



Set Text Guide: Machinal

AS and A Drama and Theatre

Pearson Edexcel Level 3 Advanced GCE in Drama and Theatre (9DR0)

**Pearson Edexcel Level 3 Advanced Subsidiary GCE in
Drama and Theatre (9DR0)**

GCE Drama 2016: Machinal

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Characters

The Young Woman

The Young Woman is the central character in the play. It is her journey that the audience accompany and throughout the text, the playwright offers insight into the different stages of her adult life. The audience see the world through the eyes of the Young Woman. Each episode is a self-contained moment of personal significance. Her name is revealed in the Court scene (Episode 8) as Helen Jones, and she is referred to as Woman in Episode 6. The Young Woman wants to taste life; she is not happy to settle and submit to society's expectations of what a woman's role should be. Throughout the play she is forced to conform, and *Machinal* 'uses expressionistic techniques to create a parable about "an ordinary young woman" who lives in a mechanised, materialistic world.' The Young Woman wants to live, breathe, laugh, love, dance, sing and ultimately find peace and be free in a kinder and more beautiful world than the world she has been given. However, she is trapped and despite her resistance, she finds herself a prisoner to a cold and loveless marriage. As a result she is forced to take her place in 'the dead wasteland of male society'. In many ways the journey of the Young Woman is similar to the 'Everyman', and through various scenes of oppression and abandonment she is left feeling incomplete. Her final words as she is sentenced to death are a desperate plea and cry for 'Somebody'. There are further parallels between the Young Woman and Treadwell herself. Helen, like Treadwell, strives to find her place and voice in a time of patriarchal dominance and suffocation.

The Husband

George H. Jones is the boss, and is first introduced to the audience as Jones in Episode 1. He speaks with authority and a rhythmic formality that suggests precision and business efficiency: 'One thing at a time and that done well'. He is at home in his office and work environment and clearly enjoys the thrill of the corporate chase. He is a man who is used to getting his way and has several strong opinions. He protests on several occasions that he 'understands women', yet this is far from the truth, as he is ignorant and blind to his wife's desires and dreams. In many ways he represents the materialistic world The Young Woman longs to be free from. This is clear in Episode 3 (Honeymoon), as his dialogue is dominated by money and all things material. He is not a villain but instead should be viewed as a product of his time: ambitious, prejudiced, chauvinistic and driven by self-interest.

The Mother

The Mother makes two appearances in the play. Episode 2 (Domestic) and the final scene (Episode 9). She is presented as a highly strung, needy and selfish woman. She is the product of a hard and cold life, and has clearly spent a considerable amount of time working for very little reward. Despite suggesting that she only wants the best for her daughter, it is clear that her motives are driven by her own self-centred desires. The thought of her daughter marrying the 'Vice President' fills her with delight: 'his income must be...' The Mother represents a tired and traditional view of marriage, and is shocked to learn that her daughter wants to marry for love: 'Love! What does that amount to?' It is no mistake that Treadwell does not offer a name for this character, for she represents a coldness and selfishness that are far from the maternal archetype an audience might expect. In the final scene the Mother appears before the Young Woman in jail; she is referred to as a 'stranger' and quickly sent away.

The Man

The Man, named in Episode 8 as Richard Roe, represents the danger and prohibited romance that Helen so desperately seeks. His talk of freedom and love inspires the Young Woman, and she hears his words on the night of her husband's murder. The Man is the opposite of the Husband; he is tactile, tender and passionate. His use of language is colloquial and casual. He listens to the Young Woman, he sings to her. He presents an alternative way of life. His affidavit is a tragic blow to the Young Woman and ultimately leads to her confession. It is clear during the court scene that she has spent a considerable amount of time visiting him. His betrayal is heart-breaking.

