey and López-Rodríguez note the play exists in two versions, both preserved in the University of Arizona Library Special Collections:[156] the early draft titled *Mrs. Wayne,* and *The Eye of the Beholder*, the version on which this chapter is based. The differences between the two manuscripts appear to be minimal. Although the exact dates of composition remain unknown, Dickey and López-Rodríguez suggest the play was likely written between 1915 and 1918, during a period when Treadwell also produced several other one-act plays, some more conventional in structure, such as *La Cachucha,* or *Guess Again*, and others more experimental, including *John Doane*, or *To Him Who Waits*. Like *The Eye of the Beholder,* these latter plays explore narrative through nonrealistic techniques.[157]

The experimental qualities of *The Eye of the Beholder* can be traced, in large part, to Treadwell's exposure to the vibrant intellectual and artistic life of New York. In 1915, she followed her husband, William O. McGeehan, who had relocated there from San Francisco the previous year,[158] reportedly prompted, as Dickey and López-Rodríguez suggest, by Treadwell's growing prominence as a journalist.[159] Although the couple did not live together, they appear to have maintained a respectful, if unconventional, relationship. The adequacy of this arrangement remains questionable, particularly in light of Treadwell's extensive travels throughout Europe during the same year, including a four-month attempt to work as a war correspondent, an experience that profoundly shaped her worldview.[160] Upon settling in New York, Treadwell soon became involved in the creative and intellectual circles surrounding

[156] Dickey and López-Rodríguez 74.
[157] Dickey and López-Rodríguez 13.
[158] Dickey and López-Rodríguez 70.
[159] Dickey and López-Rodríguez 25.
[160] Dickey and López-Rodríguez 25.

Walter and Louise Arensberg, prominent patrons of the arts known for hosting one of the city's most influential modernist salons.[161] Through these gatherings, she encountered figures such as Marcel Duchamp, William Carlos Williams, Isadora Duncan, and Wallace Stevens.[162] The salons served as a forum for discussing experimental aesthetics, emerging psychological theories, the unconscious, and evolving notions of sexual freedom.[163] The influence of these debates is unmistakably woven into the thematic and formal fabric of the play.

As Dickey and López-Rodríguez observe, this one-act play operates "within the parameters of expressionism,"[164] particularly in its embrace of certain modernist formal innovations. However, it cannot be classified as fully expressionist. Unlike *Machinal*, which clearly exemplifies the genre, *The Eye of the Beholder* does not display many of the hallmarks typically associated with expressionist theatre, such as jagged, rapid-fire dialogue, extended monologues delivered by a central protagonist, or thematic emphases on the mechanization of modern life and critiques of materialism.[165] The play's setting, too, resists experimental distortion: it is rendered in a realistic style, and the narrative progresses with linear coherence.[166] The play's innovation lies instead in its structural design. Mrs. Marcia Wayne, the protagonist, is presented across four discrete scenes, each framed as an encounter with a different character: her estranged husband, who arrives begging her to return; her lover, whose charm is matched by his naïve idealism; the lover's disapproving mother; and finally, Wayne's own mother. Through this episodic structure, the play explores identity as a series of reflections and projections, never fully stable, never entirely her own.

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[161] Julia May Boddewyn, "Louise and Walter Arensberg," The Modern Art Index Project (Leonard A. Lauder Research Center for Modern Art, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2015), https://www.metmuseum.org/research-centers/leonard-a-lauder-research-center/research-resources/modern-art-index-project/arensberg.
[162] Dickey and López-Rodríguez 13.
[163] Dickey and López-Rodríguez 13.
[164] Dickey and López-Rodríguez 74.
[165] J. Ellen Gainor and Jerry Dickey, "Susan Glaspell and Sophie Treadwell: Staging Feminism and Modernism, 1915–1941," in Krasner: *A Companion to Twentieth-Century American Drama* 46.
[166] Dickey and López-Rodríguez 74.

In the stage directions to the play, Treadwell is notably straightforward about the play's intended purpose. She explains that the idea behind the piece is

> *[t]hat each human being is, in fact, many different personalities, depending on the eye of the person who sees him. The main character in the play is seen in several different guises; that is, as she seems to several different people: her husband, her lover, his mother, her mother. She comes in contact with each one of them successively. Her husband sees her as his physical possession. Her lover sees her as an ingenuous young girl of eighteen. His mother sees her as a sophisticated woman of thirty. Her mother sees her as a little girl.*[167]

These shifting perspectives on the protagonist are conveyed not only through dialogue, but also through costume design, which changes depending on who is interacting with Mrs. Wayne. Each scene offers a distinct version of her, shaped by the perception of the character she engages with, so that the audience never encounters a wholly authentic or autonomous image of Mrs. Wayne. Instead, she is continually refracted through the "eye of the beholder," reinforcing the play's central critique of how female identity is constructed through the gazes of others.

However, this fragmented portrayal of the protagonist also gives rise to interpretive ambiguities, as the audience's understanding of Mrs. Wayne is mediated almost entirely through the perspectives of others. With the exception of two brief moments – one at the beginning and one at the end – she is largely denied the chance to articulate her own thoughts or speak in her own voice. This dramaturgical choice creates a degree of distance between Mrs. Wayne and the audience, potentially hindering deeper identification or emotional engagement with her character. Despite these limitations, *The Eye of the Beholder* remains highly significant for several reasons. It represents an early instance of Treadwell's experimentation with form, paving the way for the more fully developed modernism of *Machinal*. Whereas *Machinal* constructs subjectivity from within, filtering all action through the consciousness of its protagonist, *The Eye of the Beholder* inverts this technique, presenting the central character almost exclusively through the eyes of others. This structural contrast offers insight into

[167] Treadwell, *The Eye of the Beholder*, in Dickey and López-Rodríguez 133.

Treadwell's evolving preoccupations with identity and intimate relationships, which are the themes that recur throughout her dramatic work. In a notable parallel to *Constance Darrow*, the play critiques the possessive nature of marriage and the objectification of the wife, while also portraying a mother whose protective concern for her daughter ultimately clashes with the daughter's more modern outlook. The figure of the romantic suitor, who clings to the ideal of marriage as a redemptive institution – provided one marries "the right person" – further anticipates the relationship dynamics between Zizi and Phil in *Ladies Leave*.

Furthermore, the play's engagement with questions of identity and the search for an authentic self provides a compelling entry point for exploring the influence of Karl Jaspers on Treadwell's feminist thought. *The Eye of the Beholder* also explicitly invokes the concept of the gaze, later developed in feminist theory by critics such as Sue-Ellen Case, who describes woman as both sign and object within dominant systems of representation.[168] Given Treadwell's exposure to contemporary psychoanalytic discourse, including Freudian theory, it is plausible that she was familiar with early articulations of what would later be termed the male gaze. As such, the play can be interpreted as an early feminist strategy aimed at "exposing the patriarchal encodings in the dominant system of representation."[169] These encodings unfold through several distinct channels. First, in the contrasting perspectives of the husband and the lover, the play offers two forms of patriarchal projection: one marked by possessive entitlement, the other by naïve idealism. Second, through the voices of the two mothers, the play reveals the internalized effects of patriarchy on women themselves, while also dramatizing intergenerational tensions between traditional and modern female identities. Finally, *The Eye of the Beholder* addresses the fragmentation of female selfhood, thus anticipating later feminist theories on the social construction of gender. Treadwell implicitly poses a critical question:

[168] Case 121.
[169] Case 121.

what becomes of female identity when every relationship reflects not reality, but a socially conditioned distortion?

3.1 Mrs. Wayne Through Male Eyes

As previously suggested, the first two visitors, Marcia's husband and her lover, represent contrasting yet ultimately complementary male erotic scripts. Each man views Marcia not as an autonomous subject, but as an extension of himself: either as a possession to reclaim or a fantasy to idealize. Through this dual lens, Treadwell offers a compelling dramatization of what Simone de Beauvoir famously theorized as woman's condition as the Other, "[A woman] is determined and differentiated in relation to man, while he is not in relation to her […]. He is the Subject; he is the Absolute. She is the Other."[170] Using deliberate contrasts in dialogue, costume, and gesture, Treadwell exposes how patriarchal scripts fragment female subjectivity and replace the possibility of authentic selfhood with a series of imposed and performative roles.

While Marcia's encounter with her husband echoes the possessive model of marriage explored in the previous chapter, in which the wife is rendered a voiceless object, stripped of rights and subordinated to the husband's authority, *The Eye of the Beholder* brings a sharper focus to the sexual subtext embedded within this dynamic. Here, marriage is not only a system of ownership but also a structure that encroaches upon the most intimate aspects of identity, including sexual autonomy. In this regard, the play anticipates thematic developments in *Machinal*, where marriage functions as a direct assault on personal freedom and embodied selfhood.

[170] Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex* (New York: Vintage Books, 2010) 20.

The scene suggests that Marcia Wayne had already left her husband; the couple now lives apart, yet Mr. Wayne continues to visit her, repeatedly pleading for reconciliation. Marcia, however, firmly resists: so resolutely, in fact, that she refuses even to acknowledge her presence at home. Although the specific reasons for their separation are never directly stated, one particular moment in their exchange subtly introduces the issue:

> WAYNE: You can't bear me, can you?
> MRS. WAYNE: It is something like that.
> WAYNE: What is it […]?
> MRS. WAYNE: I don't know. It's just that somehow you always make me feel undressed. I can't bear it any longer.[171]

Both visually and aurally, the scene is charged with the language of erotic ownership. Marcia undergoes an involuntary "stripping" that operates on two interconnected levels: the symbolic erasure of personal autonomy and the literal exposure of her sexualized body. Before Mr. Wayne enters, the audience is briefly granted a rare view of Marcia alone, one of the few moments in the play when she is not filtered through another's gaze. She appears fully dressed, momentarily whole. However, the instant she is seen through her ex-husband's eyes, her appearance transforms: her costume abruptly shifts to "a slim flesh-colored negligee revealing her body."[172] This striking visual change signals the imposition of the male gaze, reinterpreting Marcia's presence as sexual availability.

Wayne's perception of her is steeped in possession. He fixates on her body, reminds her of her status as "his wife," and insists he "can't let [her] slip out of [his] hands."[173] His language – marked by words like "slip," "hands," and "mine" – casts Marcia not as a partner but as a possession, something he owns and fears losing. Treadwell reinforces this through a pointed stage direction, *"[Her] every gesture is suggestive and enticing. Her walk is undulating. Her voice thick and honeyed. For this is how her husband sees her."*[174] The italicized note signals

[171] Treadwell, *The Eye of the Beholder* 135.
[172] Treadwell, *The Eye of the Beholder* 134.
[173] Treadwell, *The Eye of the Beholder* 135.
[174] Treadwell, *The Eye of the Beholder* 134.

that what the audience witnesses is not Marcia's authentic self, but a sensual performance imposed upon her, a stylized projection of Wayne's desire. She is no longer an acting subject, but a fetishized object, shaped and constrained by the gaze of the man who believes she belongs to him.

Wayne's fantasy of control and erotic entitlement closely mirrors Karl Jaspers's warning that genuine "Existenz" cannot be found within the confines of objectification.[175] By seeking to fix Marcia within a totalizing and possessable identity, Wayne violates the ethical imperative Jaspers associates with authentic encounter – one that demands openness to the other's irreducible subjectivity. His inability to conceive of Marcia as separate from his own desire renders her effectively voiceless, transforming her into an object shaped entirely by his emotional and sexual needs. Throughout the scene, Marcia barely speaks; she is spoken at, pleaded with, and redefined in terms of Wayne's fear of abandonment. The imbalance between his monologue and her near-silence dramatizes what Jaspers describes as the failure to resist seeing "reality itself in fragments."[176] Recognition becomes impossible when one person refuses to see the other from more than a single, self-serving perspective.

De Beauvoir's analysis further enriches this reading. As she famously asserts, "humanity is male and man defines woman not in herself but as relative to him; she is not regarded as an autonomous being."[177] Treadwell's scene seems to literalize this claim. Wayne's repeated invocation of the word "wife" is not merely descriptive, but ontological: Marcia exists because she belongs to him. That imagined status entitles him, in his view, to dictate her movements, her appearance, and her future. The sexualization of Marcia's gestures, perceived by Wayne as natural affirmations of her role, functions here as a patriarchal feedback loop. Her desirability is not an expression of her agency, but a mirror of his virility and dominance. In

[175] Jaspers 24.
[176] Jaspers 75.
[177] de Beauvoir 20.

this context, the erotic becomes not liberatory but reifying, transforming Marcia into a projection whose purpose is to validate male power.

Martin Gregg's perception shifts the register of objectification from possessive control to romantic idealization, yet the underlying structure remains unchanged. While Wayne fetishizes Marcia as a sensual and seductive adult, Gregg reimagines her as an innocent girl. According to the stage directions, in his eyes Marcia appears in a *"simple frock of pink […] giving her the sweet ingenuous look of a young girl of eighteen."*[178] His language then deepens this fantasy: he addresses Marcia as "my dear," "my little girl," and speaks in heavily sentimental tones, declaring, "It has been so long without you."[179] These expressions construct a romanticized and infantilized vision, revealing Gregg's unrealistic expectations not only of Marcia, but of romantic intimacy itself. That Marcia, a thirty-year-old divorcée, echoes his childish affection suggests the extent to which she is caught within his fantasy. Her compliance signals not authentic connection, but her continued role as a projection, shaped and softened to match Gregg's vision. This is perhaps the strongest indication that the woman the audience sees is not an autonomous subject, but a figure refracted through yet another male gaze. Together, the dialogue and costume compose an image of nostalgic femininity in which womanhood is equated with sweetness, dependence, and vulnerability.

