



***NOT ENOUGH AIR***

by Masha Obolensky  
directed by Nick Bowling

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**STUDY GUIDE**

prepared by  
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# — STUDY GUIDE —

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## Sophie Treadwell – The Playwright



Sophie Treadwell, circa 1925. Photo by Bachrack. Courtesy Special Collections, University of Arizona Library, Sophie Treadwell Collection, MS318, Box 21, File 10.

Sophie Treadwell was born Oct. 3, 1885, in Stockton, California. Her mother, Nettie, and father, Alfred, had a troubled marriage. Her father, a justice of the peace, was a stern authoritarian who left the family sometime between 1890 and 1891. Nettie followed her husband to San Francisco and Sophie lived both with him and apart from him for several years. Treadwell's complex feelings about marriage were shaped by her parents' troubled marriage; her resentment of her mother, who didn't divorce Alfred in spite of saying she would; and the financial hardship she and her mother faced because of the separation. Their poverty may have contributed to Treadwell's later health problems.

Treadwell attended the University of California at Berkeley, where she performed in numerous plays. She graduated in 1906 with a Bachelor of Letters degree. After graduation, she worked numerous freelance newspaper and teaching jobs and dabbled in vaudeville as an actress. In 1908, a friend, drama critic Constance Skinner, arranged a job for her typing the memoir of actress Helena Modjeska. Modjeska was supportive of Treadwell's nascent playwriting efforts.

Later that year, Treadwell took a job with the *San Francisco Bulletin*, where she would meet the man she would marry, the noted sportswriter William O. McGeehan, known to friends as "Mac" After a brief courtship, they were married Jan. 27, 1910.

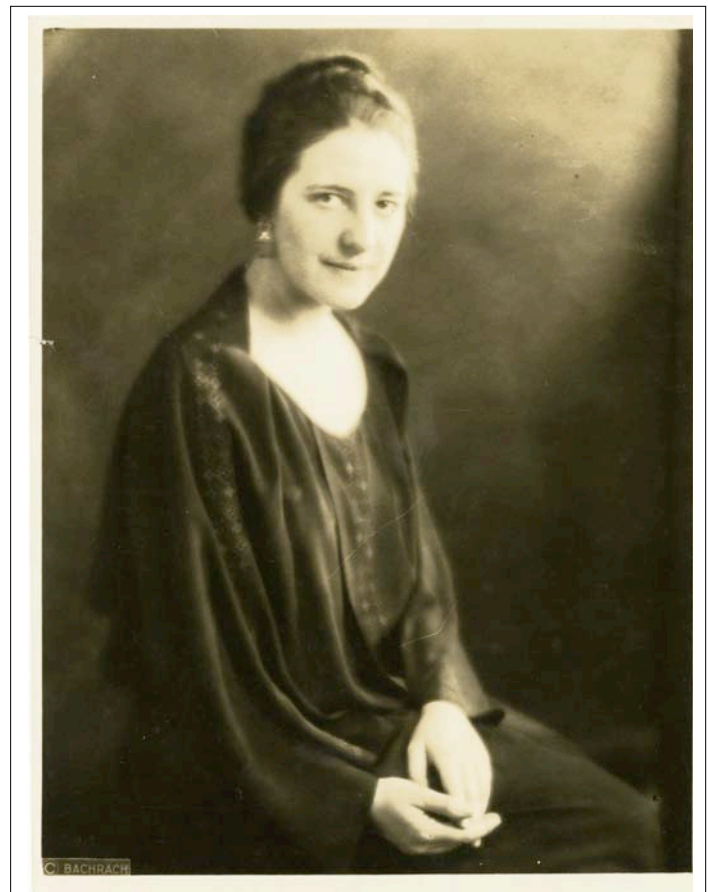
Six months into their marriage Treadwell was admitted to St. Helena Sanatorium, suffering from a nervous breakdown and a sudden loss of weight.

Their marriage was complicated but amiable. As, Treadwell's fame as a journalist grew throughout the Bay Area, there may have been tension over Treadwell's growing reputation. In 1914, McGeehan accepted a position with the *New York Evening Journal*. It would be a year before Treadwell would join her husband in New York City

When she moved to New York, she kept her name, and often her own residence, in keeping with the tenets of the Lucy Stone and early suffragist and feminist, who argued not only for rights of women to vote but also maintained the necessity of women keeping an identity independent from their husbands by keeping independent surnames and homes. When the loose organization of women formalized as the Lucy Stone League Treadwell joined the New York chapter.

Treadwell and Mac seem to have enjoyed each other's company and respected each other's work and need for individuality—and to have allowed each other a great deal of freedom. Their living arrangements would have been considered unique for the early 1900s, especially since women did not receive the vote until 1920. This freedom allowed them to develop separate friends and interests; indeed, in 1916, Treadwell had a brief but intense affair with the artist Maynard Dixon. However, she and Mac never lost their affectionate and amiable relationship and frequently took driving trips together in The States and in Europe. When Treadwell adopted a son in 1949, 16 years after Mac's death, she named him William Treadwell; perhaps in honor of Mac whose given name was William.

Treadwell's professional life was varied and acclaimed. As a journalist, she won acclaim for her serial exposé "An Outcast at the Christian Door," in which she disguised herself as a homeless prostitute and attempted to seek



Sophie Treadwell, circa 1925.  
Photo by Bachrack. Courtesy Special Collections,  
University of Arizona Library, Sophie Treadwell  
Collection, MS318, Box 21, File 10.

aid at numerous churches and aid societies. During World War I, she was one of a small number of female war correspondents; as such, officials of the countries she visited would not guarantee her safety, unsure what to do with a woman who wished to visit the front lines. In 1920 she covered the Mexican Revolution in 1920 for the *New York Tribune* and in 1921 she was granted an exclusive two-day interview with revolutionary leader Pancho Villa.

Treadwell also was writing plays while working as a journalist. Her scripts and subjects were as varied as her journalistic work; they also were frequently inspired by her journalism and firsthand experiences.