Other characters of significance

The Lawyer for the Defense

The Lawyer for the Prosecution

The Judge

The Priest

The Doctor

The Nurse

Various Office Workers

Summary

Episode 1

TO BUSINESS

In this opening episode the audience are introduced to the character of the Young Woman and the various employees who work in the George H. Jones company office. The Young Woman arrives late to work and is grilled by her colleagues. She is called to the office to speak to George H. Jones and the various members of the office gossip and talk about her. The language is deliberately fractured and fragmented to support the overall expressionistic and non-naturalistic style of the piece. The atmosphere of the episode is fast-paced and frantic. It is clear that the office is set in a busy work environment that is machine-like, dehumanised. The employees comment on the way the Young Woman plays with her hair. The episode ends with a broken monologue from the Young Woman who informs the audience that George H. Jones wants to marry her. The sounds of the office that dominate the scene transition into the sound of the radio that plays in the next scene.

Episode 2

AT HOME

The Young Woman is now at home. It is clear from the dialogue between her and her mother that they have a negative and volatile relationship. The lack of communication between them is evident from their opening dialogue, and their contrasting views on love and marriage dominate the subject matter of the scene. The fluidity of the scene is interrupted on several occasions by different character voices: the Janitor, Woman's Voice, Small Boy's Voice, Wife and Husband. The function of the interjections is to reinforce and highlight aspects of the Mother and Young Woman's broken relationship. During this episode the Young Woman announces that George H. Jones wants to marry her. The Mother is ecstatic and begins to think about the financial benefits of her daughter marrying the 'Vice-President'. The discussion of love continues and it is clear that both characters see the act of marriage differently. A key reference to the Young Woman's hands is made and the fact that she washes the dishes in gloves is an important observation. The Young Woman's outburst plants the seed in the mind of the audience that she is unstable and desperate.

Episode 3

HONEYMOON

This episode takes place in a hotel bedroom. It is clear that time has moved forward as the Young Woman and Husband (Mr Jones) enter their honeymoon suite. The Bellboy helps them enter the room and various men and women are dancing in couples. However, the stage directions suggest that they are seen but not heard. The scene revolves around the fact that Young Woman wants to leave the room and makes several references to the window and dancing. The Husband wants to stay and enjoy the pleasures of their wedding night. The Young Woman resists undressing and eventually goes to the bathroom to change in private. Much of the dialogue centres around the Husband's desire to describe his successes and accomplishments. He also tells several crude short stories and jokes in an attempt to lighten the mood. The Young Woman eventually changes into her nightgown, and when faced with the prospect of being intimate with her husband, she begins to cry and ask for her mother.

Episode 4

MATERNAL

More time has passed. The Young Woman is presented on a hospital bed; several named characters are once again 'seen but not heard'. She has given birth, but clearly has formed no attachment to the baby. The sound of 'steel riveting' dominates the scene and the noise adds to the frustration and instability of the Young Woman. The scene begins with dialogue from the Nurse who attempts to remind the Young Woman how lucky she is to have such a lovely husband and baby. The Young Woman lies still and silent for much of the scene. She does not communicate. The Husband enters the scene with flowers and a strong positive energy. It is clear that he wants the Young Woman to improve her attitude, and gives another strong speech that aims to help her 'brace up'. The Young Woman chokes and gags, and the Nurse ushers the Husband out of the room. The Doctor enters; he and the Nurse discuss the Young Woman's health. The Doctor, like the husband, is patronising and offensive to the Young Woman. Despite the Young Woman's resistance, the Doctor instructs the Nurse to bring the baby and tell the Young Woman that she must 'put the child to the breast'. The scene concludes with another fractured stream of consciousness from the Young Woman and her declaration that 'I'll not submit'.

Episode 5

PROHIBITED

Again time has passed and the sound of electric piano music suggests the location of a bar or speakeasy. There are various tables of customers and throughout the episode the audience are presented with various viewpoints surrounding the idea of romance, love, danger and lust. The scene work is split between three tables. Table three features First and Second Man, who discuss waiting for their dates. Table two features a Man and a Boy, and it is clear that the intentions of the Man are of a sexual nature. Table one highlights a man and a woman who are discussing a potential abortion. A waiter moves between the tables and conversations. The Girl and Young Woman arrive, and it soon becomes clear that they are the potential dates for the First and Second Man. During this episode the audience are informed of the Young Woman's name – Helen. She is keen to dance and 'keep moving'. The conversation reveals that the Second Man has recently returned from Mexico, where he killed a man. When asked why, he simply replies: 'To get free'. This seems to strike a chord with the Young Woman, who longs for her own sense of freedom. The details of the murder are important to note, as this will form an important detail in later scenes. The Girl and Second Man eventually leave together, and the scene focuses on the dialogue between the Young Woman and the First Man. It becomes clear that they are attracted to one another. They leave together to spend the night at his apartment.