This version of femininity, though gentler than Wayne's, proves equally constraining. Martin Gregg's idealization of Marcia as a youthful, emotionally delicate figure imposes its own set of limitations: she is rendered incapable of agency, contradiction, or adult desire. From the outset, Gregg projects dependency onto her, as reflected in her line, "I am so unhappy when you are away from me,"[180] a sentiment that aligns with his fantasy rather than with any established autonomy. Secondly, his disregard for her decision-making becomes evident when

[178] Treadwell, *The Eye of the Beholder* 135.
[179] Treadwell, *The Eye of the Beholder* 136.
[180] Treadwell, *The Eye of the Beholder* 136.

he invites his mother into Marcia's home, which is a space over which he should hold no authority, thus violating her boundaries without consultation. Additionally, he imposes his own intentions upon her with subtle rhetorical manipulation, asking, "Aren't you glad?"[181] as though her agreement is preordained. Throughout the scene, Marcia is effectively silenced; Gregg either talks over her or simply does not listen.

In Case's terms, Gregg's romanticized vision reflects a larger theatrical tradition in which women function not as full subjects but as "semiotic functions" within male-centered narratives.[182] Treadwell appears to parody this logic of romantic melodrama, where the heroine's purpose is not self-actualization but the affirmation of male desire. By juxtaposing this scene with the preceding one, Treadwell does not offer a spectrum of female identities, but rather a spectrum of male needs, each of which distorts and restricts the woman at its center.

Heilmann's study of turn-of-the-century "New Woman" fiction reveals that such objectifying gender scripts were already under feminist scrutiny in the literature of the 1890s. Writers like Sarah Grand and George Egerton exposed the limiting binaries imposed by the male gaze, which forced women into oscillation between the "sweetly womanly" figure and the unruly "wild woman;"[183] early iterations of what later became known as the "Everywoman" and the "New Woman." Treadwell reworks these tropes for the 1910s, but retains their essential logic. Wayne desires Marcia as a sensual, compliant wife; Gregg idealizes her as an innocent, childlike lover. The rapid costume changes function as a visual shorthand for these projections, making clear that neither framework accommodates the complexity of female subjectivity. In both portrayals, Marcia's identity is not self-determined but externally imposed, constructed through the desires and expectations of the men who claim to love her.

[181] Treadwell, *The Eye of the Beholder* 136.
[182] Case 121.
[183] Heilmann 33.

Together, these two scenes dramatize what Beauvoir, Jaspers, and Case each articulate in distinct terms: the erasure of women's freedom through a perceptual structure that denies them full humanity. As Beauvoir argues, woman's condition is shaped not only by legal and economic subordination, but by a deeper asymmetry in how she is seen and in how she is permitted to see herself.[184] Treadwell renders this imbalance theatrically visible: Marcia is not seen as a subject, but rather seen through lenses that distort or diminish her. To connect this with Jaspers's philosophy, this represents a failure of response.[185] Confronted with the existential challenges, neither man is capable of genuine encounter in communication. Instead, each retreats into a self-serving fantasy: one grounded in sexual control, the other in romantic idealism. Trapped between these competing illusions, Marcia is denied the relational conditions necessary for authentic selfhood. She is never granted the space to become a self in dialogue, only a surface upon which others project.

Treadwell's decision to stage these two encounters consecutively, without external commentary or narrative framing, invites the audience to recognize their structural symmetry: both revolve around male constructions of desire. As the play transitions into its second half, where two maternal figures offer competing but equally prescriptive models of femininity, the question of whether Marcia can resist or reconcile these externally imposed identities emerges as central. Yet even in these early scenes, Treadwell begins to unravel the psychological toll of being endlessly perceived through others' eyes. What unfolds is the first layer of a more profound inquiry into the disintegrating effects of being constantly beheld, yet never fully seen.

[184] de Beauvoir 27-28.
[185] Jaspers 56.

3.2 Two Mothers, Two Scripts

In the second half of *The Eye of the Beholder*, Treadwell shifts the source of Marcia Wayne's objectification from male erotic desire to female domestic concern. Marcia is visited by two maternal figures: her lover's mother, Mrs. Gregg, and her own mother, Mrs. Middleton. Though ideologically distinct in tone and temperament, both women serve as agents of normative femininity, each projecting onto Marcia a vision shaped by her own generational anxieties, social position, and moral code. In doing so, they function not as liberators but as enforcers of prescriptive gender roles. The encounters expose how patriarchal values are not only imposed from above but also sustained and transmitted through women themselves. In dramatizing these maternal interactions, Treadwell anticipates later feminist critiques and the intergenerational transmission of gender ideology.

The third scene opens with the arrival of Mrs. Gregg, the protective and status-conscious mother of Marcia's young lover. From the beginning, her demeanor is marked by veiled hostility, and her language is steeped in judgment. "You have lived too much […] You will take away all his [illusions]," she tells Marcia[186] in a line that draws a clear boundary between respectable womanhood and what she views as moral and sexual excess. Marcia's status as a divorcée involved with a younger man threatens the narrative Mrs. Gregg seeks to uphold: one in which women safeguard male purity by embodying innocence, restraint, and self-sacrifice. In Mrs. Gregg's eyes, Marcia becomes a corrupting force, a dangerous "New Woman" figure who will render life "stale"[187] for young Gregg.

Her reaction exemplifies what Heilmann, citing Angelique Richardson, identifies as "eugenic maternalism," a discourse emerging in Victorian fiction that casts mothers as moral guardians responsible for preserving the virtue of the next generation, particularly its men.[188]

[186] Treadwell, *The Eye of the Beholder* 137.
[187] Treadwell, *The Eye of the Beholder* 138.
[188] Heilmann 143.

Rather than challenging patriarchal structures, Mrs. Gregg operates as a regulator at their borders, reinforcing their logic through maternal authority. The anxiety she expresses is not solely personal; it is deeply cultural. Marcia's sexual experience and independence symbolize a disruptive form of femininity, an alternative that Mrs. Gregg seeks to suppress. Her critique thus functions as a strategy of containment: by discrediting Marcia's past, she reaffirms the ideological premises of maternal control, heterosexual respectability, and class-bound moral order.

This dynamic also aligns with de Beauvoir's argument that traditional femininity depends on women's complicity in their own subjugation. In *The Second Sex*, Beauvoir observes that mothers often seek "a double" in their daughters; alienated from their own freedom and unable to confront their daughters' potential for autonomy, they replicate the very structures that denied them subjecthood.[189] Although Mrs. Gregg is not Marcia's biological mother, she enacts this disciplining role with unmistakable intensity. By casting "living too much" as a moral failure, she reframes Marcia's life – her divorce, independence, and sexual agency – not as expressions of freedom but as threats to be corrected. In Mrs. Gregg's view, womanhood is not a process of becoming but a form of containment, an identity bounded by the ideals of sacrifice, passivity, and social conformity; which is clearly an ideal that aligns with the restrictive contours of the "Everywoman."

Treadwell offers minimal staging instructions for this scene; unlike the earlier encounters, there are no visual or spatial cues, apart from a brief note at the end. Nevertheless, Marcia is again displaced to the margins through language. Although she attempts to assert herself, it is Mrs. Gregg who dominates the conversation, establishing from her opening lines that she has not come to engage, but to instruct. In this way, her role as a maternal figure mirrors the authority asserted by the male characters earlier in the play. Like Wayne and Martin Gregg,

[189] de Beauvoir 477.

she filters Marcia through the lens of a rigid ideal. However, whereas the men imposed eroticized fantasies, Mrs. Gregg enforces a moralistic vision of womanhood: one rooted in chastity, restraint, and social decorum.

Costume again plays a crucial role in signaling perception. Marcia is dressed in a "conventional afternoon dress," reminiscent in cut and material of the outfit she wore at the beginning of the play; yet this time, the dress is "of a brilliant rose color."[190] The stage directions further note that Mrs. Gregg sees her as *"a woman of the world of thirty."*[191] The contrast between the vibrant, arguably provocative color and the clinical labeling of age serves to mark Marcia, in Mrs. Gregg's eyes, as inappropriate. Her appearance becomes a visual cue of her supposed transgression, a symbol of lived experience that challenges the ideal of womanhood Mrs. Gregg seeks to preserve.

The final scene, involving Mrs. Middleton, Marcia's own mother, seems to offer a gentler alternative, but ultimately proves just as restrictive. This dynamic, familiar from Treadwell's other plays such as *Constance Darrow* and *Machinal,* reflects a recurring pattern in which maternal affection becomes a vehicle for control. Mrs. Middleton enters in a stream of domestic concern, fussing over Marcia's health, her cough, her torn cuff, her disheveled hair. "You think too much," she chides, while simultaneously overwhelming her daughter with suggestions for tonics, rest, and obedience. [192] Unlike Mrs. Gregg, who condemns Marcia for her perceived moral excess, Mrs. Middleton infantilizes her, rendering her passive, fragile, and in perpetual need of maternal oversight. If Mrs. Gregg functions as the gatekeeper of social respectability, Mrs. Middleton emerges as the architect of emotional dependency. In this portrayal, Treadwell appears to draw from her own complex relationship with her mother, whom she reportedly struggled to forgive for two things: her failure to resist patriarchal norms

[190] Treadwell, *The Eye of the Beholder* 137.
[191] Treadwell, *The Eye of the Beholder* 137.
[192] Treadwell, *The Eye of the Beholder* 139.

within her marriage, and the emotionally constricting upbringing she imposed. In a 1905 letter, Treadwell wrote to her mother, "The only thing I could ever blame you for – the only thing – to bring me up weak and then rail at me because I'm not strong."[193] This personal history lends added poignancy to the scene, underscoring how maternal care, even when well-intentioned, can become a mechanism of control.

This scene again resonates with Heilmann's reading of first-wave feminist fiction, particularly the term "hypersymbiotic" mother.[194] As Heilmann explains, this maternal figure, often motivated by genuine concern, seeks to shield her daughter from patriarchal harm but, in doing so, paradoxically reproduces the very constraints she hopes to resist.[195] By projecting her own history of disempowerment onto her daughter, the hypersymbiotic mother denies her autonomy and reinforces feminine passivity. Mrs. Middleton exemplifies this pattern: her persistent fretting and infantilizing tone reflect a worldview shaped by internalized submission, one in which female safety is found in retreat, conformity, and self-effacement. While her concern is framed as maternal love, it ultimately functions as a mechanism of control, silencing Marcia's adult voice. De Beauvoir similarly critiques the idealization of the mother as a benign authority whose dominance is justified through care. As de Beauvoir observes, this ideal conceals a deeper reality: a mother who, in the name of affection, prevents her daughter from becoming an autonomous subject.[196] By the time Mrs. Middleton appears, Marcia has already been redefined through her husband's desire, her lover's fantasy, and his mother's condemnation. Now, she is pulled into yet another externally imposed identity: that of the helpless daughter. The structure of the play emphasizes the cumulative force of these projections. Just as Marcia begins to shed the erotic roles assigned to her by the men in her life, she is drawn into a domestic narrative rooted in modesty, obedience, and regression. Costume

[193] Dickey and López-Rodríguez 5.
[194] Heilmann 146.
[195] Heilmann 146.
[196] de Beauvoir 478.

plays a decisive role once again: the stage directions describe Marcia dressed "*as a little girl*" in a short dress of "*an old-fashioned rose shade*,"[197] signaling a visual infantilization. She is no longer a wife, a lover, or a seductress, but a child.

The juxtaposition of the two maternal figures thus also serves to dramatize an ideological tension within the historical period of first-wave feminism; tension which is still apparent today. Mrs. Gregg represents a conservative moralism aligned with social purity campaigns and maternalist politics, while Mrs. Middleton reflects a domestic traditionalism anchored in the private sphere. Though different in tone, both perspectives ultimately define women in terms of their service to others, as "Everywomen" whose value lies in embodying obedience. Treadwell critiques these positions not through overt argument, but through narrative accumulation. Each encounter strips Marcia further of agency, leaving her increasingly fragmented, silent, and estranged from any coherent sense of self.

This can again be seen in the light of Jaspers' philosophy. In his reflections on reality and experience, Jaspers argues that authenticity arises only when one actively confronts reality.[198] Marcia's life, however, is composed entirely of confrontations not with her own reality, but with the realities projected onto her by others, grounded in objectifying relationships: love without recognition, motherhood without nurture, desire without voice. In none of these encounters is she permitted a meaningful response. The relationships that should offer intimacy and affirmation instead generate coercion and fragmentation. The "will to communication," which Jaspers identifies as essential to grasping truth and achieving authentic existence,[199] is persistently obstructed. In this way, *The Eye of the Beholder* becomes not only a critique of how femininity is externally scripted, but also a meditation on how those scripts are perpetuated within familial structures. Treadwell's movement from male to female visitors

[197] Treadwell, *The Eye of the Beholder* 139.
[198] Jaspers 78.
[199] Jaspers 56.

is not merely a structural device, but a deliberate commentary on the nature of social inscription. Marcia is not only beheld by men, she is also beheld, and ultimately constrained, by women who have themselves internalized the gaze.

3.3 Fragmented Femininity and the Possibility of Authenticity

The final moments of *The Eye of the Beholder* offer no conventional resolution. There is no transformation, no dramatic rupture, no climactic assertion of identity. Instead, Marcia Wayne stands alone at the window and quietly reflects, "Everybody understands a little. Nobody understands enough."[200] Delivered in solitude and without further explanation, this line distills the play's central insight: that woman, under patriarchal modernity, is not a unified self but a fragmented figure, shaped by conflicting discourses, contradictory demands, and the coercive projections of others. For both Marcia and the audience, the unresolved question is whether any authentic identity can emerge from this multiplicity. The audience never encounters a fully realized Marcia, only the shifting masks she is forced to wear.

This ambiguity raises critical questions for a potential staging of the play: does the limited access to Marcia's inner life risk alienating viewers or undermining narrative coherence? Yet it is precisely through this refusal of resolution that Treadwell gestures toward something vital: the crisis of identity that both modernist philosophy and feminist theory have sought to articulate. She implicitly poses the question: what remains of the self when all available subject positions are externally imposed?