Although best known for the Expressionist play *Machinal*, which opened on Broadway in 1928, Treadwell enjoyed experimenting stylistically. Her work included so-called “well-made” plays (plays that follow a traditional three act structure), plays that incorporated music, comedy and social drama in a naturalistic style. Treadwell often took an active role in her plays that extended beyond writing: She produced and sometimes acted in, or directed them, a rarity for a woman of the era.

The latter part of Treadwell’s life is characterized by her travels, her shift from playwriting to focusing on other forms of writing and her continued interest to social issues.

After the deaths of McGeehan in 1933 and her mother in 1934, plus the failure of her play *Lone Valley* in 1933 (it closed three days after opening on Broadway), she attempted to make the family ranch in Stockton profitable and traveled widely. In 1949, she adopted a German boy after seeing and writing about the economic hardship in post-World War II Germany.

Treadwell would stop writing for the stage in 1941, after the failure of her stage adaptation of her novel *A Hope for a Harvest*, about her experiences trying to make the family ranch successful.

Between 1956 and 1964, she continued to travel widely, dividing her time between Spain, Vienna and Connecticut until failing health forced her to settle in Tucson, Arizona, in 1965. She lived to see *Machinal* revived in an off-Broadway production in 1960.

She died Feb. 20, 1970, in Tucson. She willed the copyrights of her work to the Roman Catholic Diocese of Tucson the proceeds of which were to be used for the education of Native American children.

## Timeline of Sophie Treadwell's Life and Work

- October 3, 1885 Sophie Anita Treadwell is born in Stockton, California
- 1890 Her father, Alfred Treadwell, abandons her and her mother, Nettie, and moves to San Francisco.
- 1906 Treadwell graduates from the University of California at Berkeley with a Bachelor of Letters degree.
- 1907 Treadwell writes her first play, *Le Grand Prix*. She also freelances for the *San Francisco Chronicle* and *San Francisco Examiner* and is an actress in vaudeville.
- 1908 Treadwell is hired to type actress Helena Modjeska's memoir; the *San Francisco Bulletin* hires her as a feature writer and theater critic.
- 1910 Treadwell marries William O. McGeehan, a sportswriter for the *Bulletin*. Six months later, she enters a sanitarium to recover from a nervous breakdown
- 1911 She finishes the play *The High Cost*, formerly called *Constance Darrow*, and writes *The Settlement*.
- 1914 Treadwell gains a reputation in the Bay Area for her journalism because of her interview of the author Jack London and her serial, "An Outcast at the Christian Door," an exposé in which she posed as a homeless prostitute and sought assistance from various churches and aid societies. William O. McGeehan moves to New York City to work for the *New York Evening Journal*. Treadwell becomes a supporter of the principals the suffragist Lucy Stone, who advocated that married women should keep their own names and campaigned for equality for men and women in all aspects of civil and social life. When the loose organization became formalized as the Lucy Stone League, Treadwell would become an active member.
- 1915 Treadwell moves to New York but soon leaves for France for four months to cover World War I for the *Bulletin* and *Harper's Weekly*. After her return, she is hired by the *New York American*. Her one-act play *Sympathy* is produced in San Francisco; it is the first of her plays to be produced.
- 1916 Treadwell has a brief but intense affair with the artist Maynard Dixon.

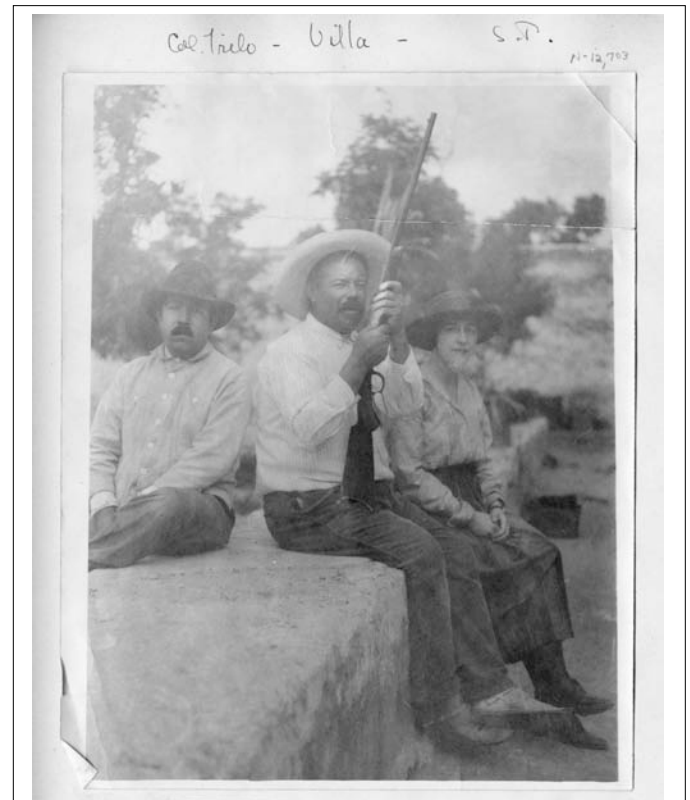
- 1918 Treadwell, writes, acts in and produces *Claws*.
- 1920 Treadwell covers the Mexican Revolution for the *New York Herald Tribune*.
- 1920 The United States Congress passes the Nineteenth Amendment, which prohibits denying any citizen the right to vote because of gender, in effect granting women the right to vote.

1921 Treadwell, writing for the *New York Tribune*, is the only foreign journalist to be granted an exclusive two-day interview with revolutionary leader Pancho Villa.

1922 Treadwell's play *Gringo*, based on her journalistic experience in Mexico, is produced on Broadway.

1923 Treadwell spends the summer studying acting with Richard Boleslavsky and a small group of actors.

1924 Treadwell sues actor John Barrymore for plagiarism failing to return her play on the life of Edgar Allen Poe after expressing interest in playing the role then announcing he would play Poe in a play written by his wife. She receives much negative publicity for the lawsuit.