Episode 6

INTIMATE

This episode features only the Man and the Young Woman. They are alone in a dark room, and the intimacy of the scene reflects the night they have spent together. For the first time the Young Woman talks poetically about positive thoughts and images. She is relaxed and comfortable. She laughs and lets him play with her hands. The mood is gentle and in stark contrast to the previous episodes. The man sings to her, accompanied by the sound of the hand organ described in the stage directions. They are tactile with one another, and again this physical relationship is in clear contrast to her reaction to the Husband in Episode 3. The scene develops in romantic conversation and imagery, and the couple kiss. The mood changes towards the end of the scene as the street light is lit

outside. This creates a sense of panic in the Young Woman, who suddenly decides to leave. She gets dressed and is comfortably watched by the Man. In the final moments of the episode she notices a lily on the window ledge. She asks the man if she can take it with her. He agrees. The Young Woman leaves and the curtain falls.

Episode 7

DOMESTIC

The Husband and Young Woman are at home, reading papers at opposite ends of the divan. Headlines are read out and this helps to reveal their different attitudes and mind states. The Man is governed by money, business and all things practical. The Young Woman talks about love, suicide and escape. Throughout this episode the phone rings and the Husband speaks to business associates about his corporate triumphs. Much of the dialogue is repeated and deliberately formed in clichés to emphasise the lack of colour and variety in their domestic conversation. The second set of headlines read aloud are used to emphasise the patriarchal society to which the Young Woman belongs. She is trapped. Heat and suffocation become an important image as the Young Woman is desperate for air while the Husband insists on keeping the window closed. It is clear there is very little love or tenderness in their relationship – another stark contrast to her behaviour with the Man in the previous episode. The voice of the lover enters the final moments of the episode and helps to prompt the various voices in her head that encourage her to kill her husband.

Episode 8

THE LAW

Much like the opening scene, the penultimate episode is full of pace and energy, and is dominated by a range of characters that help to form the courtroom. It soon becomes clear that the Young Woman is on trial for the murder of her husband. The First and Second Reporter help to move the narrative on as they each comment on various key reactions and moments of significance. The Lawyer for the Defense takes the floor and the Young Woman pleads not guilty to the charge of murder. As the scene develops, the Lawyer for the Prosecution presents a range of evidence that helps to identify the Young Woman as her husband's murderer. The final piece of evidence takes the form of a signed affidavit from the Lover, who admits that he had explained to the Young Woman how he had killed a man using a bottle full of pebbles. In her horror and shame that her affair had been so publicly announced, she admits to the murder of her husband. Her motive is announced to the court: 'to be free'.

Episode 9

A MACHINE

The final episode takes place in a prison room. The sound of a man singing starts the scene, and this underscores the prayers of the Priest. Several characters appear in this final scene, including a Jailer, Two Barbers, a Matron, the Mother and Two Guards. The prayer from the Priest dominates the opening moments of the scene. The racist references to the singer help to date the play and the overall negativity that infects the final scene. The Barbers cut the Young Woman's hair in preparation for her death. The Young Woman is hounded by the various characters in this scene and once again struggles to find any sense of compassion or humanity in the world. 'Am I never to be let alone?' The Mother comes to visit and the Young Woman disowns her: 'She's a stranger – take her away'. The scene ends with fragmented commentary from the Priest and Reporters. The Young Woman is led away to her death and cut off shouting for 'Somebody ... somebody'.