Each of the four scenes that structure the play presents Marcia in a different costume, vocal register, and emotional demeanor. These shifts are not part of a coherent personal evolution but rather abrupt transformations, underscoring that Marcia's identity is not internally

[200] Treadwell, *The Eye of the Beholder* 139.

developed but externally imposed. Treadwell's use of theatrical elements, such as costuming, gesture, and stage movement, renders this fragmentation visible onstage, enacting what Judith Butler would later theorize as the performativity of gender: identity not as an expression of some stable inner truth, but as a repeated stylization of the body within a normative framework.[201] Although Butler's theory of gender performativity would not be published until 1990,[202] Treadwell's dramaturgy seems to anticipate its central claim. De Beauvoir had already laid the groundwork in *The Second Sex* by asserting that "one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman."[203] In *The Eye of the Beholder*, Marcia's "becoming" is never a self-directed process; it is entirely reactive, shaped and reshaped in response to the gazes that define her.

Such a fragmentation of character aligns Treadwell's with the formal experiments of modernist expressionism, though she stops short of its full abstraction. Unlike *Machinal*, which submerges the protagonist's name and identity into a generic archetype ("Young Woman"), *The Eye of the Beholder* retains the boundaries of realism such as named characters, a single physical setting, interpersonal dialogue; yet it stretches that realism until it reveals its fissures. Dickey and López-Rodríguez rightly observe that the play is "a series of distorting mirrors," and that Mrs. Wayne's identity remains a palimpsest, traced over so many times by others that its original outline is no longer legible.[204] This fragmentation is not only a stylistic innovation; it is a structural diagnosis of how womanhood is culturally produced through contradiction.

Even in this aspect, Jaspers provides a valuable framework for interpreting the play's philosophical underpinnings, particularly his notion that reality confronts the individual with their own limitations and calls them into an encounter with freedom. Yet the essential condition for such authenticity – reciprocal dialogue – is conspicuously absent. Each of Marcia's interactions is, in effect, a monologue disguised as conversation; each encounter renders her an

[201] Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex"* (London: Routledge, 1993) 264.
[202] See Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (London: Routledge, 1990).
[203] de Beauvoir 247.
[204] Dickey and López-Rodríguez 74.

"object," thereby foreclosing the possibility of what he calls "encompassing existence."[205] Marcia's hope for an authentic life is continually thwarted by the inability or refusal of others to meet her as a subject. This failure is not only interpersonal but also structural. The play denies Marcia a soliloquy or extended monologue, the very discursive tools that theatre traditionally offers to articulate inner life. As Case, drawing on E. Ann Kaplan, notes, in the Western dramatic tradition "'woman' is constructed by and for the male gaze."[206] Treadwell confronts this legacy by crafting a protagonist who is consistently spoken for and spoken about, but rarely allowed to speak for herself. Even Marcia's final line is not assertive but observational: a simple acknowledgment of alienation rather than a declaration of resistance.

Heilmann's readings of New Woman fiction provide a complementary historical lens. In early feminist literature, Heilmann identifies a recurring motif of "inner crisis," where female protagonists struggle to reconcile the contradictory demands of tradition and modernity, morality and desire, maternal duty and personal ambition.[207] These tensions are not merely individual but generational, as daughters confront and often internalize the ideologies inherited from their mothers. Treadwell extends this motif into a visual and dramatic register, illustrating how Marcia is not simply perceived differently by others, but actively conscripted into roles shaped by the unresolved anxieties and thwarted ambitions of those around her. The two maternal figures do not merely judge Marcia; they attempt to live through her, each imposing a script rooted in her own fears about changing gender norms. As a result, Marcia is not only trapped between conflicting male fantasies, but between generational expectations that render a coherent and self-authored identity unattainable.

The final moment of *The Eye of the Beholder* offers no promise of reintegration or resolution. The silence that follows Marcia's closing line may be read as the collapse of any

[205] Jaspers 20.
[206] Case 118.
[207] Heilmann 174.

stable, unified self, but it may also signify a space where the roles imposed upon her have momentarily fallen away, allowing for the emergence of something unspoken, as yet undefined. Drawing on Jaspers, even the recognition of alienation constitutes a step forward, insofar as it prompts the individual to seek genuine communication.[208] Marcia's final line, then, functions both as a lament and a revelation. It names the world's failure to see her, but also marks her awareness of that failure. Whether this recognition has the potential to catalyze change remains unresolved.

This ambiguity represents one of the play's central vulnerabilities. Its fast pace raises numerous questions, yet these are not explicitly articulated so much as implied, leaving the audience to navigate a dense terrain of inference and assumption. Treadwell herself addressed this issue generally in her 1925 lecture "Writing a Play," where she asked, "Why doesn't the emotion come out as it went in, strong, intense, sincere?" and continued,

> All the emotional intensity in the world may be concentrated into the writing […] but curiously enough nothing whatever of this comes out of it. The result is either blaa or funny. The answer is very simple. Because the writer doesn't know how to write a play. I speak here with great authority. I've written so many plays like this. [209]

This suggests that Treadwell was well aware of the challenges involved in conveying emotional intensity from stage to audience. She referred to this as an "emotional battle with an audience," a struggle to unify the "scattered thoughts and feelings [of the human beings composing the audience] into one concentrated thought and feeling."[210] It is perhaps this difficulty that has contributed to the play's absence from the stage. Yet, paradoxically, the ambiguity that may have hindered its performance is also one of its strengths. By withholding any clear moral resolution or final statement, Treadwell resists the pull of didacticism and avoids the sentimental closure typical of melodrama. Marcia does not reclaim her voice through a

[208] Jaspers 20.
[209] Treadwell, "Writing a Play" 226.
[210] Treadwell, "Writing a Play" 224.

climactic assertion of agency, nor does she vanish into total silence. Instead, she remains suspended in ambiguity, fractured, yet not erased.

Treadwell's contribution, then, is both thematic and formal. By refusing to unify her protagonist, she dramatizes what it means to live as a socially fragmented subject, positioned between the poles of "Everywoman" and "New Woman," yet fully inhabiting neither. The play's refusal to resolve Marcia's identity mirrors the unresolved and unstable status of womanhood in modernity: caught between cultural categories, shaped by competing projections, always beheld, never fully present. In this way, Treadwell not only anticipates Beauvoir's existential feminism but also prefigures the concerns of poststructuralist gender theory, which conceives of identity not as a stable essence but as an effect of discourse and power. What remains at the end of *The Eye of the Beholder* is not a coherent subject, but a silhouette, traced by the outlines others have drawn.

4. An Expressionist Masterpiece: *Machinal*

Machinal is by far Treadwell's most critically acclaimed and frequently revived play. It is the only one among her works to have received sustained scholarly attention and to have enjoyed a significant afterlife on the stage. Several factors may explain this singular success. Premiering on Broadway in 1928, the play was directly inspired by a real-life case that Treadwell had followed closely during her time as a journalist: the infamous 1927 trial of Ruth Snyder and Judd Gray[211] for the murder of Snyder's husband. Both defendants were convicted and sentenced to death; Snyder would become the first woman in New York State to be executed in the electric chair. The case, one of the most sensational of its time, captivated the public imagination and drew intense media scrutiny. Its widespread appeal can be attributed in part to the unsettling narratives circulated by the press; narratives that transformed the trial into a spectacle of moral panic and morbid fascination. *Machinal* likely owed part of its initial success precisely to this cultural climate of sensationalism.

As Ann Jones observes in her study of historical cases in which women were convicted of murder – including the Snyder case – one of the trial's most disturbing, and thus most compelling, elements for the public was the ordinariness of the defendants. The notion that "the perpetrators were no different from their neighbors," Jones writes, led to an anxious cultural question: "what is to deter those neighbors from committing similar adulteries and murders?"[212] This anxiety was amplified by popular outlets such as the *New York Post*, *Herald Tribune*, and *Outlook*, which helped to frame the trial as a contemporary "morality play."[213] Over time, however, media attention narrowed its focus almost exclusively to Ruth Snyder, and not with sympathy. As Jones notes, Snyder was quickly constructed as a figure of public warning: "a bad woman, a bad wife, a bad mother, […] an utterly cold, inhuman vampire completely unlike

[211] Ozieblo and Dickey 146.
[212] Ann Jones, *Women Who Kill* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1980) 254.
[213] Jones 254–255.

those good, warm, self-sacrificing wives and mothers who represented the best of American womanhood."[214] Rather than seeking to understand Snyder's motives, the press reduced her to an emblem of deviance. She was fashioned into a cautionary emblem of deviant womanhood, less a figure to prompt reflection than a deterrent against transgression. This construction, paradoxically, heightened the cultural intrigue and presumably contributed to the play's appeal.

Treadwell was likely motivated by both these factors in writing *Machinal*. She clearly recognized the topic's commercial potential, as evidenced in the play's earliest surviving manuscript notes, expressing the hope of creating "a genuine box office attraction" through the "interest and curiosity already aroused in it by the actual and similar story of Ruth Snyder."[215] Yet, her ambitions seem to extend beyond market calculation. The play emerges as a fusion of personal experience and the external pressures that shape, and ultimately crush, individual lives. Through a distinctly feminist lens, Treadwell reimagines the story of a woman trapped in a loveless marriage who sees no escape other than murder. Rather than sensationalize, she uses the narrative to interrogate the systemic biases that pervade institutions ranging from the family to the courts. As Dickey observes, she "resists the sensational aspects of the story in favor of exploring the social conditions and gender inequities that might have led to this woman's act of violence."[216] Her interest, therefore, lies not in scandal, but in structure.

This intention is also well-described in the above-mentioned manuscript, where Treadwell outlines her conceptual framework in the initial stage directions. The play, she writes, aims to "show the different flat surfaces and hard edges of life that the woman comes up against; and disclose her inner reactions to these."[217] Structurally, this is to be achieved through "eight acted scenes connected by monologues – spoken thoughts. These monologues are all the voice

[214] Jones 256.
[215] Ozieblo and Dickey 148.
[216] Ozieblo and Dickey 146.
[217] Ozieblo and Dickey 148.

of the woman coming from out a dark stage."[218] In the finalized version of *Machinal*, the eight scenes were turned to nine episodes; but the plan stays the same. The form of these inner thoughts is open to the directorial interpretation; Treadwell asks herself whether they should move "in an approximately straight line, or can one be permitted a nearer approach to the scatteredness, unexpectedness of the relaxed meditating mind?"[219] Additionally, she articulates her hope for the production: to create a stylized theatrical experience "by accentuation, by distortion" that engages through the formal innovation of its staging, through the story, and, crucially, through its potential to "quicken […] still secret places, in the consciousness of the audience, especially of women."[220] Her objective is thus both artistic and political: to challenge dominant cultural narratives through formal experimentation, and to awaken affective and critical responses, particularly among female spectators.

The contemporary critical reception suggests she achieved that goal: since the 1990s, *Machinal* has enjoyed a resurgence on stages, particularly in academic and experimental theatre settings. Beyond its "incontrovertibly feminist" resonance, as Cary M. Mazer notes, the play's allure is also due to the abundant opportunities for creative interpretation and visual innovation it offers to directors and designers.[221] In sum, the enduring appeal of *Machinal* lies in its compelling fusion of topical urgency and formal experimentation, which is a combination that captivated audiences in the 1920s and continues to do so today. A 1928 reviewer for *The New York American* praised the production for presenting "a complete picture of life's bitterness and essential meanness, painted with […] strokes of the realist, yet achieving […] the sweep and swing of expressionism."[222] This synthesis of sharp social commentary with stylistic boldness

[218] Ozieblo and Dickey 148.
[219] Ozieblo and Dickey 148.
[220] Ozieblo and Dickey 148-149.
[221] Cary M. Mazer, "The Machinal Machine," University of Pennsylvania, November 26, 1998, https://web.english.upenn.edu/~cmazer/machina2.html.
[222] Pierre de Rohan, "Machinal Ugly but Great Play," *New York American*, September 8, 1928, quoted in Ozieblo and Dickey 154.

situates *Machinal* as a landmark work in American modernist theatre. Rather than sensationalizing a real-life case, the play transforms it into a vehicle for interrogating both the personal and institutional structures that govern women's lives.

4.1 Expressionism: Treadwell's Aesthetic and Political Logic

Machinal transforms personal tragedy into an expressionist critique of modern life, using stylization not as ornament but as ideological and structural necessity. The play's formal innovations, including fragmented dialogue, non-linear structure, typified characters, and an oppressive soundscape, are integral to its thematic concerns. It is through these devices that *Machinal* explores how women are alienated, fragmented, and mechanized by the world around them that dictates their lives. Weiss describes the play as one "criticizing the mechanical age responsible for the [electrocution]" of the Young Woman by surrounding her with a "claustrophobic world" constructed from expressionist elements.[223] Far from simply mimicking German expressionism, Treadwell adapts its techniques to the specific cultural and gendered conditions of American modernity. As Walker puts it, expressionism in U.S. drama is "not simply a minor derivation of the better-known German movement, but a complicated artistic response to the forces of modernization."[224] *Machinal* is a key example of this adaptation: a play that repurposes expressionist form to expose the systemic dehumanization of women under the totality of patriarchy and capitalism.