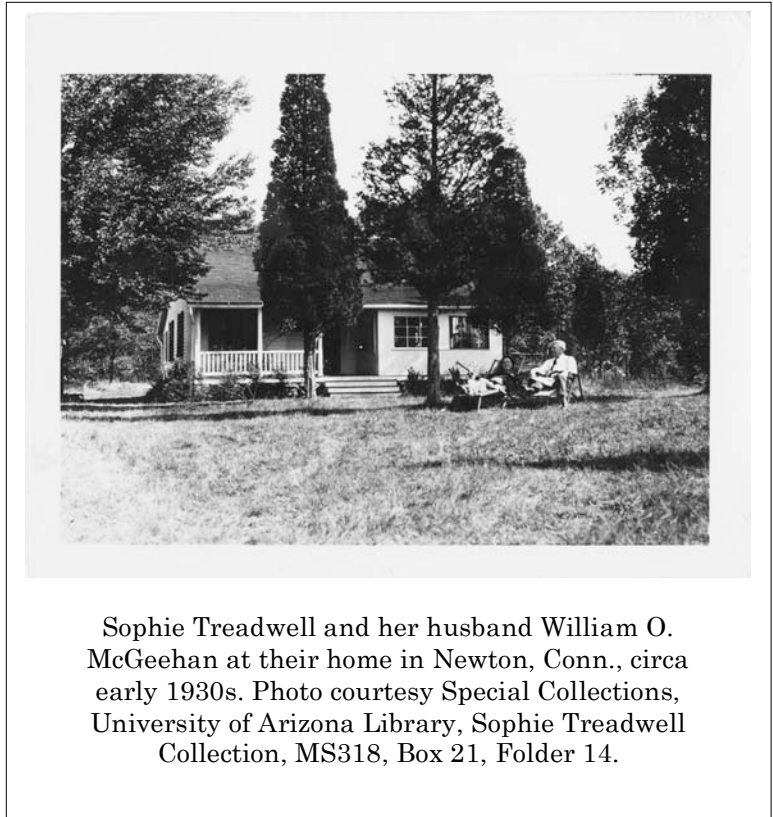
Sophie Treadwell (right) with Pancho Villa (center). Photo courtesy Special Collections, University of Arizona Library, Sophie Treadwell Collection, MS318, Box 11, Scrapbook, 8x10.

- 1925 Treadwell acts in and produces her play *O Nightingale*, on Broadway
- 1927 Treadwell covers the murder trial of Ruth Snyder and Judd Gray.
- 1928 *Machinal*, her play inspired by the Snyder-Gray trial, is produced on Broadway, starring Zita Johann and Clark Gable.
- 1929 *Ladies Leave* is produced on Broadway.

1930 Treadwell and McGeehan collaborate on the play *A Million Dollar Gate*. The couple travels in Europe and Africa. Treadwell stays in a sanitarium while in Vienna.

1931 *Machinal* debuts in London *The Life Machine*.

1933 After traveling to Moscow for a production of *Machinal*, Treadwell is disappointed in Communism and writes *Promised Land*. Her play *Lone Valley* closes on Broadway after three performances. William O. McGeehan dies.



Sophie Treadwell and her husband William O. McGeehan at their home in Newton, Conn., circa early 1930s. Photo courtesy Special Collections, University of Arizona Library, Sophie Treadwell Collection, MS318, Box 21, Folder 14.

1934 Treadwell's mother, Nettie, dies

1936 *Plumes in the Dust*, Treadwell's play on Edgar Allen Poe, is produced on Broadway. Treadwell travels to Egypt and the Far East.

1938 Treadwell writes the novel *A Hope for a Harvest* on her experiences trying to make the family ranch profitable.

1941 Treadwell turns *A Hope for a Harvest* into a play. After the failure of the play she turns from writing plays and focuses on other forms of writing. She works as a correspondent in Mexico for the *New York Herald Tribune*

1949 Treadwell tours Europe; while in Vienna, she spends two more months in a sanitarium. She writes about postwar Germany for the *New York Herald Tribune*—and adopts a German boy, naming him William Treadwell.

1950 Treadwell writes *A String of Pearls*.

- 1953 A television adaptation of *A Hope for a Harvest*, produced by the Theatre Guild, airs on the “U.S. Steel Hour.”
- 1954 Treadwell sells the family ranch in Stockton, California.
- 1956-1964 Treadwell divides her time between Spain, Vienna and Newton, Connecticut.
- 1959 Treadwell’s novel *One Fierce Hour and Sweet* is published.
- 1960 *Machinal* is revived in off-Broadway at The Gate Theatre.
- 1965 Treadwell moves to Tucson, Arizona
- 1967 Treadwell writes *Woman with Lilies*; it is produced at the University of Arizona under the title *Now He Doesn’t Want to Play*.
- February 20, 1970 Treadwell dies in Tucson. She donates her body to the Department of Anatomy at the University of Arizona in Tucson and wills her copyrights to the Roman Catholic Diocese of Tucson for the education of Native American children.

## **The Snyder-Gray Murder Trial**

In 1927, the trial of Ruth Snyder and Judd Gray was a sensational murder story that created a media frenzy. More than 180 reporters covered the trial and executions.

Snyder was a Long Island housewife who, with her lover, Judd Gray, a corset salesman, conspired to murder her husband after first having taken out a \$48,000 insurance policy on his life that included a double indemnity clause. After several alleged failed attempts on his life, the pair apparently hit a sleeping Albert Snyder with a window sash weight, beat him to death with a sash weight, tied a picture wire to his neck and stuffed a chloroform-soaked rag in his mouth. They then disguised the scene to look like a robbery. Snyder and Gray’s stories quickly unraveled under police scrutiny, and each blamed the other as the originator of the murder plot and the one to give the final blow to Albert Snyder.