Social, cultural and historical context

Machinal was written by playwright and journalist, Sophie Treadwell. It is her most famous piece of work and was first produced on Broadway in 1928, directed by Arthur Hopkins. It was a critical success and was described by Brooks Atkinson as a 'tragedy of submission'. It ran for 91 performances. It is loosely based on the real-life trial of Ruth Snyder who with the help of her lover, Judd Gray, murdered her husband. Both were sentenced to death by electric chair.

It was first performed in the UK in 1931 under a different title – *The Life Machine*. Interestingly, Sophie Treadwell's expressionistic play comes only a few years after Elmer Rice's *The Adding Machine*, 'a landmark in expressionistic drama', which explores similar themes of conformity, social oppression and the individual's search for peace and freedom. *Machinal* has been revived several times in London, the most notable being the 1993 production that was directed by Stephen Daldry and starred Fiona Shaw in the role of the Young Woman. It was revived on Broadway in a Roundabout Theatre production in 2014, directed by Lyndsey Turner.

Themes

Machinal explores a range of themes and ideas. Expressionistic theatre is the perfect form for the journey of the Young Woman, and through a collection of episodes the audience are invited into the hard and mechanical world that suffocates and traps the **hopes and dreams** of Helen Jones.

Treadwell uses a range of **non-naturalistic techniques** and devices in order to give the audience insight into the effects of living in a **dehumanised, materialistic and machine-driven society**. Expressionistic drama puts society under the theatrical microscope and provides insight into the soulless systemisation of mankind. The world of the Young Woman is one that exploits people and robs them of **beauty and individualism**. The metallic and mechanical sounds that dominate the production add a haunting and disturbing quality to the overall narrative.

J. L. Styan, a leading author and literary critic on expressionistic drama, states that 'the story of the theatre is one of rebellion and reaction' and Treadwell's masterpiece is testament to this belief. Expressionistic plays often 'dramatise the spiritual awakening and sufferings of their protagonists', and the journey of the Young Woman supports this claim.

Key features of expressionistic drama include a dreamlike and nightmarish atmosphere, and this is apparent throughout several episodes in *Machinal*. The **distorted reality** that is presented through various speeches and monologues from the Young Woman provide insight into her fractured and troubled soul. The episodes that make up the play serve to contain the stages of her life, but also stand alone as examples of the broken and tormented world from which she is trying to escape.

The **mechanical world** dominates her existence, and it is only in Episode 6 (Intimate) that she is offered an alternative perspective of the world. With her lover she is presented with a taste of the romance and beauty that she desires, but this is soon destroyed with his courtroom betrayal.

Treadwell's use of language is fragmented and stylised, another key ingredient of expressionistic drama. Characters often speak in hard, spikey, rhythmical and staccato forms that mirror the office machines and devices presented in Episode 1. The dialogue becomes increasingly clipped and is sometimes referred to as 'telegram style'. Characters in expressionistic drama are often reduced to type and are presented as nameless figures to emphasise the **loss of individuality** that is central to the world they inhabit.

The play is often regarded as a **pro-feminist** piece of work. Treadwell was well regarded as a leading journalist in the 1920s and often went 'undercover' to shine a light on the problems facing homeless women in New York. She was also an active member of the Lucy Stone League of Suffragettes. The focus of *Machinal* is on the tragic and futile journey of the Young Woman as she attempts to fight against the **male-dominated and soulless society**.

Resources

Recommended edition

Machinal by Sophie Treadwell

ISBN 978-1-8-5459-211-8

This is the recommended edition for the Pearson Specification

Further reading

Modern Drama in Theory and Practice 3. Expressionism and Epic Theatre by J. L. Styan

ISBN 978-0521227391

Modern American Drama: The Female Canon. Edited by June Schlueter

ISBN 978-1611471397

Online resources

Reviews of National Theatre Production (1993)

<http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/theatre-the-soul-of-the-machine-paul-taylor-reviews-machinal-at-the-national-theatre-1511563.html>

Interview with Roundabout Theatre (2014 production)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oJdhZ4j7mQM>

There is also a series of design-based tutorials offered by the National Theatre. These are available by visiting

www.youtube.com/user/ntdiscovertheatre

Useful soundtracks to use in the classroom

Frost/Nixon by Hans Zimmer / Varese Sarabande Label

The Golden Age of Grotesque (specific suggested track) 'Theatre' by Marilyn Manson / PSP Co Ltd

Practical exploration activities

Actors

The following exercises are designed to help theatre makers practically explore some of the key characters, themes and ideas that are central to *Machinal*. Some of the exercises may help actors to consider how key roles might be communicated and realised from 'page to stage'.