The delayed emergence of expressionism in American theatre can be traced to the dominance of commercial realism on the U.S. stage in the early twentieth century. As David Krasner notes, "the American drama of the first 15 years of the twentieth century reflected […]

[223] Weiss 4.
[224] Walker 2.

a theatrical business structure that resisted new forms."[225] When experimental forms did begin to surface, they responded not just to European artistic trends, but to distinctly American anxieties: the alienation brought about by rapid urbanization, the spread of mechanized labor, and the disintegration of traditional modes of communication. C. W. E. Bigsby captures this cultural shift in his observation that "the small town had given way to the anonymous city; the independent farmer to the industrial worker [and] language became deeply suspect as an expression of reality."[226] In this context, expressionism offers a way to dramatize not only external social change but internal psychological dislocation. Erich Fromm's insight, quoted by Bigsby, that "man does not only sell commodities, he sells himself and feels himself to be a commodity"[227] resonates powerfully in *Machinal*, where the Young Woman's life is shaped by the logic of commodification: processed, unpacked, and ultimately disposed of like a defective product.

Treadwell stages this alienation through a tightly structured series of nine episodes, each capturing a critical moment in the Young Woman's life: work, mother-daughter relationship, marriage, motherhood, infidelity, murder, trial, execution. Yet these are not presented as a linear narrative of development or transformation; rather, they are mapping the protagonist's life as a conveyor belt of socially prescribed roles. As Walker notes, in this way, "*Machinal* illustrates how gender roles are produced and. reproduced through a mechanistic process."[228] The very form of the play mimics these mechanized routines it critiques: repetitive labor, obligatory marriage, mind-numbing aftermath of childbirth, or the bureaucratic choreography of the courtroom and the death chamber. Each episode is a closed circuit, exposing how life itself becomes mechanized when reduced to function.

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[225] Krasner 3.
[226] C. W. E. Bigsby, *A Critical Introduction to Twentieth-Century American Drama. 1, 1900-1940* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982) 122-123.
[227] Bigsby 125.
[228] Walker 215.

The opening episode immediately immerses the audience in this world of mechanical repetition. In a crowded office, workers known only by their functions peak in clipped, repetitive phrases that echo the rhythm of typewriters and subway trains. The Young Woman stands apart, overwhelmed and fragmented, unable to synchronize her speech or thought with the surrounding noise. Weiss reads this dissonance as emblematic of a world in which language itself becomes mechanical and the office workers themselves "have become mechanized, speaking and behaving in the same manner as the technology that assists them in their work."[229] Expressionism here serves to render not just alienation but the very erosion of subjectivity.

This erosion is also mirrored in the protagonist's fractured language. Unlike the staccato efficiency of the workers, the Young Woman's speech is marked by hesitations, unfinished thoughts, and repetitions. She speaks in fragments, constantly interrupted by others, by herself, by the soundscape. Her voice seems unable to form in a space already saturated with noise. As Walker observes, Treadwell's dramaturgy combines mute bodies and disarticulated sounds "to create a spatial and aural landscape of alienation in which the Young Woman lives."[230] This disarticulation becomes most pronounced in scenes like the hospital and the courtroom, where the Young Woman's physical presence is most visible but her ability to express herself most compromised. In the hospital scene, her words are drowned out by the mechanical rhythms of medical staff and the sound of a jackhammer outside. Walker sees this moment as literalizing the Young Woman's powerlessness: "Physically and emotionally exhausted, she literarily has no voice."[231]

Expressionism thus becomes not merely a way to externalize psychological states but a means to critique the very systems that shape and suppress those states. As Dickey observes,

[229] Weiss 6-7.
[230] Walker 229.
[231] Walker 217.

Machinal uniquely combines "European expressionism and domestic American realism"[232] to expose how women's lives are structured by impersonal systems. Treadwell's technique anchors these stylized episodes in concrete detail: the fit of a glove, the sound of a typewriter, a familiar song. These details allow the audience to recognize the world onstage even as it is rendered strange through distortion and stylization. A contemporary reviewer, Robert Littell, captured this effect succinctly, noting, "All sorts of things that do not strictly belong to the play, things that would be excluded by other playwrights, stray into *Machinal* and sink out of sight again, giving us overtones and glimpses and other dimensions which the ordinary self-contained play is too 'well-made' ever to tolerate."[233] Such moments of fragmentation and excess create an emotional resonance that draws the audience in, while maintaining an aesthetic distance characteristic of modernist theatre. In doing so, *Machinal* achieves an artistic richness that, in the view of some critics, surpasses even the most technically proficient works of contemporaries like Eugene O'Neill.[234]

Importantly, the play avoids the "confident moralism" that Bigsby identifies in much of American drama from the interwar period."[235] Like *The Eye of the Beholder*, *Machinal* offers no redemption or catharsis. Its structure instead accumulates pressure, anxiety, and fragmentation, culminating not in clarity but in silencing. Helen's final exclamation, cut short by the electric chair, echoes Jaspers' notion, discussed in the previous chapter, of the "will to communication,"[236] and its persistent foreclosure by oppressive structures. As in *The Eye of the Beholder,* here Treadwell portrays the potential for authenticity and freedom not as realizable breakthroughs, but as possibilities systematically denied. The machinery of execution then both

[232] Dickey, "The Expressionist Moment: Sophie Treadwell" in *The Cambridge Companion to American Women Playwrights* 77.
[233] Dickey, "The Expressionist Moment" 77.
[234] Dickey, "The Expressionist Moment" 77.
[235] Bigsby 125.
[236] Jaspers 56.

literally and symbolically drowns out her voice, extinguishing not only her life but also any last hope for transformation.

Treadwell's use of expressionism makes this significantly palpable. Through stylized movement, fractured language, and oppressive sound, she dramatizes the pressures of the Young Woman's surroundings and her desperation of as well as internalization of external constraints. Her ultimate downfall is not due to an innate flaw or personal failure, but because the world she inhabits offers no alternative. In this way, *Machinal* becomes more than a portrait of one woman's oppression; it serves as a tangible embodiment of modernity's machinery, articulated through its theatrical design. Treadwell chooses expressionism not simply for its aesthetics, but because it allows to make that machinery visible, audible, and ultimately, inescapable.

4.2 Mechanized Lives: The Woman as Product of the System

The title of the play, drawn from the French term meaning mechanical, automatic, or involuntary,[237] presents *Machinal*'s central concern: the mechanization of modern womanhood under patriarchy. As Dickey notes, the title encapsulates a condition in which individual will is subsumed by surrounding forces.[238] From its outset, the play situates its protagonist, the Young Woman, not as a fully individual subject but as a type: unnamed, ordinary, and interchangeable. She is a woman processed by expectations, pushed from role to role (daughter, worker, wife, mother) until her only act of agency, the murder of her husband, is reabsorbed as another function in the societal machine. Rather than positioning her as a monstrous or exceptional figure, Treadwell constructs Helen as an "everywoman," shaped and ultimately broken by the patriarchal system that allows no space for authentic selfhood. Yet, there are also other women

[237] Ozieblo and Dickey 147.
[238] Ozieblo and Dickey 147.

characters in the play submitted to the same logic with different results, as is the case of the Telephone Girl and the Mother.

The play's approach to naming serves as a revealing mechanism through which the workings of the system are made visible. The protagonist is never given a personal name in the script reference to her character and is described in the first stage directions simply as "an ordinary young woman – any woman."[239] This abstraction places her in stark contrast to her coworkers, who are identified only by their function: Filing Clerk, Telephone Girl, Adding Clerk. Yet it also implicates her in the same system of mechanization. Walker sees this anonymity as a reduction of the individual to "a Taylorized employee."[240] The Young Woman is emblematic of a larger social reality: one in which individuals are shaped not by internal desire but by the roles they are expected to fulfill. Treadwell's own remarks reinforce this reading; in describing the Young Woman's experience, she calls it "essentially hard, mechanized […] all are difficult for her – mechanical, nerve-nagging."[241] Similarly to Constance Darrow, the Young Woman is caught in a world in which every social script only deepens her "everywomanhood;" she represents a woman's life reduced to function. In this context, mechanization is not merely environmental, but also existential.

The figure of the Telephone Girl offers a counterpoint, representing the "New Woman": economically independent, sexually confident, and socially mobile. She appears to inhabit the machinery of modern life with ease; similar to Nan in *Constance Darrow*, she seems to navigate flirtations and workplace banter with apparent control. Yet even her modernity is constrained by scripted behaviors. As Weiss notes, her speech – similarly to the other employees – is delivered in the same "monotonous voice," [242] repeating variants of three social scripts: professional communication, suitor rejection, and suitor acceptance. Her autonomy is more

[239] Treadwell, *Machinal* xi.
[240] Walker 216.
[241] Weiss 6.
[242] Weiss 7.

performative than substantive; she enacts the illusion of choice within tightly bounded roles. Heilmann's insights into New Woman fiction is relevant here, as it also "often calls into question the possibility of individual liberation."[243] Treadwell compresses this question into a single character whose name is a job title, rendering her agency as a loop of choices preordained by modern patriarchy. Together the Young Woman and the Telephone Girl sketch a spectrum of modern femininity. One is crushed by the machine, the other dances to its rhythm; neither escapes its logic. Both function as templates, interchangeable, impersonal, and legible to the audience not as individuals, but as types. What the play follows, then, is how a living woman is pushed through this template, often by people who are themselves extensions of the system. Treadwell dramatizes how submission is socially orchestrated, internalized, and swiftly neutralized when resisted.

The Young Woman's Mother is one such conduit of patriarchal control. Like Mrs. Middleton in *The Eye of the Beholder*, she exerts a smothering influence, insisting that her daughter eat her dinner, dismissing her emotional distress, and offering financial pragmatism over emotional support. Most tellingly, when the Young Woman hesitates to marry Mr. Jones, her mother urges her to proceed once she learns of his wealth, dismissing her daughters fears of not loving Jones with, "Love! – what does that amount to! […] Will it pay the bills?"[244] In this way, it is her who forces the Young Woman into a loveless marriage. De Beauvoir describes this dynamic as a double jealousy: "of the world that takes her daughter, and of her daughter who, in conquering part of the world, robs her of it."[245] The maternal figure, rather than protecting or empowering her daughter, reinforces the very system that crushes her. The daughter's later reflection on their relationship, when she laments, "[s]he's never known me,"[246]

[243] Heilmann 175.
[244] Treadwell, *Machinal* 17.
[245] de Beauvoir 479.
[246] Treadwell, *Machinal* 81.

signals both estrangement and insight: a recognition that the mother's complicity in the machinery of gender roles has rendered true understanding impossible.

The prison visit from the Young Woman's mother serves as a poignant extension of the play's exploration of generational trauma and emotional deprivation. In this encounter, Helen, now facing imminent execution, registers not only the absence of maternal care throughout her life, but also her lingering desire for it. As her mother turns to leave, the Young Woman reaches out to her, and the two share an embrace that suggests a momentary gesture of forgiveness, or at least recognition. Crucially, this physical closeness prompts Helen to recall her own "strange child"[247] she never wanted to have, and she is suddenly seized by fear. She realizes that, like her mother, she too has failed to know or protect her daughter. In a desperate attempt to break the cycle, she utters her final plea: "Let her live, Mother. Let her live!"[248] Yet even this appeal is cut short by the procedural machinery of the system, which – as if afraid what other instructions she might give – swiftly reasserts control and leads her away. The moment crystallizes the tragic pattern of maternal alienation passed from one generation to the next, marked by a clear yearning for change, but overshadowed by a system too rigid to allow transformation.

This cycle of misrecognition and repression is portrayed not only through the women characters, but also through the way the men treat them. Much has already been said about the husband-wife dynamics in the chapter on *Constance Darrow,* however, the oppressive patterns extend even into moments of supposed intimacy with the man whom the Young Woman falls in love with. Her affair with her lover, who is identified only as "Man," initially appears to offer liberation. In Episode Six, the soundscape quiets, and for the first time, the protagonist speaks fluidly and lyrically. Weiss describes her as "charged with the desire for love and romance,"[249]

[247] Treadwell, *Machinal* 81.
[248] Treadwell, *Machinal* 81.
[249] Weiss 9.

and draws attention to her description in the stage directions: the Woman's gestures are now "relaxed, sure and full of natural grace."[250] She laughs, sings, and, in this moment, is simply called "Woman," suggesting a fleeting reclaim of selfhood. The atmosphere diverges radically from the clipped rhythms of the earlier episodes, presenting what Dickey and López-Rodríguez interpret as Treadwell's psychoanalytic belief in "sexual openness [as] the emergence of the authentic self."[251]

However, even this seemingly liberating moment is not free from constraint. The lover's language, though affectionate on the surface, is patronizing and diminutive; he repeatedly calls Helen "honey" and "kid," echoing the kind of belittlement seen in Ben's treatment of Constance in the first act of *Constance Darrow*. While Helen appears to come into herself during this encounter in what Walker identifies as a rare moment when "Treadwell perfectly coordinates [the Young Woman's] three languages:" voice, gesture and words,[252] his fleeting integration of selfhood is undercut by the lover's dismissive behavior. Treadwell allows Helen a brief synthesis of "reason, emotion, and will"[253] in this scene, but it is not sustained.

The lover's responses reveal the shallowness of his commitment. When Helen tries to affirm a deeper emotional connection, insisting that they "belong together," he deflects with a flippant, "Sing something else."[254] This response underscores the transactional nature of his interest: Helen is not unique but interchangeable, one among many women who fulfill his desires. His casual admission, "All women look like angels to me,"[255] reinforces this perception, exposing the consumerist logic that frames female identity in terms of availability and aesthetic appeal. Consequently, the transformation Helen experiences cannot last. Unlike Zizi in *Ladies Leave*, whose erotic awakening enables lasting self-assertion, the Young Woman in *Machinal*

[250] Treadwell, *Machinal* 50.
[251] Dickey and López-Rodríguez 15.
[252] Walker 234.
[253] Walker 234.
[254] Treadwell, *Machinal* 47.
[255] Treadwell, *Machinal* 48.

is offered only a fleeting reprieve. She escapes the immediate confines of her marriage, but not the wider cultural machinery that commodifies female desire. Her rebellion is real but, at the same time, absorbed back into the same system that momentarily allowed it.