Gray issued a statement to the press, “I warn all men against bad liquor and evil women. If I had not taken to drink, I would not have met the woman who

has placed me in the position I am in now. Bad liquor and evil women make a combination too strong for any man.”

The characterization of Snyder as a *femme fatale* was one that would be repeated and embellished by the press throughout the trial. It was Sophie Treadwell who described Snyder as “fattish,” pointing out that she was more matronly than she was portrayed by other papers.

Snyder and Gray, who were tried together, were convicted of murder and sentenced to death in the electric chair. Snyder was the first woman sentenced to death in New York State in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. (Notably, the jury was comprised entirely of men, as women were not allowed to serve as jurors on murder trials at that time.)

This was not the first time Treadwell had covered a trial of a woman accused of murder. She had covered the trials of women for several of the newspapers for which she had worked. The female journalists who covered the trials of these women were often derisively called “sob sisters.”

Adding to the media frenzy was a photograph of Snyder’s execution. The New York Daily News contrived to get a cameraman into the execution chamber at Sing Sing Prison. Afraid that the paper’s staff photographers would be identified, they hired *Chicago Tribune* photographer Tom Howard and brought him to New York City. Howard attached a camera to his leg and lifted the leg of his trousers to take the photo at the moment of Snyder’s execution.

The crime and trial inspired Treadwell to write the play *Machinal*. The Snyder-Gray murder also has inspired other writers and filmmakers. It was the basis for James M. Cain’s novels *Double Indemnity* and *The Postman Always Rings Twice* as well as the subsequent film adaptations. The film *The Picture Snatcher* features an incident much like Howard’s photo of Snyder in the electric chair.

Additionally, technological advances allowed for wider radio broadcasts in the 1920s, which meant that news and entertainment programs could reach a wide audience. The Snyder-Gray trial was one of the first trials covered on the radio as well as in the newspapers, further adding to the sensationalism of the reporting and the saturation of the story in both forms of media.

## Elizabeth Blair Mohr and Leah Alexander

The Snyder-Gray trial was not the only murder trial of a woman defendant that Sophie Treadwell attended. In 1914, working as a journalist in San Francisco, Treadwell covered the trial of Leah Alexander for the murder of her lover, J. D. Van Baalen. In 1916, she would cover the Providence, Rhode Island, trial of Elizabeth Blair Mohr for the *New York American*. Mohr was on trial for hiring her chauffeur to kill her husband and disfigure his housekeeper/mistress. Treadwell was known for a reporting style that included not only details of the cases but information that might give an impression of the emotional state of the women on trial for murder. She would describe their facial expressions or gestures or gasping for breath during the prosecution's closing argument. She also covered the public response to the trials, including comments heard outside the courtroom about the good looks of a murdered man.

## Neurasthenia

Sophie Treadwell, Ruth Snyder and the character of The Young Woman in *Machinal* all suffered from neurasthenia.

Neurasthenia, a term coined in the late 1880s by George Beard, an American psychiatrist, covered a broad range of symptoms, including fatigue, listlessness, forgetfulness, anxiety, insomnia, pain, heart palpitations, fainting and trouble breathing.

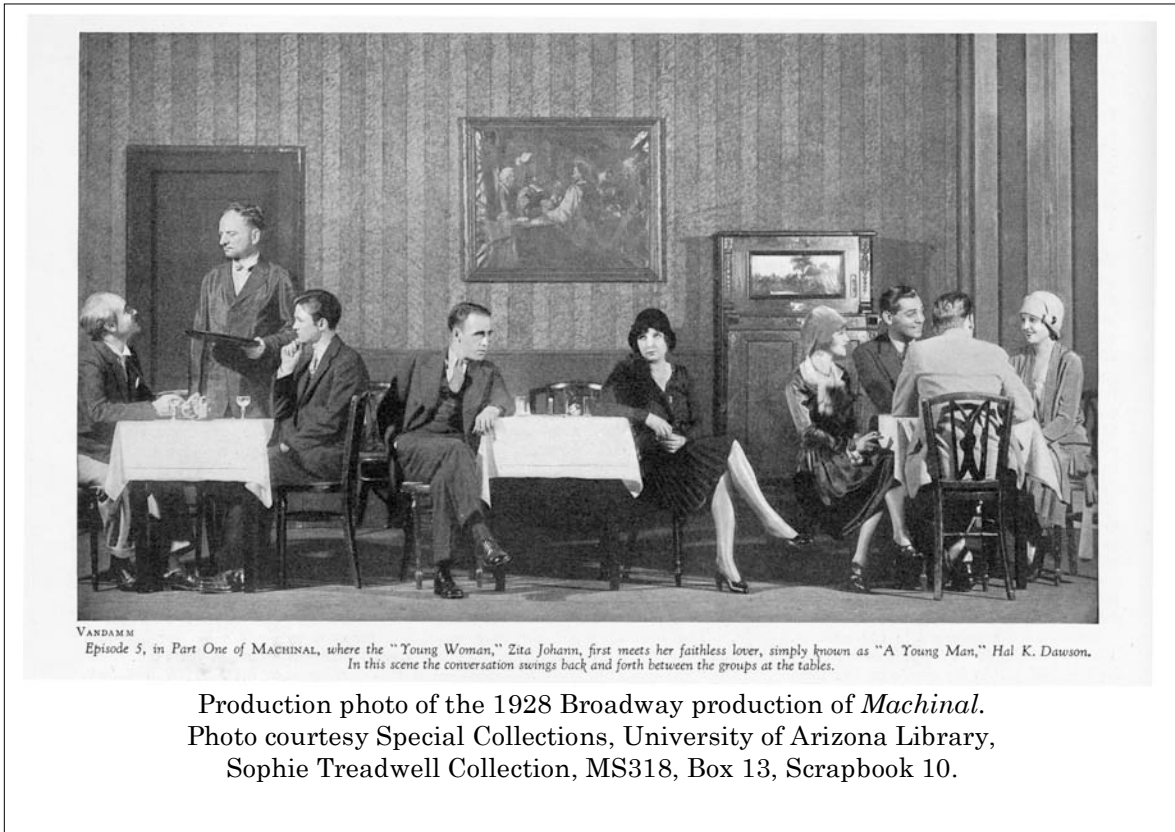
Beard believed the symptoms were brought on by the stresses of the urban world and excessive mental stimulation.