Off-text improvisation is a useful explorative technique to consider the 'before and after' life of the play. For example, a useful exercise would be to create an interview scenario where George H. Jones hires the Young Woman. Other off-text work might include hot-seating various minor characters from Episode 1 to see what their individual opinion and attitude is towards Jones and the Young Woman.

Hot-seating is a valuable and exciting method to develop characterisation. It helps actors to 'flesh out' their understanding of the characters and provides them with the opportunity to develop ideas for performance. Characters should respond in role and consider the voice, attitude and physicality of the character they are exploring.

Gestic props and multi-role are also effective ways of developing details of character. For example, it might be useful in practical workshops to collect a series of props that might help students and actors develop the mechanical world of the office: the adding clerk, filing clerk, stenographer and telephone girl all feature heavily in the first episode. It might be useful to explore extracts from the scene with and without the use of props. Gestic costume and accessories might also help actors to discover the physicality of characters. For example, a suit jacket might help the actor playing George H. Jones to discover details about the physicality of the character. What happens when the Mother explores Episode 2 in an apron or a cardigan? Encourage your students to explore a range of characters, as this will allow them first-hand experience of how each character might stand, use space, behave in silence etc.

Stylised movement could be explored through the use of Brecht's 'Gestic Action' and Berkoff's 'Levels of Grotesque'. Both techniques are a useful way of exploring non-naturalistic action. It might be useful to develop a repeated action or movement sequence for some of the heightened characters in the play. For example, the reporters, the telephone girl, the Judge or the Nurse/Doctor. Gestic action is a useful Brechtian performance technique that allows movement to encapsulate attitude and character. Once the repeated action has been discovered, the actor can exaggerate and intensify the action using Berkoff's scale of 1–10, 1 being small and subtle and 10 being grotesque and over the top.

Exploring accent and dialect can also help actors to consider character choices. For example, a voice workshop that explores a range of accents might help to stress a particular attitude of a specific character. Does it make a difference if the Young Woman speaks with a regional or RP accent? Does it help to explore a working-class voice for the Man and a regional or RP accent for George H. Jones? *Machinal* is an American play, so why does it work in a range of accents? What is the theatrical impact of specific accent choices for the characters in the play?

It is sometimes useful to **explore a vocal mantra for each character**. Finding a particular line or phrase that is said by each character can help to define their attitudes

and emotions. Several characters in the play repeat lines. Exploring the vocal placement of each character can also help to define detail and bring a role to life. Key vocal resonators to explore include the nose, the throat, the stomach, the chest and the head. What quality is explored when the voice of the character is placed in a different resonator? It might be useful to explore different resonators with a key monologue or speech, for example the Young Woman's monologue in Episode 4 (Maternal).

Non-verbal communication is often a highly effective way to explore character, subtext, tension and silence. How does each character behave in moments of silence? It might be interesting to consider what happens in the moment of silence between George H. Jones and the Young Woman in Episode 3 (Honeymoon). It might be a useful exercise to run this scene under different time limits. What happens to the non-verbal action and detail when the scene is explored under the constraint of 10 minutes? 5 minutes? 3 minutes? The pace of the scene is crucial at this moment in the life of the Young Woman, and considering the non-verbal details for each character will help to explore changes in mood and atmosphere. It might also be useful to consider how the Young Woman behaves in the Court scene (Episode 8). Is she still? Is she nervous? Does she react differently under pressure from each lawyer? How does she react when the reporters speak? All these are important questions for the actor playing this role to consider.