The murder of her husband appears, then, as the only act of resistance available. Yet it, too, is immediately reabsorbed by the apparatus she sought to escape. From the beginning of the play, Helen, an "everywoman," is incompatible with her modern-paced surroundings. She repeats the word "submit" at critical points of resistance. In a monologue that ends Episode Five, she says, "I've submitted enough […] I won't submit to any more!"[256] and later, in the hair-cutting scene of Episode Nine, she cries out, "Always have to submit – to submit!"[257] Her act of rebellion is not born of deviance, but of desperation. In Episode Eight, when asked in court why she committed the murder, she stammers, "I – I wanted to be free,"[258] only to be met with a burst of laughter from the courtroom. Her plea is not understood; it is ridiculed. In that moment, her isolation is complete. She stands not as a threat to patriarchal order, but as its product; she is a woman broken by submission and punished for resisting it.

As Jaspers suggests, reality confronts an individual with limitations, for instance guilt, suffering, mortality, which however can offer a path to an encounter with freedom.[259] However, Helen is denied that possibility. When confronting reality, her rebellion, misread and ridiculed, becomes merely another signal the machine uses to justify its own continuation. Weiss succinctly captures this tragic loop claiming that "the cold machinery that condemns and imprisons Helen" is always one step ahead.[260] In the end, the play indicts individual characters, but the system that renders them all unfree.

[256] Treadwell, *Machinal* 30.
[257] Treadwell, *Machinal* 79.
[258] Treadwell, *Machinal* 75.
[259] Jaspers 20.
[260] Weiss 12.

4.3 Institutions of Control: Women Under Surveillance

Treadwell also avoids vague indictments of "society" in *Machinal*; instead, she stages a precise confrontation between a typified woman and the institutional forces that claim to serve, heal, or redeem, but in practice discipline and erase her. The play traces the Young Woman's encounters with several public systems, namely, medicine, law, religion, and the press, all of which fail her at critical moments. Where *Constance Darrow* explored the moralistic repression of the domestic sphere, *Machinal* expands the critique outward, focusing on institutions traditionally regarded as protective or authoritative. Treadwell suggests that these structures are not simply indifferent but actively complicit in the oppression of women, reducing human experience to a mechanical sequence of duties and punishments. Through a tightly choreographed dramaturgy of repetition, typecasting, and stylized language, the play constructs a system in which every institutional cog presses the Young Woman further into objecthood.

In Episode Four, titled "Maternal," the audience is transported into a public maternity ward, where institutional medicine converges with industrial noise. The Young Woman, now a patient and a new mother, speaks in broken, exhausted fragments while doctors and nurses move with impersonal precision, deaf to her needs. Outside, the noise of a "riveting machine"[261] blends into the scene, fusing her physical vulnerability with the sonic brutality of the institution's expansion. As Walker observes, the effect of the sound, significantly produced by a "phallic jackhammer" representing the persistence of the patriarchal order, "is expressionistic in suggesting that the very ground of the Young Woman's existence is being ripped up from underneath her feet."[262] Thus, the institution whose task is to heal instead only processes the body, turning childbirth from a potentially transformative experience into a routine task. It is not simply the failure of individuals but of the whole apparatus that cannot accommodate emotional or bodily complexity.

[261] Treadwell, *Machinal* 27.
[262] Walker 230.

Yet, to the audience, the Young Woman's resistance to motherhood is not deviant, but deeply human. She never wanted the child; her pregnancy, implicitly the result of a non-consensual encounter, is situated between Episodes Three and Four without narrative exposition, underscoring its involuntary nature. This absence echoes a systemic failure: the absence of choice, the absence of care. If *Constance Darrow* depicted pregnancy as hope for meaning, *Machinal* presents its counterpoint: even this route was closed to its protagonist. Now, post-partum and alienated, the Young Woman struggles with her maternal role, and rather than receiving support, she is managed. Her body is treated as a malfunctioning machine in need of recalibration. Even the nurse, a woman herself, functions as an agent of the system. Like the Mother character, she silences rather than listens. Her care is conditioned by institutional loyalty, not empathy. When the male doctors arrive, their authority is unchallenged; they speak, the nurse obeys.

By Episode Eight, the legal system offers the Young Woman no greater recognition. Here, she is no longer a patient, but a defendant. The courtroom is presented not as a space for deliberation or justice, but as an expressionist theatre of ritualized aggression and role-play. As in earlier scenes, characters are identified solely by institutional titles (Judge, Lawyer for Prosecution Layer for Defense, Bailiff), reinforcing the depersonalization that has defined the protagonist's experience throughout the play. Dialogue is delivered in syncopated, overlapping rhythms, evoking the relentless logic of machinery. As Weiss observes, Treadwell "represents the courtroom as a war zone,"[263] with the reporters' descriptions of the scene in terms of a battlefield, referencing "heavy artillery fire" and "machine-gun attack."[264] What unfolds is not a pursuit of truth, but a stylized enactment of patriarchal ideology that further strips the Young Woman of voice, agency, and humanity.

[263] Weiss 12
[264] Treadwell, *Machinal* 73.

Historical parallels to the Snyder–Gray case are especially telling here. As Jones documents, Ruth Snyder was cast in the press as the "Fiend Wife," a "woman of steel," or a "vampire,"[265] while her lover Judd Gray was portrayed as a respectable citizen "love-mad" by an evil woman who "forced her will upon him."[266] Treadwell channels this dynamic into the courtroom of *Machinal*, where, as mentioned above, the Young Woman's halting statement, "I – I wanted to be free," is met not with reflection or empathy, but with derision.[267] The laughter it provokes mirrors the dismissive response too often observed in legal and public discourse when victims of systemic or domestic abuse retaliate against their oppressors. Rather than recognizing her words as a plea for autonomy or a response to existential despair, the court treats them as confirmation of guilt. In this way, the trial scene becomes not a search for justice but another mechanism within the broader machinery of social control, reducing a complex individual to a fixed legal identity, a woman found guilty.

Religion fares no better. In Episode Nine, as Helen awaits execution, she is visited by a priest. The scene opens with stage directions that emphasize her passive position: she sits with folded hands, while the priest prays. In the background, the voice of a fellow prisoner, a Black man, sings a spiritual. The contrast is sharp; the priest's prayer is stilted, mechanical, impersonal; the spiritual is supposedly emotive, personal, human. Walker reads this juxtaposition as the evidence of "the bankruptcy of language if it is isolated from other forms of meaning."[268] However, the contrast can also be seen as a critique of institutional religion's complicity in the machinery of death. The priest, offering only generic absolution through "meaningless clichés,"[269] is only another accomplice of the system which offers no

[265] Jones 256–257.
[266] Jones 258.
[267] Treadwell, *Machinal* 75.
[268] Walker 231.
[269] Walker 231.

understanding for a woman. When Helen seeks comfort or answers, he retreats into repetitive fragments of scripture, his voice eventually becoming a mere background noise.

Again, Treadwell as if subverts Jaspers' thoughts on search for authenticity, which the realization of one's own mortality may convey.[270] Rather than opening a path toward existential clarity or spiritual liberation, death in the play is rendered as a fully mechanized process, orchestrated with the cold precision of modern industry. The execution unfolds as a series of automated cues, with Helen's final plea, "Somebody!"[271] not answered but extinguished, absorbed into the machinery of the event. Salvation is no more attainable than justice or healing; religion has become the soft-voiced attendant of a technological apparatus it once sought to sanctify. *Machinal* stages death not as a disruption of the system, but as its most definitive enactment.

This final episode collapses all the institutions into one; their failure is complete. However, Treadwell adds one more layer: the press. Reporters hover at Helen's downfall, distilling her story into headline-sized judgments. Their dialogue in Episodes Eight and Nine mimics the rhythm of assembly-line inspectors, examining tragedy for marketable copy. Yet, as Weiss reminds, the reporters are far from trustworthy, creating "their own narrative of the story the audience has already seen, and each of them reports a different 'truth.'"[272] In the courtroom, their notes are in direct oppositions; while the First Reporter writes that "the accused woman's defense was badly riddled," and that she is "pale and trembling," the Second Reporter writes down that "the defendant was able to maintain her position of innocence in the face of rapid-fire questioning that […] never seriously menaced her defense," and describes her as "flushed but calm."[273] Yet, neither of these observations are accurately aligned with what the audience sees on stage. The press and its echoes of reality thus remind of the final lines of *The Eye of the*

[270] Jaspers 78.
[271] Treadwell, *Machinal* 83.
[272] Weiss 12.
[273] Treadwell, *Machinal* 73.

Beholder, where Mrs. Wayne sighs, "Everybody understands a little. Nobody understands enough."[274] In this light, though, the implication becomes broader and more unsettling: one's misunderstanding is not restricted to a personal level; there is systemic misrecognition that sustains patriarchal control.

Weiss describes the press as "part of the cold machinery that condemns and imprisons Helen"[275] noting their use of tabloid shorthand to flatten her story into cliché. Jones's analysis of the Snyder case underscores the real-world analogue, with newspapers busy to come up with pre-fabricated and easy-explanatory labels for both Ruth Snyder and Judd Gray,[276] as mentioned above. *Machinal* mirrors these distortions through a rapid-fire montage in Episode Seven, where Helen scans newspaper headlines that echo her own inner turmoil, such as "Girl turns on gas […]. Woman leaves all for love […]. Young wife disappears."[277] Rather than finding clarity or information, she discovers a social script written down for an "Everywoman" in similar situation as is hers; it is a script that both reflects and directs her. The press thus also functions as a meta-institution: it reports, predicts, and shapes behavior, extending the logic of mechanical control into language itself.

Across all these institutions, Treadwell constructs what might be called a closed system of feminine containment. Each institution claims a unique social mandate: care, justice, salvation, information. However, in practice, they operate according to the same logic: procedural efficiency over personal understanding, turning womanhood into a series of mechanized procedures. The expressionist technique makes this visible: stylized roles, rhythmic speech, mechanical soundscapes, and symbolic lighting reinforce the theme of depersonalization. The Young Woman is not heard, only processed. Her journey from anonymity to notoriety to oblivion is not the result of inner pathology but systemic

[274] Treadwell, *The Eye of the Beholder* 139.
[275] Weiss 11-12.
[276] Jones 256-259.
[277] Treadwell, *Machinal* 53.

orchestration. In critiquing these structures, *Machinal* anticipates later feminist analyses of biopolitics, disciplinary power, and media spectacle. Treadwell shows that oppression is not confined singularly to family or workplace; it is encoded into the very institutions that define modern life. As Jaspers writes, freedom requires a "leap from the totality of immanence to transcendence,"[278] but *Machinal* offers no such leap. The machinery is too complete, its rhythms continue. The question it leaves behind is not one of personal guilt, but systemic design: if the machine works so flawlessly, what will it take to stop it?

[278] Jaspers 24-25.

5. *Ladies Leave*: *Machinal* in Reverse?

Staged on Broadway in 1929, only a year after *Machinal,* Treadwell's *Ladies Leave* presents a markedly different theatrical form: structured in three acts and billed by the playwright herself as a *"modern comedy of morals."*[279] Yet the temporal proximity of the two plays prompted several critics to seek thematic connections between them. As Dickey and López-Rodríguez observe, some reviewers perceived *Ladies Leave* as "a largely lighthearted inversion of the same theme as that in *Machinal*," while most dismissed it as a "frothy satire of psychoanalysis and the American marriage." [280] Both readings reflect a certain misrecognition of Treadwell's feminist concerns.

There is no doubt that satire plays a central role in *Ladies Leave*, though in a far more subversive mode than contemporary audiences seem to have expected. The play's protagonist, Zizi, begins as a disenchanted upper-middle-class wife of a magazine mogul, drifting into a flirtation with her husband's employee, Philip, in pursuit of excitement. By the second act, set six weeks later, Zizi has undergone a decisive transformation. Her trajectory questions the very "traditional" values her husband, Burnham Powers, upholds: values he articulates in statements such as "a man's only hope lies in finding himself an old-fashioned girl, untouched by modernity," and his unwavering belief that "the American husband is the best husband in the world."[281] It is precisely such gendered clichés that the play sets out to dismantle, most incisively through Zizi herself and, equally important, through the character of Doctor Jeffer, a Viennese psychoanalyst and popularizer of Freudian theory.

Though it was often interpreted as parodical among critics of the time, Jeffer's function in the play moves far beyond. As an outsider to American culture, he offers a reflective, critical perspective on its moral pretensions, its obsession with capitalist gain, and its commodification

[279] Treadwell, *Ladies Leave* 140.
[280] Dickey and López-Rodríguez 77.
[281] Treadwell, *Ladies Leave* 144.

of human relationships. When Powers attempts to enlist Jeffer in his campaign to warn American women and "open their eyes to the menace," the doctor's dry response, "Ah! Our old friend – the menace!" cuts through the moral panic and exposes its hollowness.[282]

The significance of Jeffer in the play, however, extends beyond the critical perspective on American's claim on morality of the time. With a certain distance, he is able to reflect on the broader problematic issues of American society and to address them with directness. His monologue in the first act provides a lucid critique of the commercial culture that reduces love to yet another product to be marketed,

> If I were a young man pleading my cause to the American girl, […] I would simply tell her that love is better for the complexion than any two creams – better for the digestion than chopped oats – that it prevents colds – stops pyorrhea – that it is a quick brain quickener – a swift soul sensitizer – and that it is given for the taking – don't even send a coupon.[283]

Jeffer's rhetoric points to the commodification of intimacy, where love must compete in a marketplace of creams, diets, and slogans.