The disorder was believed to be psychological in origin, and patients often were prescribed a "rest cure," although electroshock therapy occasionally was used as well.

The writers Charlotte Perkins Gilman and Virginia Woolf were diagnosed with neurasthenia and prescribed "rest cures." However, it was not considered a woman's disorder: It was a common diagnosis for soldiers returning from World War I.

Today, neurasthenia is no longer recognized as a diagnosis, and past diagnoses likely covered a wide range of illnesses, many of which are physical rather than psychological in origin. Illnesses that might have been diagnosed as neurasthenia include chronic fatigue syndrome and fibromyalgia, as well as post-traumatic stress.

## *Machinal*



*"The plot is the story of a woman who murders her husband, an ordinary young woman, any woman."* —Treadwell's script note from *Machinal*

The title *Machinal* — the French word for mechanical, or automatic — evokes Treadwell's concerns about the machine-like nature of the modern world. Indeed, when the play was first produced in London, it was under the title *The Life Machine*.

*Machinal* is an Expressionist play; as such it focuses on revealing the emotional reality of its main character rather than a literal or naturalistic representation of the events of her life. Expressionism, which was still experimental at the time, relies on short scenes, two-dimensional characters that represent types, short lines of deliberately repetitive language, monologues, and machine sounds and noises to create an overall feeling of mechanization, entrapment and alienation. These stylistic devices are particularly noticeable in the opening scene, which takes place in an office, dehumanized and vague but full of the repeated phrases of co-workers and the constant buzz of typewriters, telephones and machines.

Not unlike a medieval morality play, *Machinal* follows a set of stations, or pivotal scenes, in the life of the protagonist. The play is divided into nine scenes in the life of a young woman, who functions as an Everywoman. Each scene depicts a subsequent phase in the young woman's life: "To Business," "At Home," "Honeymoon," "Maternal," "Prohibited," "Intimate," "Domestic," "The Law" and "A Machine." It may be deliberate that Sophie Treadwell chose nine episodes mirroring nine months of a pregnancy. As Treadwell notes in her stage directions, "The plan is to tell this story by showing the different phases of life that the woman comes in contact with, and in none of which she finds any place, any peace. The woman is essentially soft, tender, and the life around her is essentially, hard, mechanized."

Notably, in *Machinal*, the major event of each episode in the life of The Young Woman happens off stage. For example, the proposal, the consummation of her marriage, the birth of her daughter and the murder of her husband are not depicted. The scenes on stage reflect only the turmoil of her inner life.

She is identified in the script as The Young Woman, but she is also called Helen Jones, a name that also indicates her role as an Everywoman. Jones is a common, almost generic, surname and Helen, like Helen of Troy, is a cipher, a blank slate upon which external forces and ideas are enacted.

When it opened on Broadway in 1928, *Machinal* was an unqualified success. *New York Times* critic Brooks Atkinson saw the play twice and compared it favorably to Theodore Dreiser's *An American Tragedy* and Elmer Rice's *The Adding Machine*. He called it "a triumph of individual distinction, gleaming with intangible beauty," adding that "in a hundred years ... it should still be vital and vivid." After the play opened in London in 1931, *The Times* critic called it "expressive and beautifully clean cut."

In 1933, *Machinal* also had two successful runs in the Soviet Union, where Treadwell was unique in receiving royalties for her work, which was unusual for a Soviet production. The play, which was included in the anthology *The Best Plays of 1928-1929*, was revived in off-Broadway in 1960.

The initial Broadway production starred Zita Johann (who would later star with Boris Karloff in the 1932 film *The Mummy*) as the young woman and young Clark Gable as the lover.

## Summary of the Episodes in *Machinal*

### Episode 1: To Business

*Adding clerk: She doesn't belong in an office.*

The first episode of *Machinal* opens in an office where the monotony and isolation is immediately indicated not only by the noise of the machines but also by the repetitive phrases of the office workers: The adding clerk is reciting a series of numbers, the file clerk lists his alphabetized filing, the stenographer recites portions of a letter, and the telephone operator repeatedly answers the phone with the same words. The Young Woman arrives late into this scene and is out of place. The adding clerk says, "She doesn't belong in an office" and later, "She's artistic." She is out of tune with the mechanized and mercantile world around her. The Young Woman is summoned by her boss, George H. Jones, who proposes to her off stage. She returns to her desk and sits, unable to use her machine, which is broken. She is unable to take any initiative until the stenographer tells her to sort the mail.

The noise of the office echoes The Young Woman's inner turmoil. As the stenographer recites an ordinary line from a letter, "awaiting your answer," it resonates with her own need to answer the marriage proposal.

The episode ends with The Young Woman's monologue recited over the clamor of the office. It is in short, disjointed phrases filled with Treadwell's dashes and also incorporates the business phrases of the office: "Marry me — wants to marry me — George H. Jones — George H. Jones and Company — Mrs. George H. Jones..."

### Episode 2: At Home

*Mother: He's a decent man, isn't he?*

*Young Woman: I don't know. How should I know — yet.*

*Mother: He's a Vice President — of course he's decent.*

This scene takes place between The Young Woman and her mother. In the background are the conversations of neighbors, which act like a chorus echoing The Young Woman's emotional state. The mother urges her daughter to eat a potato she does not want, while The Young Woman struggles to discuss the marriage proposal with her mother. At first her mother is against the marriage, but when she learns it is from the vice president of the company and that he would agree to care for her as well, she encourages it. She disregards her daughter's desire for a love match.