It would be useful for students to explore the gestures and details of George H. Jones and the Lover. What differences do they find in their approach to the physical interpretation of these roles? It is important that there is contrast between the two characters, therefore by exploring the detail practically, students will feel more confident writing about their ideas on paper.

Key scene work / alternative viewpoints

Another useful exercise for an actor to consider involves staging and rehearsing a key scene with a particular focus and then trying it in an alternative style. For example, it might be useful to stage the court scene or the office scene, as these involve a lot of different characters. How will the use of space help to define the action, setting, mood and atmosphere? Try staging the scene in different ways. What happens when the pace of the scene is increased or decreased? What is the theatrical effect and impact of staging it end on/in the round/traverse? Try exploring a key scene with different levels of status. For example, what happens when the status changes between the Mother and the Young Woman in Episode 2? How does the scene change when the dynamics are altered? This exercise will encourage actors to think about appropriate interpretations of characters, within the context of the whole play.

Designers

The following exercises and ideas are designed to help theatre makers explore some of the opportunities, themes and ideas that are central to *Machinal*. Some of the suggestions may help designers to consider how key aspects of the play might be communicated and realised and from 'page to stage'.

It might be useful to set up a **production meeting** and pitch for your student designers, as this will help them to consider the play as a whole and root their practical ideas in aims and intentions. Remember that audience impact is key, and that setting up small groups of potential theatre makers might help students to consider the text in a holistic way. For example, a group could consist of a set, costume, sound and lighting designer. Smaller groups simply take on more than one area of responsibility. It is important that each designer questions the aims and intentions of the others, so that each member of the team is able to think in a holistic and collaborative way. The design 'pitch' could then be offered to the teacher (producer!). This is a useful discussion exercise that also lends itself to research, images and presentations. It can work at the start of a scheme of

work to initiate ideas/contextualise themes and key moments, or at the end of a scheme of work as a way of ensuring all aspects of production are considered. It would also make an excellent 'active' revision session in time for the exam. TIP – each member of the production team should justify their ideas with key moments from the play.

Creating a **model box of a potential set design** is a useful exercise and can be as simple or as elaborate as required. It is often useful for students to see how each scene will be played in a potential space, and by creating a model box they will be able to refer more easily to their ideas in a specific space. *Machinal* refers to several different locations, and a model box design might help students to consider how each space could be created and realised on stage.

Exploring different music and sound effects for key scenes is another effective way of considering how design can play an important role in the development of a key idea or theme. Treadwell lists several key sounds in her stage directions, and it might be interesting to see how they work as an underscore in key scenes. Sounds often help transition from scene to scene, and it would be useful for your students to explore the theatrical impact of using sound in a potential performance. Are the sounds recorded? Live? Both? Try exploring a range of sound effects and music. Does the sound heighten the emotion of the scene or detract from it? What sounds help to create the hospital, or the bar in Episode 5? What sounds help to establish the mood and atmosphere of the final scene?

If you have access to **different lighting effects**, it might be useful to explore key scenes in different lighting states. There are several different locations in the play, and lighting might help to create a sense of contrast. For example, how might lighting be used in the scenes that involve the inner thoughts of the Young Woman? What colours could be used to help establish the world of the bar in Episode 5? How can lighting help to support the mood and atmosphere of the Jail in Episode 9? How can lighting help to present the mechanical and cold world of the play? Have a look at previous productions and lighting designs to see how other theatre makers have used lighting to create impact in *Machinal*.

Another useful exercise that helps to build the world of the play and develop ideas for performance is **sourcing and designing potential costumes**. Research is key, and will help students who are initially daunted about the thought of 'designing'. They don't have to be great artists to create great designs. The main thing is that they approach the design of the production in a holistic way. Is their costume design expressionistic, representational or more naturalistic? If so, what is their aim and intention? Does their costume design root the production and performance in a particular time period or style? How does the performance of an actor playing the Young Woman change when she wears a small heel or character shoes? It is interesting for designers to interview actors and discover how costume can reveal insight into characterisation and interpretation.

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