However, he also acts as a catalyst for Zizi's awakening. Dickey and López-Rodríguez connect his character to Theodor Reik, a "well-known author" of the time "who disseminates psychoanalytic theory" in a comprehensive language for a common reader.[284] They also note that such writings clearly "deeply influenced" Treadwell and suggest that, through them, she discovered "the 'cause' of her internal demons."[285] Similarly, Jeffer writes in a manner presumably easy to understand for Zizi; we learn in the first act that she has been reading his book. When asked if she has taken anything from it "for herself," she replies uncertainly, "I don't know yet;"[286] by the second act, however, the answer is clear: she and Powers have separated, and she has taken Philip as a lover – though not necessarily as a partner in love. In

[282] Treadwell, *Ladies Leave* 143.
[283] Treadwell, *Ladies Leave* 146-147.
[284] Dickey and López-Rodríguez 76.
[285] Dickey and López-Rodríguez 76.
[286] Treadwell, *Ladies Leave* 144.

the third act, her transformation is acknowledged directly by Jeffer, who remarks appreciatively, "You were […] covered over, before – smothered – buried. […] But now –!"[287] Their dialogue reveals Zizi's emergence into self-awareness and agency, marking her transition from the ornamental wife to a woman who chooses for herself.

As should be clear by this chapter, Treadwell's female protagonists often dramatize the tension between social expectation and authentic selfhood. Constance Darrow is only beginning her journey as an "Everywoman" disillusioned by false ideals; Mrs. Wayne in *The Eye of the Beholder* has already acquired insight but does not allow to let the audience see her true self; the Young Woman in *Machinal* pursues a misguided escape from subjugation. In *Ladies Leave*, however, Zizi finally completes the trajectory: her movement from domestic confinement toward self-articulation suggests a fully realized transformation from the "Everywoman" to the "New Woman." In that respect, *Ladies Leave* present a uniquely positive outlook on the women's position and a powerful attempt at translating Reik and other psychoanalytic popularizers' efforts into drama.

The audience's misreading of the play arguably stemmed from Treadwell's overestimation of their interpretive readiness. Though *Ladies Leave* was advertised as a "modern comedy of morals," a genre Hugh Holman defines as a form of satire aimed at correcting moral abuses,[288] the intended aim of Treadwell's critique was largely misunderstood. As Dickey and López-Rodríguez observe, the "popularization of Freudian theory in the United States had made rapid advances since 1915," particularly through general-audience publications by Greenwich Village intellectuals.[289] Whether this fact had any impact on the audience, however, is debatable as many spectators failed to recognize the play's deeper engagement with psychoanalysis as a tool of feminist self-liberation. Instead of identifying the satire as a critique

[287] Treadwell, *Ladies Leave* 183.
[288] C. Hugh Holman, *A Handbook to Literature: Based on the Original Edition by William Flint Thrall and Addison Hibbard* (New York: The Odyssey Press, 1992) 111.
[289] Dickey and López-Rodríguez 75.

of moral posturing and capitalist ideology, audiences misattributed it to a mere lampooning of modern marriage and psychoanalysis itself.

One likely factor contributing to this misreading was the casting of Blyth Daly in the role of Zizi. Despite Treadwell's objections that Daly lacked the much-needed subtlety for the character, producer Charles Hopkins insisted on having her as the lead, seeing in her a "showy dynamic personality."[290] This choice reflects a fundamental misunderstanding of the play's tone. If the production team failed to grasp Treadwell's vision, it is unsurprising that audiences struggled to do so as well. Treadwell often prefaced her scripts with explicit statements of purpose, but in the case of *Ladies Leave*, no such clarification was provided, which may have contributed to the play's premature closure in October 1929. Shortly thereafter, Treadwell suffered another breakdown and spent several weeks in a sanatorium in Vienna.[291]

Yet, from a contemporary perspective, *Ladies Leave* reveals Treadwell's remarkable prescience. The play not only links capitalist consumerism to the disintegration of intimate relationships but also insists that a woman's self-realization cannot be predicated solely on her attachment to a man. As Zizi herself declares, neither her husband nor her lover mattered "as an end," though each may have served "as a means" in her search for authentic meaning.[292] By dramatizing the freeing potential of self-reflection, the play offers a rich and resonant narrative for twenty-first-century audiences – perhaps more so now than at the time of its debut.

5.1 Performed and Gendered Morality: Mrs. White vs. Zizi

Thematically, *Ladies Leave* is a play full of contrasts: not only in the given, already mentioned gendered ones portraying asymmetries of marriage, but also more nuanced ones, as in the case of morality and how it is treated. Virtuous by far does not mean the same as moral

[290] Dickey and López-Rodríguez 77.
[291] Dickey and López-Rodríguez 76.
[292] Treadwell, *Ladies Leave* 184.

in the play; instead, morality is treated like any other prestige good that men, and by extension the whole consumer culture, buy, display and police. This policy of course involves objects, possession in general, and also food – *Ladies Leave* significantly stresses the glamor of various pompous servings, such as cocktails or tea – addressing the consumerist culture visually. However, it is not only this literal sense in which consumerism manifest itself: both Powers and Phil work in a magazine, where ideas are "consumed." This is not restricted purely to ads; from the outset of the play, they are trying to persuade Doctor Jeffer to write articles for their magazine – ideas that are to be consumed by the women readers. Additionally, women themselves are subject to the consumer society; they are seen either as readers (whom the magazine owners view in terms of sales), reputation-extensions of their husbands (which applies to both Mrs. White and Zizi), or in terms of their bodies (a manifestation that Philip consumes). Yet the same characters who are succumbed to consumerism often speak about morality with great authority. This is portrayed most significantly in the contrasts between Zizi and Mrs. White.

These two women characters occupy the same marketplace of 1920s New York respectability, yet they engage with its moral currency in fundamentally different ways. While Mrs. White treats morality as a form of social capital, something to be displayed, performed, and accumulated like household wealth, Zizi regards it as a negotiable script, one she can revise, reject, or discard altogether. This is most clearly illustrated in Act 2, when Mrs. White is caught "listening at the keyhole like a servant girl,"[293] thus discovering not only Phil's unflattering true feelings toward her and her novel she is attempting to write in consultation with him. Although she insists on her innocence and decency, the act of course breaches both privacy and propriety. She quickly justifies her eavesdropping by saying, "Anybody when they hear their own name" naturally listens,"[294] implying that from her perspective, the act is a simple self-defense against

[293] Treadwell, *Ladies Leave* 174.
[294] Treadwell, *Ladies Leave* 174.

immoral gossip. This invocation of moral surveillance as a form of protection exemplifies what Baudrillard sees as "the denial of the real on the basis of an avid and repeated apprehending of its signs,"[295] which he connects to the "system of interpretation"[296] consumer society acts upon. Mrs. White's act of surveillance, ethically dubious in itself, serves primarily to broadcast her own virtue.

Zizi shatters that logic in a single, unequivocal gesture. Moments after Mrs. White's interruption, the scene escalates until Zizi delivers a slap. The action is, by conventional standards, unladylike and "immoral," a breach of feminine decorum. Yet the moment functions as a stripping away of civility's performative veneer, revealing the aggression and pettiness beneath. Rather than descending into guilt, as might be expected, Zizi responds with clarity and defiance, as shown in the dialogue,

> MRS. WHITE: Don't you try to insinuate I'm not decent!
> ZIZI: I'm not insinuating it. I'm yelling it!
> MRS. WHITE: I've never had a lover!
> ZIZI: What's that got to do with it? You listen at keyholes. You carry tales! You tell!
> MRS. WHITE: *(Triumphantly.)* That's what you're afraid of, isn't it?
> ZIZI: I'm not afraid, but if I weren't a lady –
> MRS. WHITE: A lady! Hah! *(Zizi slaps her.)* Now you've done it!
> ZIZI: Thank God.[297]

The exchange subverts the psychological mechanism Reik identifies as "moral masochism," where "the masochist accuses a destiny that persecutes him, an innocent victim."[298] Masochism in Reik grows beyond the Freudian descriptions of sexual behavior; he considers it "a particular attitude toward life or a definite type of social behavior: of enjoying one's own suffering or one's own helplessness."[299] This accurately describes Mrs. White; Zizi however, refuses that pathway entirely. Her slap is not just a reaction to insult; it is a rupture in

[295] Baudrillard 34.
[296] Baudrillard 35.
[297] Treadwell, *Ladies Leave* 176.
[298] Reik 297.
[299] Reik 198.

the moral performance Mrs. White insists upon, and a refusal to occupy the self-sacrificing feminine role.

Their contrasting moral logics also emerge in discussions of relationships. Mrs. White definitely disapproves of Zizi's affair with Phil, but her indignation appears to be rooted less in principle than in jealousy. From her first encounter with Phil, Mrs. White responds to his flirtation with visible pleasure,

> PHIL: If you'll permit me, I'd like to be of all the assistance I can.
> MRS. WHITE: How thoughtful and unselfish!
> PHIL: Oh, I'm there, thinking – every minute. But I assure you it's not unselfish!
> MRS. WHITE: *(Flattered and flustered.)* You mean-?[300]

Although Phil's intentions are primarily manipulative, to deflect suspicion and prod Zizi's jealousy, Mrs. White receives them as genuine romantic interest. In Act 3, her monologue further reveals her infatuation, as she itemizes her interactions with Phil with obsessive precision, underscoring her hope for validation:

> All the maids have told me he hadn't been here for months until I came, and now he's here all the time. And I've never once gone to his apartment. I've never been there even as his hostess when he has guests. He says he never has guests. I've never been inside his apartment, not even to fix it around for him. He says it looks terrible. That's one of the reasons he doesn't want me to go – not that I would go! I've never been inside his apartment not even when we were going over my work together.[301]

Her language reflects both desire and denial. For her, both Phil and New York itself serve as "stimulation," a stark contrast to her experience of having been "buried alive" in her Southern hometown, which she claims would have led to a nervous breakdown.[302] Yet as Zizi astutely observes, Mrs. White's romantic fantasy offers little more than "ego satisfaction."[303]

By contrast, Zizi is no longer willing to be defined through others. Throughout Act 2, she honestly reveals that she is no longer interested in men "in a selfless way."[304] She identifies

[300] Treadwell, *Ladies Leave* 155.
[301] Treadwell, *Ladies Leave* 166-167.
[302] Treadwell, *Ladies Leave* 157.
[303] Treadwell, *Ladies Leave* 164.
[304] Treadwell, *Ladies Leave* 159.

the patronizing tactics employed by Powers, calling him out directly at several occasions.[305] She responds to Phil's increasingly possessive behavior with similarly curt dismissals, such as "don't be horrid."[306] Her rejection of male validation echoes de Beauvoir's dictum that "one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman."[307] Zizi insists on becoming a subject in her own right, rather than an object circulated within patriarchal systems of meaning.

Both women, however, remain entangled in the web of consumer culture. In Mrs. White's case, it is especially visible in her use of language, which often mimics advertising. An avid reader of *The Ladies Home Companion*, she repeats lines that sound like they were lifted from the pages of the very magazine Powers publishes. Her recurring lament that she was "dying of dry rot" or would have ended up "in a sanitarium – with two trained nurses – and a big doctor's bill,"[308] exemplifies the kind of stylized, slogan-like speech that Treadwell satirizes. As Heilmann notes, for fiction of the first decades of the twentieth century, the problem for portraying an "ideal of Victorian womanhood" gradually became that "even anti-feminists had ceased to believe in the Angel in the House [character type]."[309] Mrs. White thus represents a specter of the everywoman-hood which is no longer plausible.

Zizi, too, is initially caught in the system of consumer logic, particularly in her exchanges with Phil in Act 2. He accuses her – not unrightly – of treating him like "her Pekingese," pet-like accessory for her amusement. This reverses Treadwell's usual dynamic, but it reveals the same underlying mechanism: both characters reduce each other to functional roles within a consumer system of intimacy. When Phil protests, "[I refuse] to serve any longer as your lapdog,"[310] he attempts to regain control through emotional withdrawal, a tactic reminiscent of male threats in Treadwell's *Constance Darrow*. However, unlike Constance, Zizi

[305] Treadwell, *Ladies Leave* 165.
[306] Treadwell, *Ladies Leave* 150.
[307] de Beauvoir 14.
[308] Treadwell, *Ladies Leave* 157 -158.
[309] Heilmann 24.
[310] Treadwell, *Ladies Leave* 170.

is unmoved. The stage directions inform she "ignores him" and keeps "walking away,"[311] a striking contrast to the dependent female protagonists in the plays previously analyzed in this thesis.

Zizi's attitude toward love and partnership seems to be governed by a consumer logic, which Jeffer predicts in the first act when he exclaims – exaggeratedly, yet not without insight,

> Love is dying in America! It is men who let it get feeble – through stupidity and inattention – but it is women who will give it its death blow – one generation more – it will not exist in this country.[312]

Ultimately, though, Zizi chooses to reject such logic. The process is well-illustrated on her relationship with Phil as they both seem to view one another as means to an end. She is looking for freedom, he seeks possession which would reaffirm his own masculinity. Neither of them is comfortable at being turned into a commodity. And yet it is she, not he, who faces moral condemnation for resisting such pattern. In this inversion, Treadwell exposes the asymmetry of gendered morality, an equation that Zizi eventually comes to fully reject. Her realization culminates in a declaration to Jeffer in Act 3, "I don't want to succeed in business; I think it all too stupid."[313] In that statement, she renounces the consumerist logic that underpins both romantic and professional life, opting instead for literal and symbolic mobility: a steamship to Europe, and a life outside the marketplace of virtue.

Additionally, the contrast between Mrs. White and Zizi's can also be found in their respective attitudes toward morality in relation to domesticity, which, as already pointed out, is traditionally connected to the ideal of a virtuous woman.[314] Although Mrs. White takes evident pride in having left her Southern home, her identity remains deeply tethered to the domestic sphere. Throughout the play, she is repeatedly depicted as "at home" in the Powers household, appearing in intimate, homebound contexts (such as being dressed in a negligee) and engaging

[311] Treadwell, *Ladies Leave* 170.
[312] Treadwell, *Ladies Leave* 146-147.
[313] Treadwell, *Ladies Leave* 183.
[314] Lavender 3.

in domestic gossip with the servants.[315] Her physical and performative presence is consistently aligned with the interior space, reinforcing her embeddedness in the domestic realm.