Outside the apartment we hear a young boy argue with his mother, who wants him to come inside. Husbands and wives argue, and a young boy urges a young girl to sneak outside and meet him. The Young Woman's decision to marry George H. Jones comes at the end of the scene in a resounding, "I suppose so." It is more a response to her mother's nagging than based on any personal longing.

### **Episode 3: Honeymoon**

*Husband: You don't have to go in there to take your clothes off.*

*Young Woman: I want to.*

*Husband: What for?*

*Young Woman: I always do.*

*Husband: What?*

*Young Woman: Undress by myself.*

*Husband: You've never been married till now — have you?*

The episode opens as the young woman and the husband arrive at a hotel. Outside, people are dancing and music is heard; the husband insists on closing the blinds. The Young Woman is nervous and unresponsive to his suggestions. The husband tries to tell her a few dirty jokes, but The Young Woman recoils from the jokes — and his touch. She finally changes into her nightgown, but emerges from the bathroom in tears. As the scene ends, The Young Woman calls for her mother, then just for "Somebody."

### **Episode 4: Maternal**

*Young Woman: Let me alone — let me alone — let me alone — I've submitted enough — I won't submit to any more — crawl off — crawl off in the dark — Vixen crawled under the bed — way back in the corner under the bed — they were all drowned — puppies don't go to heaven — heaven — golden stairs — long stairs — long — too long...*

The Young Woman is in a hospital. She has given birth but is unable to speak. The husband, nurse and the doctor all insist she is doing better in spite of her vehement gestures to the contrary. The husband lectures her in platitudes: "But you've got to brace up now! Make an effort! Pull yourself together! Start the uphill climb!" The Young Woman chokes and is unable to breathe.

The husband leaves and the doctor arrives, but he ignores the information given by the nurse in prescribing a course of treatment. He declares The Young Woman should see her baby, to which she responds with an audible

and resounding, “No!” The doctor takes her speaking as proof that her condition has improved.

The doctor and nurse leave to get the baby, and The Young Woman has another monologue, in which she expresses her desire to be left alone. She describes a vixen hiding under a bed and the pups being drowned, and staircases to and from heaven with the dead going up and children coming down to be born.

She ends with the refrain, “I’ll not submit. I’ll not submit.”

### **Episode 5: Prohibited**

*First Man: There were a bunch of banditos — bandits, you know, took me into the hills — holding me there — what was I to do? I got the two birds that guarded me drunk one night, and then I filled the empty bottle with small stones — and let ’em have it!*

*Young Woman: Oh!*

*First Man: I had to get free, didn’t I? I let ’em have it —*

The episode takes place in a bar. There are three tables. At one, an older man is seducing a young man and plying him with liquor. At the second, a man and woman discuss whether she will have an abortion.

At the third table, two men wait. The Young Woman arrives with a girl. The girl and the Second Man have already planned an assignation and quickly depart. The Young Woman remains with the First Man.

He talks about his love of travel and freedom. He describes escaping some bandits in Mexico after filling a bottle with small stones and beating his captors to death with it. He tells The Young Woman she looks like an angel, and she agrees to go to his apartment with him.

### **Episode Six: Intimate**

*Young Woman: We’re going to stick together — always — aren’t we?*

*Man: [honestly] I’ll have to be moving on, kid — someday, you know?*

*Young Woman: When?*

*Man: Quien Sabe?*

The Young Woman and the man are in bed. They listen to a hand organ and singer outside. They talk more about the man’s life and travels. The Young Woman sings some children’s songs. She asks if they will stick together, and the man responds honestly, who knows? The Young Woman describes herself

as feeling “purified.” She realizes how late it is and dresses to go home. Impulsively, she asks for a bowl filled with pebbles and a lily that the man has in his window. He gives it to her. She bids him goodbye and thanks him.

### **Episode 7: Domestic**

***Husband: You don't breathe deep enough — breathe now — look at me. [He breathes.] Breath is life. Life is breath.***

***Young Woman: [Suddenly] And what is death?***

***Husband: [Smartly] Just — no breath!***

***Young Woman: [To herself] Just no breath.***

The Young Woman and the husband sit on opposite ends of a sofa. The Young Woman reads newspaper articles: “Girl turns on gas —” “Woman leaves all for love —” “Young wife disappears —”. The husband talks about work, deals and property. He repeats the same business story to his wife and in phone calls. The Young Woman wants the curtains and window open, but the husband wants them closed. The Young Woman describes feeling stifled, and the husband suggests she doesn't breathe deeply enough.

The Young Woman begins to hear the voice of her lover, describing his break for freedom, and other disembodied voices, which urge her on in choral fashion with phrases like, “free — free — free”, “Who'd know? Who'd know? Who'd know?” and “head stones — head stones — head stones.” The Young Woman cries out, “Oh! Oh!” The scene ends, in darkness.

### **Episode 8: The Law**

***1<sup>st</sup> Reporter: [Writing rapidly] The defense sprang a surprise at the opening of court this morning by putting the accused woman on the stand. The prosecution was swept off its feet by this daring defense strategy and —***

***2<sup>nd</sup> Reporter: Trembling and scarcely able to stand, Helen Jones, accused murderess, had to be almost carried to the witness stand this morning when her lawyer —***

The scene opens in a courtroom. Several other cases are dispatched with, and then The Young Woman is cross-examined about her husband's death. Throughout the scene, reporters give differing interpretations of her testimony and character. She describes two men standing over her husband. She tries to justify washing her bloody nightgown and denies having seen a lily bowl. The Young Woman breaks down after an affidavit from her lover is read that describes their affair and the lily bowl and pebbles he gave her. She confesses.

## **Episode 9: The Machine**

***Young Woman: Oh, Father, pray for me — a prayer — that I can understand!***

The Young Woman is in prison. A priest prays a repetitious litany of prayers. In a cell offstage, a fellow condemned prisoner sings a spiritual. The Young Woman fails to understand the prayers of the priest. She seems calm but struggles against the barbers who have come to shave part of her hair for the electric chair. She shouts her refusal to submit, but she is subdued and her hair shaved. The Young Woman asks the priest questions. She can't understand how her moments of freedom have all been sin. She sees her mother, but the mother is taken away before The Young Woman can give her a message for her own daughter. The Young Woman is led away. In the darkness, the voices of the priest and reporters continue.