This portrayal resonates with Angela Y. Davis's critique of the gendered exclusions that structure domestic ideology. As Davis argues, "The woman not only remains tied to the family, but must bear the major responsibility for the internal labor guaranteeing its preservation."[316] Although Mrs. White does not maintain a family of her own, she continues to perform the labor of domestic womanhood emotionally, socially, and symbolically. Her behavior reflects an internalized investment in homeliness as a marker of worth, perhaps precisely because she lacks external value within the capitalist system: she does not work, produce, or earn, and is thus excluded from the economic structures that define public legitimacy. In this sense, Mrs. White re-enacts what Davis identifies as the "double inferiority"[317] of women in capitalist patriarchy. Her self-worth is sustained not by autonomy, but by her performance of virtue within someone else's household. Domesticity, then, becomes both her role and her prison.

Zizi, by contrast, actively resists the double bind that confines women to both the private sphere and the traditional romantic-marital economy. Her final departure from the Powers household thus signals an embrace of a feminist ethic no longer dependent upon structures of domination, whether domestic, economic, or moral. While Mrs. White remains invested in the moral and social commodities that constitute her identity, Zizi elects to divest from them entirely. Her refusal to engage in the symbolic marketplace of virtue marks the emergence of an ethical autonomy that resists commodification, inheritance, or exchange. In this divergence, Treadwell dramatizes a radical disagreement: one woman remains tethered to the performative trappings of conventional femininity; the other walks away from them.

[315] Treadwell, *Ladies Leave* 166.
[316] Davis 163.
[317] Davis 163.

5.2 Moral Codes and Male Control: Burnham Powers and Phil

The consumer mindset is also visible in the dynamics between Zizi and both her husband and her lover. Burnham Powers, the publisher of *The Ladies Home Companion* magazine, speaks the language of Victorian virtue while thinking in the metrics of circulation figures. "A man's only hope lies in finding himself an old-fashioned girl, untouched by modernity,"[318] he declares, effectively converting female chastity into a stable commodity comparable to his magazine's "million-copy" guarantee. Powers's formula exemplifies what Baudrillard calls the "tautological mode" of consumer culture, in which objects are reaffirmed by metaphors as brands.[319] For Powers, morality is a kind of advertising copy, which enhances the brand of husband, household, and publishing alike, inevitably commodifying the woman. Yet, his advertising never interrogates the desires that underpin those institutions. His youthful escapades, casually alluded to in a conversation with Jeffer, are treated as proof of masculine vitality rather than moral failure. They enact Reik's observation regarding the "double standard that governs our mores,"[320] by which male transgression is valorized and female transgression condemned.

Zizi initially appears to affirm values embedded in her husband's world. Bored by the predictability of her affluent, well-furnished life, she consumes the visible tokens of upper-class femininity. Yet, her reading of Jeffer's psychoanalytic handbook triggers a shift in her moral orientation. Suddenly alert to the transactional logic embedded in Powers's rhetoric, she begins to resist. Her firm response to his projections of virtuosity, "It's the last straw,"[321] closes the first act and propels her toward a decision: the affair with Phil becomes not so much a romantic escape as an experiment, a strategic disruption. In testing the boundaries of moral capital, she

[318] Treadwell, *Ladies Leave* 143.
[319] Baudrillard 129.
[320] Reik 441.
[321] Treadwell, *Ladies Leave* 161.

arrives at the play's most striking line, "Immorality is moral."[322] his paradox reveals Zizi's rejection of morality as a fixed standard and her recognition of its status as a socially negotiated fiction.

However, for Powers, as for Mrs. White, morality is shaped by a traditional patriarchal framework that defines women primarily in relation to their conformity. By the second act, Zizi is already equipped to subvert such narratives. When Powers attempts to reassert control through a rhetorical moral reprimand, Zizi reframes the interaction as psychological manipulation,

> ZIZI: This is very immoral of you, Burnham.
> POWERS: Immoral!
> ZIZI: Yes. Deliberately planting an inferiority complex in me like that.[323]

Enlightened by Jeffer's psychoanalytic framing, Zizi already recognizes this manipulative strategy and exposes it with clarity and confidence.

Powers is unable to follow her critique because his livelihood depends on the very confusion she articulates. As a publisher, he profits from the circulation of virtue alongside the promotion of beauty creams, diet plans, and lingerie – commodities that promise renewal, control, and value. Baudrillard notes that consumer hedonism is haunted by a sense of "guilt [which] is increasing as our affluence progresses," and "fuels the violent, impulsive subversion of the very order of happiness."[324] For Powers, it seems the subversion lies precisely in commodifying women. Through ads in his magazine promising "no aging lines – firm contours – straight silhouette,"[325] Powers channels this guilt into the consumption of lifestyle goods that reinforce women's anxieties while preserving the illusion of moral order. The widening gulf between husband and wife reflects a deeper structural asymmetry. De Beauvoir observes that woman is cast as "Other […] an uncontrollable force" whose containment reaffirms male

[322] Treadwell, *Ladies Leave* 173.
[323] Treadwell, *Ladies Leave* 165.
[324] Baudrillard 177.
[325] Treadwell, *Ladies Leave* 146.

subjectivity.[326] Powers's possessiveness, most noticeably voiced in his desperate assertions by the end of Act 3, reveals the fragility of that identity when his wife refuses the role of compliant display object.

Philip, for his part, fares no better. Though he presents himself as an ally in Zizi's liberation, he is driven by similarly patriarchal imperatives. His rhetoric may masquerade as emotional honesty, but it is manipulative at its core. Attempting to seduce Zizi, he mounts a dramatic, performative tirade:

> Oh, the immorality of withholding yourself from love – of immolating yourself behind a vain, stubborn, small will – all because of cowardice and a small-town mind – you are small-town, you know! When you're middle-aged, you'll be a female edition of Powers himself! And when you're old – what will you have to think about as you sit by the radiator winter evenings – what memories to warm your chilling bones – a woman who has never known love! – what will you think about?[327]

Zizi, however, refuses to be shamed. Her understated reply, "I won't have to think! – I'll listen to the radio,"[328] offers a deft counter to Philip's romanticized coercion. Unlike Constance Darrow, Zizi begins the play with already some distance from the Everywoman archetype. She is capable of recognizing patriarchal manipulation, and throughout the play, she seeks to liberate herself from its hold.

Her revolt also resonates with the trajectory Heilmann maps in New Women fiction, where the female protagonists "opposed the idea that home is woman's only proper sphere."[329] By the third act, Zizi declares that neither husband nor lover matters "as an end," but only "as a means,"[330] thereby dissolving the notion that romantic relationships must define a woman's purpose or worth. Her orientation shifts toward mobility: Europe, travel, psychological self-determination. Powers and Phil, both deprived of their symbolic center are now compelled to denounce the very thing they desire most: an autonomous woman.

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[326] de Beauvoir 283.
[327] Treadwell, *Ladies Leave* 152.
[328] Treadwell, *Ladies Leave* 152.
[329] Heilmann 105.
[330] Treadwell, *Ladies Leave* 184.

In this way, Treadwell constructs a pair of opposing moral economies. Powers, represents a system in which morality functions like a blue-chip stock, shoring up consumer confidence and stabilizing social expectations. Zizi, by contrast, develops a new ethical model that begins only once the ideological scaffolding of marriage, gender, and domestic virtue is dismantled. Phil, rather pathetically, reflects a third variation: a morality rhetorically invoked but strategically bent to serve male needs. It is morality deployed as political theatre, and in that usage, stripped of authenticity. Zizi exposes this collapse, revealing that the very word "moral" has become hollowed out, much like the vocabulary in *Machinal*, where words lose their meaning through constant repetition and normativity. This insight mirrors Treadwell's modernist thinking and also implies her recognition that concepts, such as morality, when over-coded by ideology, tend to collapse under the weight of their own contradictions. Zizi herself articulates the existential core of this crisis when she admits, "I am confused! […] Isn't everybody?"[331] Here, confusion is not a weakness but an honest confrontation with the incoherence of inherited scripts.

Ultimately, Zizi does not propose a new moral system. Rather, she exposes the instability of all systems that presume to fix meaning in a world defined by performance, transaction, and simulation. If Powers is selling virtue, Zizi ceases to buy. In her refusal, she not only steps outside the marriage but steps beyond the ideological marketplace that makes such unions legible. Her liberation, then, is not merely personal but paradigmatic; it is a rejection of moral economies structured around visibility, exchange, and containment.

5.3 Performing Modernity, Unwriting Domesticity

From the moment the curtain rises on *Ladies Leave*, modernity is not merely a backdrop; it constitutes the atmosphere, tempo, and psychological condition of the play. The setting,

[331] Treadwell, *Ladies Leave* 144.

described as "of an extreme modernity – experimental, unsettled, but intelligent and expensive,"[332] stages the contradictions of a world that is aesthetically cutting-edge, yet socially incoherent. The New York apartment functions less as a domestic refuge than as a space of performance: a showroom for class identity and capitalist accomplishment. The accelerated pace of city life invades the private sphere: guests enter mid-conversation, and servants operate through an impersonal bureau system. Intimacy is displaced by logistics.

Treadwell's depiction of urban modernity extends beyond the décor into character and dialogue. Exchanges unfold rapidly, interspersed with ironic asides and sudden emotional shifts. Powers boasts about his magazine's circulation figures in an attempt to recruit Jeffer, a Viennese psychoanalyst, as a contributor. Jeffer politely refuses, offering a distanced European perspective on American culture: "I just wouldn't belong! […] one doesn't put the spade […] in the window with […] the paper flowers."[333] Phil's breezy rejoinder, "It's all right with me,"[334] underscore the cultural divide. Treadwell's satire is clear: America fetishizes visibility and commercial success but lacks psychological depth. This tendency also manifests in the characters' capacity for rapid adjustment. When Zizi announces her departure for Europe in the final act, both Powers and Phil move on almost immediately. Moments after having vied for her affection, they turn seamlessly to business, planning a new magazine section together as they exit through a "very wide-open door," a staging metaphor for future capitalist ventures.

This restless, performative modernity clashes with the play's gendered moral expectations. While male characters such as Powers and Phil openly embrace consumerism and ambition, they also seek emotional anchorage in women, who, to them, symbolize stability, purity, and domesticity. The double standard is unmistakable: masculine engagement with

[332] Treadwell, *Ladies Leave* 140.
[333] Treadwell, *Ladies Leave* 146.
[334] Treadwell, *Ladies Leave* 146.

modernity is valorized as energy and ambition, while feminine participation is viewed as dangerous or degenerate.

Treadwell further layers her critique through the geographical contrasts: not only between the States and Europe, as seen in Jeffer's commentary, but also between New York and the American South, evoked through Mrs. White. As Zizi remarks, the South is all "grace and leisure," with ladies organizing "all those committees," thus tying the South to a static tradition Powers admires, marked by manners, façade, and female propriety. Mrs. White summarizes her life in the South with the phrase "dry rot" which she claims "inhibits" her; by contrast, she finds New York and its inhabitants "stimulating." The irony, of course, is that despite her moral conservatism, Mrs. White eagerly participates in the culture and manners of the urban elite. The South, in this context, is not an alternative to modernity but rather a nostalgic mask that covers the same consumer values.

Contrastingly, Europe, is framed as a zone of psychological depth and potential liberation. Jeffer's psychoanalytic perspective offers Zizi an interpretive framework through which she begins to understand herself and the roles imposed upon her. By the end of the play, she has fully internalized this insight. Her line from the final act, "Why not? I think I'll go to Vienna,"[335] signals not only her physical departure from New York but her symbolic break from the consumerist and moral frameworks that have defined her life. If New York represents a world in constant motion that nonetheless reinscribes patriarchal norms, Vienna offers the possibility of transformation and self-authorship.

[335] Treadwell, *Ladies Leave* 194.

5.3.1 The Question of Home

If modernity is characterized by flux, the idea of home in *Ladies Leave* is constructed as its supposed counterbalance: a stable, grounding institution that provides security and social legitimacy. For the male characters, "home" functions primarily as a status object. Powers defines marriage as having "found a home," and adds, significantly, "I want security in my life!"[336] The domestic sphere is thus positioned as the final achievement in a narrative of masculine upward mobility. Phil, younger and financially unstable, articulates a parallel longing "I haven't any home – just an apartment."[337] For both men, home is not merely a physical structure but a relational construct that requires a woman's presence to become meaningful. The domestic interior becomes the site where masculine identity is not only secured but also displayed.

This view reflects what Baudrillard describes as the "fetish-objects of personal security,"[338] a domestic space valued not for its emotional utility but for its symbolic projection of success. Jeffer subtly critiques this transformation when he describes how maids now enter via the central bureau, leave memoranda, and are notified of their next assignments. "What is left of the home here?"[339] he asks rhetorically. The language of logistics and impersonality replaces that of intimacy and relationality. In Treadwell's world, home has ceased to be a lived space and has become a managed transaction, a site of service provision and image maintenance.

The woman characters, meanwhile, reveal varying relationships to this increasingly hollow ideal of home, shaped by generational, class-based, and ideological distinctions. Mrs. White, despite her efforts to present herself as modern and socially engaged, remains deeply invested in patriarchal domestic values. As mentioned above, her speech is replete with

[336] Treadwell, *Ladies Leave* 143.
[337] Treadwell, *Ladies Leave* 192.
[338] Baudrillard 130.
[339] Treadwell, *Ladies Leave* 181.

borrowed clichés which convert personal experience into consumer soundbites. Although she exclaims, "Don't say that word to me: home!"[340] positioning herself as someone fleeing domestic confinement, she eagerly awaits the cheque her husband sends her, which is her only means that allow her to engage in her New York adventure. Her protests thus ring not only hollow, but entirely hypocritical.