The Young Woman calls out “Somebody! Somebody...” and is cut off mid-sentence. Her cry echoes the one she made at the end of the “Honeymoon” episode. The scene ends with the priest continuing to pray: “Christ have mercy — Lord have mercy — Christ have mercy —”

## **Expressionism and its Influences in American Theater**

“Expressionism, with its explosive syntax, its disintegrating forms, and its panoramic simultaneities, had a kinship with many other modern-art movements, including futurism and cubism; it borrowed from Rimbaud and the French symbolists, it was influenced by Dostoevsky and Strindberg, and it was motivated by Freud’s explorations of the unconscious. ... The expressionists felt that they created rather than merely reproduced, and that they were reacting against what they regarded as the predominately surface approaches of such nineteenth-century movements as naturalism and impressionism. For the most part these were concerned, for all their differences, with material aspects; the expressionist regarded themselves as concentrating upon the spiritual.”

— Harry T. Moore, in the preface to *Accelerated Grimace  
Expressionism in the American Drama of the 1920s*

In the early 20<sup>th</sup> Century, particularly in the aftermath of World War I, visual artists as well as artists in the theater and cinema began experimenting with non-realistic representations in art such as Cubism, Surrealism, Dadaism and Expressionism. The rising influence of Freudian

psychology and psychology in general contributed to an interest in the subjective internal life of an individual rather than just the external reality.

Expressionism, by the nature of its focus on the subjective experience through abstract methods, is unwieldy and difficult to define. For reference in other artistic genres: In music, Arnold Schoenberg is considered an Expressionist. In art, although he precedes them slightly, Edvard Munch — and his “The Scream” — was an inspiration for many Expressionists. Art movements like Fauvism, (which included Henri Matisse), with its bright colors and abstraction, had similar artistic impulses. Jackson Pollock’s mid-century works of Abstract Expressionism is a philosophical descendant of the early 20<sup>th</sup> Century Expressionists.

Germany is generally considered to be the birthplace of Expressionism. In the post-war era there were no large budgets for films or the theater. Designers turned to abstract, exaggerated sets that represented a central character’s subjective emotions. Many of the designers who worked on these films and plays were members of the group that published the Expressionist journal *Der Sturm* (storm).

Often called *stationendramen*, or station plays, these new works echoed the tradition of religious station plays that focused on the spiritual life and major events in the life and death of Christ. In Expressionism, the events and awakenings that occur in the life of a central character take the form of short scenes, often with heightened or stylized language. The awakenings may be dark and represent a character’s psychological journey to madness or murder.

American Expressionism grew up concurrent with Europe’s Expressionist movements in art, film and the theater. However, American playwrights may have been more influenced by German Expressionist films than its Expressionist plays. The plays of German Expressionist playwrights Georg Kaiser and Ernst Toller, did not receive American productions until after American Expressionist plays had been produced. However, films like *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* and *The Golem* had been shown in America by 1921, with *Nosferatu* in 1922 and *Metropolis* in 1927.

Expressionism is not easily described as a single cohesive movement. In the United States, it was not organized as a group. Additionally, confusing the matter, some critics referred to the movement as Impressionism. American playwrights, though, enjoyed success with experimental plays: Eugene O’Neill’s plays *The Hairy Ape*, *The Emperor Jones* and *The Great God Brown* employed Expressionist techniques, as did Elmer Rice’s *The Adding Machine* and Sophie Treadwell’s *Machinal* and *For Saxophone*.

American playwrights working with Expressionist forms were particularly interested in social concerns: the role of the worker in a changing world, the effects of social classes and the circumscribed roles available to women. In *The Hairy Ape*, the main character, Yank, labors in a ship's engine room. But when he is called a "filthy beast" by a rich girl, he begins a journey where he finds he does not fit with any social level of humanity and so seeks solace with a gorilla at a zoo, where he dies. In *The Adding Machine*, the adding clerk, Mr. Zero, is expecting a raise and is instead fired. Told he is being replaced by a machine, he murders his boss and is sentenced to death. When he is given the option of a more peaceful afterlife he chooses to be reborn into a new life in an office. The Young Woman in *Machinal* is ill-suited to life in an office and equally ill-equipped for a marriage of security with a man she does not love. It leads her to murder him — and to her death sentence.

Although Expressionism, much like Dadaism and other experimental forms, faded from popularity, its techniques are still found in the theater and film. Film, in particular benefited from the influx of German filmmakers who immigrated to the United States as the Nazi Party came to power. Both the film genres of horror and film-noir use techniques pioneered by Expressionist filmmakers. Playwrights too still use Expressionist techniques and David Mamet's *Edmond* may be considered the heir of that tradition.

## **Timeline of Women's Rights and Achievements**

- 1833 Oberlin College becomes the first coeducational college in the United States.
- 1841 Lucy Stone and Antoinette Brown graduate from Oberlin.
- 1848 The Seneca Falls Convention on Women's Rights is held, and the Declaration of Sentiments and Resolutions, which argues for equal rights and suffrage, is signed.
- 1848 The Married Women's Property Act of New York State grants women the right to own property after marriage and retain the ownership of any property owned before marriage.
- 1849 Elizabeth Blackwell earns her M.D. degree from the Medical Institution of Geneva, N.Y., becoming the first woman in the United States with a medical degree.
- 1850 The first National Women's Rights Convention is held in Worcester, Mass.