As Heilmann points out, early twentieth-century New Woman narratives challenged the traditional alignment of femininity with domesticity. Yet not all female characters escape these structures: some remain "spoken by" the ideologies they inhabit.[341] Mrs. White, then, may be read as an Everywoman cloaked in New Woman rhetoric. She has left her Southern home, but only to reenact its logic within a more stylish, urbanized consumer culture.

Zizi, by contrast, undergoes a dramatic transformation from ornamental wife to autonomous subject. Her trajectory is marked by growing skepticism toward the narratives that link womanhood to home, morality, and emotional subordination. Her affair with Phil functions less as a romantic turn than as a means of reassessing her values and testing the limits of her autonomy. "I got over the garden wall,"[342] she tells Jeffer, painting an image that evokes escape from a cultivated, enclosed space. "I wouldn't go back for worlds!" she continues,[343] affirming the freedom she has claimed. Yet her outlook on relationships is not cynical. When Jeffer asks her to define love, she replies that it is not a lover alone, but "a lover plus X," the "unknown quantity" that "varies for every equation."[344] In this metaphor, Zizi rewrites the relational logic that sustains the patriarchal ideology of home. Love becomes a dynamic process rather than a fixed term.

[340] Treadwell, *Ladies Leave* 167.
[341] Heilmann 105.
[342] Treadwell, *Ladies Leave* 185.
[343] Treadwell, *Ladies Leave* 185.
[344] Treadwell, *Ladies Leave* 185.

This embrace of mobility becomes literal when Zizi announces her intention to leave for Europe. The decision follows her disillusionment with both Powers and Phil: one who attempts to cast her out of their home, the other who disgusts her with his posturing. "It isn't your house […] any more than it's mine,"[345] thus severing the link between property, marriage, and moral authority. Yet she adds, "but I will leave it if you don't want me here."[346] In these words, she clarifies both that she refuses to acknowledge the logic in which nothing in a marriage could be hers; and that she refuses to be dependent on anyone or anything, or to be equalized with domesticity. Her leaving is thus not framed an act of abandonment, but rather a form of self-liberation.

The conclusion of *Ladies Leave* is subtle, yet deeply radical. Zizi exits with no partner, no fixed destination, and no moral justification, only the decision to leave. In doing so, she enacts a form of feminine modernity that resists the fetishization of objects and roles, choosing instead the ambiguity and risk of self-authorship. As Baudrillard might argue, she refuses to conform to "a ready-made code;"[347] as Reik would note, she abandons the guilt that underpins moral masochism.[348] Zizi ceases to serve as a symbol within someone else's script and becomes a subject in motion. Davis reminds us that "home" has long been an obstacle in women's valuation;[349] Zizi's rejection of the domestic ideal thus embodies Davis's promise of liberation, when someone escapes "the socially created prison of natural roles."[350]

Ultimately, *Ladies Leave*, similarly to *Machinal*, offers not only a critique of modernity's dizzying pace or of the ideological persistence of domestic femininity, but a dramatization of one woman's refusal to comply. Yet, contrary to the Young Woman, Zizi embodies a meaningful glimmer of hope, one that extends beyond women alone and gestures

[345] Treadwell, *Ladies Leave* 191.
[346] Treadwell, *Ladies Leave* 191.
[347] Baudrillard 97.
[348] Reik 297.
[349] Davis 163.
[350] Davis 163.

toward broader human possibility. Through her trajectory, Treadwell stages a confrontation between two competing visions of the future: one rooted in consumerism, symbolic performance, and prescribed, normative morality; the other unfolding in motion, ambiguity, and the potential for self-invention. In leaving the apartment, Zizi does not simply leave her husband; she leaves the script itself.

6. Conclusion

This thesis examined four plays by Sophie Treadwell – *Constance Darrow*, *The Eye of the Beholder*, *Machinal*, and *Ladies Leave* – with the aim of broadening the critical discourse surrounding her work and reassessing her place in the canon of American modernist drama. While *Machinal* has garnered considerable attention, her other plays remain understudied despite their formal innovation and thematic depth. This study sought to foreground those lesser-known works, situating them alongside *Machinal* to reveal a coherent and urgent feminist critique across her dramatic corpus. The plays explore the social, economic, and psychological conditions that constrain female autonomy and depict women in various stages of transformation from figures fully inscribed within patriarchal roles to those striving, often painfully, for new modes of being. These trajectories were examined through a feminist lens, with particular attention to how Treadwell's characters inhabit and negotiate the dichotomy of the "Everywoman" and the "New Woman."

Structurally, the plays employ a diverse set of theatrical strategies, ranging from realism to expressionism and satirical comedy, not as formal experiments for their own sake, but as integral expressions of political and psychological content. In *Machinal*, expressionist fragmentation externalizes the Young Woman's alienation in a mechanized, patriarchal world. In *The Eye of the Beholder*, modernist dislocation dramatizes the impossibility of a coherent self under constant projection and surveillance. Conversely, the realist forms of *Constance Darrow* and *Ladies Leave* emphasize the quiet, everyday violence of domestic life, capitalism, and gender roles. Even within these realist frameworks, Treadwell's dramaturgy displays hybrid qualities, such as psychological fragmentation and stylized dialogue, that align her work with a distinctly feminist modernism. Form and content are thus inseparable: each play's dramaturgical choices illuminate the inner conflicts and external pressures that shape the lives of its protagonists.

Thematically, Treadwell's work returns insistently to four central concerns: marriage as a site of psychological control; the unreliability of social institutions; the exploitative dynamics of capitalism; and the paradoxes of modernity. In each play, marriage functions not as a mutual partnership, but as a mechanism for enforcing patriarchal conformity. For men, it affirms status and control; for women, it is a site of emotional coercion and economic dependency. In *Constance Darrow* and *Machinal*, the protagonists are trapped by the myth of domesticity and rendered unable to access meaningful autonomy. In *Ladies Leave*, the protagonist Zizi ultimately escapes this system, but only after external forces trigger her departure, showing how deeply internalized social scripts can be.

Treadwell's critique extends beyond the marital sphere to the broader institutional structures that shape modern life. Her plays portray the family, workplace, law, religion, and medicine as mechanisms not of support or justice, but of regulation and erasure. *Machinal* offers the most sustained depiction of this institutional failure, portraying each domain the protagonist enters as dehumanizing and hostile. *Ladies Leave* extends this critique through satire, revealing morality itself as a socially constructed fiction that serves to legitimize power and suppress dissent. In both plays, morality becomes a rhetorical weapon rather than an ethical guide, wielded to justify systems of control.

These institutional critiques are inseparable from Treadwell's sustained engagement with capitalism. Her plays repeatedly expose how the female body and labor are commodified under patriarchal economic systems. In *Constance Darrow*, the protagonist's struggle to retain employment highlights the gendered inequities of the capitalist workplace. *Machinal* intensifies this critique, portraying the Young Woman's job as alienating and her boss's interest in her as exploitative. Marriage and sex, too, are portrayed as transactions in which women's bodies are consumed, exchanged, and dehumanized. This commodification becomes a dominant metaphor

across Treadwell's work, suggesting that capitalist modernity both mirrors and intensifies patriarchal domination.

Modernity itself emerges as a double-edged force in Treadwell's plays. On the one hand, it enables the emergence of the New Woman, feminism, and demands for equality. On the other, it reconstitutes old forms of control through new mechanisms: speed, consumption, bureaucracy, and technological alienation. *Machinal* stages this contradiction most powerfully, but even in *Ladies Leave*, modernity is revealed to offer hollow promises of freedom. A lavish apartment, elegant dinners, and transatlantic travel are symbols of mobility that ultimately conceal the absence of emotional or ethical depth. Modernity, for Treadwell, is not a break from the past but a reinvention of subjugation in more insidious forms.

At the center of these overlapping critiques stands the figure of the woman negotiating between Everywoman and New Woman. Treadwell does not romanticize this trajectory: for many of her characters, transformation is partial or unattainable. *Constance Darrow* and *Machinal* end in resignation or destruction. *The Eye of the Beholder* dramatizes fragmentation rather than resolution. Only *Ladies Leave* imagines a symbolic departure from the oppressive system, with Zizi choosing flight over complicity. In every case, however, Treadwell portrays this movement as a painful awakening: a confrontation not only with social norms but with the self, as conditioned by those norms. Becoming a New Woman is not a matter of personal choice alone; it is a rupture with the entire structure of meaning in which women have been taught to live.

Treadwell's feminist modernism thus lies in her capacity to fuse structural critique with philosophical depth. Her characters are not symbols but subjects undergoing crises of agency, perception, and self-definition. They ask existential questions about truth, freedom, and identity within systems that refuse those very questions legitimacy. Her use of fragmented dialogue, disjointed scenes, and disrupted temporalities is not merely avant-garde flourish but a formal

analogue to the psychological and political fragmentation her characters endure. In this, her work aligns with the existential concerns of Karl Jaspers, the psychoanalytic theories of Theodor Reik, and anticipates the feminist interventions of Simone de Beauvoir and Judith Butler. Through both form and content, Treadwell articulates the tension between imposed identity and authentic selfhood, making her plays resonant well beyond their original context.

Indeed, Treadwell's relevance persists. The structural inequalities she exposes, particularly regarding marriage, labor, or institutional injustice, continue to shape contemporary life. Issues of domestic coercion, workplace discrimination, and the exploitation of bodies remain global concerns. In *Machinal*, the indifference of the hospital, the alienation of the workplace, and the brutality of the legal system resonate with twenty-first-century experiences of bureaucracy and dehumanization. Helen's courtroom confession, punctuated by laughter, echoes the real-world silencing of women who resist or retaliate against abusive systems. Similarly, *Constance Darrow* retains sharp relevance in its portrayal of emotional abuse and coerced reproductive decisions. *Ladies Leave* and its satirical dismantling of moral double standards gestures to contemporary anxieties around performative politics, consumerism, and identity.

Moreover, Treadwell's insights extend beyond gender. Her protagonists, while women, are emblematic of broader categories of marginalization. Her drama seems to speak to what it means to be scripted, silenced, and commodified in any form. In this sense, her theatre offers not only a feminist but an ethical critique of modern life. Her male characters, especially in *Ladies Leave*, are often not empowered but emotionally stunted, trapped in scripts of masculinity that leave little room for vulnerability or self-awareness. Treadwell's vision of liberation, therefore, can be seen as inclusive: she critiques not only the subjugation of women, but the emotional impoverishment that patriarchy enforces on all its subjects.

6.1 Limitations, Further Research Suggestions, and Treadwell's Legacy

While this thesis has sought to foreground Treadwell's critical relevance, some limitations must be acknowledged. First, the thesis largely follows Treadwell's own staging of America as regressive and Europe as progressive, particularly in *Ladies Leave*. Yet this binary is increasingly untenable in today's political context. Populist movements and democratic erosion in both the U.S. and Europe complicate any clear-cut contrast between the two regions. A more nuanced transatlantic reading would benefit future work. Second, the thesis draws upon the work of Angela Y. Davis in its critique of patriarchal capitalism. However, it must be noted that Davis' analysis is inextricably tied to race and class – dimensions largely absent in Treadwell's plays. Treadwell's silence on racial issues, combined with her own distancing from her Mexican heritage, calls for a more critical examination of her positionality – a line of questioning initiated by Bryan C. Williams in his essay "Bhabha and the Bandit."[351] Future research might investigate how her racial and class background informed both the scope and limits of her feminist critique.

Another research trajectory could explore mental health in Treadwell's drama, particularly in relation to contemporary neurodiversity discourse. The psychological fragmentation, disrupted speech patterns, and emotional intensity exhibited by her protagonists, especially when considered alongside Treadwell's own experiences with nervous breakdowns, may be interpreted as pointing to inner states of crisis that exceed conventional psychological realism. Understanding these as dramatizations of neurodivergent experience might offer new perspectives on her formal strategies and ethical vision. Finally, masculinity in Treadwell's plays deserves closer scrutiny. Though centered on female experience, her male characters often embody forms of toxic masculinity that are equally destructive. Exploring these portrayals

[351] Bryan C. Williams, "Bhabha and the Bandit: Myth, Stereotype, and Colonial Discourse in Sophie Treadwell's Machinal and Gringo," *South Atlantic Review* 83, no. 3 (2018): 63–83.

could contribute to broader conversations around gender, vulnerability, and emotional repression, and help reframe feminism as a project concerned with the well-being of all.

In returning to the thesis title – Being "New Woman," Being "Everywoman" – what becomes most evident is how Sophie Treadwell's theatre interrogates the conditions under which identity is formed, contested, and sometimes destroyed. Her characters live at the edge of imposed roles and emergent possibilities, caught in a world that offers the language of freedom while enforcing conformity at every level. Through realist, expressionist, and satirical forms, Treadwell stages the costs of complicity and the difficulty of resistance. Her heroines struggle to speak, to act, to be – but it is precisely in this struggle that her drama finds its enduring power.

Treadwell's legacy is not simply a feminist one, though it is deeply informed by feminist thought. It is a legacy of formal innovation, philosophical depth, and political urgency. Her work reminds us that drama can be a site of resistance, a space where voices marginalized by society can be heard with clarity and force. In confronting the roles assigned to us – whether as women, men, workers, or citizens – Treadwell asks us to imagine what lies beyond them. Her protagonists, situated between Everywoman and New Woman, articulate not a final arrival, but the ongoing, unfinished work of becoming. Her drama endures because its central question endures: how does one live authentically in a world that scripts one's role before one can speak? This question, urgent in her time, remains equally so in ours. Treadwell's voice continues to echo: insistently, unflinchingly, and necessarily.

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