- 1851 Former slave Sojourner Truth delivers her “Ain’t I a Woman” speech at a women’s-rights convention in Akron, Ohio.
- 1855 The case *State of Missouri v Celia*, A Slave finds that Celia is property and therefore not entitled to protect herself against her rape by her master.
- 1869 Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton form the National Woman Suffrage Association. Lucy Stone, Henry Blackwell and Julia Ward form the American Woman Suffrage Association. The Territory of Wyoming passes women’s suffrage.
- 1872 Victoria Claflin Woodhull is the first woman to run for president, on the Equal Rights Party ticket.
- 1880 Through special congressional legislation, Belva Lockwood becomes the first woman lawyer to try a case before the Supreme Court.
- 1890 The National Woman Suffrage Association and American Woman Suffrage Association merge to form the National American Woman Suffrage Association.
- 1893 Hannah Greenbaum Solomon forms the National Council of Jewish Women.
- 1896 The National Association of Colored Women is formed.
- 1903 The National Women’s Trade Union League is formed to advocate for improved working conditions for women.
- 1911 Mrs. Arthur Dodge forms The National Association Opposed to Woman Suffrage.
- 1912 Theodore Roosevelt’s Progressive Party adopts a woman-suffrage plank.
- 1912 After getting involved in the Girl Guides program in England, Juliette Gordon Low founds the first Girl Guides chapter in the U. S., which would be renamed the Girl Scouts in 1913.
- 1916 Margaret Sanger opens a birth-control clinic in Brooklyn. The clinic is shut down 10 days later, and she is arrested.
- 1920 The United States Congress passes the Nineteenth Amendment, which prohibits denying any citizen the right to vote because of gender, in effect granting women the right to vote.

- 1925 Nellie Tayloe Ross is elected governor of Wyoming. She is the first woman governor in the United States.
- 1932 Amelia Earhart is the first woman to fly solo across the Atlantic Ocean.
- 1933 Frances Perkins is named Secretary of Labor by President Franklin D. Roosevelt. She is the first female Cabinet member.
- 1935 Mary McLeod Bethune forms the National Council of Negro Women to lobby against discrimination.
- 1960 The Food and Drug Administration approves birth-control pills.
- 1963 Congress passes the Equal Pay Act, making it illegal for employers to pay a woman less than a man for the same job.
- 1964 Title VII of the Civil Rights Act makes it illegal to discriminate in employment on the basis of race or gender. The Equal Employment Opportunity Commission is formed.
- 1966 The National Organization for Women is founded.
- 1968 Shirley Chisholm is the first African-American woman elected to the U.S. House of Representatives.
- 1969 California adopts a no-fault divorce law that allows a couple to divorce by mutual consent. It will take until 1985 for the last of the other states to adopt similar laws.
- 1978 The Pregnancy Discrimination Act is passed, making it illegal for a woman to be fired or denied a job because she is pregnant.
- 1981 Sandra Day O'Connor is the first woman appointed to the Supreme Court of the United States.
- 1983 As a crewmember on the space shuttle Challenger, astronaut Sally Ride becomes the first woman in space.
- 1984 Geraldine Ferraro becomes the first woman vice-presidential nominee of a major American political party.
- 1985 Wilma Mankiller becomes the first woman chief of the Cherokee Nation.

- 1990 Dr. Antonia Novello is the first woman and first Hispanic to be appointed Surgeon General.
- 1992 Carol Mosley Braun of Illinois is the first African-American woman elected to the U.S. Senate.
- 1993 Janet Reno is the first woman to be appointed Attorney General.
- 1993 Sheila Widnall is appointed head of the U.S. Air Force.
- 1994 The Violence Against Women Act tightens penalties against sex offenders and funds service for victims of rape and domestic violence.
- 1996 Army Sgt. Heather Johnsen is the first woman to guard the tomb of the Unknown Soldier at Arlington Cemetery.
- 1997 Madeleine Albright is the first woman to be appointed Secretary of State.
- 2000 Hilary Rodham Clinton of New York is elected to the U.S. Senate, becoming the first former First Lady elected to national office.
- 2005 Condoleeza Rice is the first African-American woman to be appointed Secretary of State.
- 2007 Rep. Nancy Pelosi of California is the first woman to become the Speaker of the House of Representatives.
- 2008 Sen. Hilary Rodham Clinton wins the New Hampshire Democratic presidential primary, the first woman in U.S. history to win a presidential primary.
- 2008 Army Gen. Ann E. Dunwoody is promoted to four-star general, the first woman to attain this rank.
- 2009 Michelle Obama will become the first African-American First Lady in U.S. history.

## Women and Playwriting

“A Native American Comedy, by a Mrs. Mowatt, is rumored to be in rehearsal at the Park. We have little confidence in female dramatic productions, of the present time, but we wish the lady a happy debut although it may be in five long acts.”

— An 1845 New York newspaper announcement about Anna Cora Mowatt’s play *Fashion*

“But let me tell you it takes a tremendous effort to shake my woman’s guilt. Who knows how many potential playwrights there may be out there fixing bag lunches for their children who would be attempting to write their plays and get them on, were it not for the fact that they would guiltily consider their efforts self-indulgent folly.”

— Playwright Gretchen Cryer in a May 20, 1973, article in the *New York Times*, “Where Are the Women Playwrights?”

“Would Eugene O’Neill have been a great playwright if he happened to be born a woman? No. He was in as much pain as most women are, but because he was a man, he was allowed his anger because that is ‘manly.’ ”

— Playwright Renee Taylor in a May 20, 1973, article in the *New York Times*, “Where Are the Women Playwrights?”

“I personally don’t think playwriting is a gene on the Y chromosome.”

— Playwright Theresa Rebeck in a October 25, 2008, article in the *New York Times*, “Charging Bias by Theaters, Female Playwrights to Hold Meeting”

In 1929, Virginia Woolf published her essay “A Room of One’s Own,” based on lectures she delivered at women’s colleges at the University of Cambridge in England. In it she examined the lack of women writers and the challenges facing women who want to write, in terms of a tradition of women writers, the economic freedom and the privacy to write.

In the theater, the problems facing women writers seem even more challenging.

In America, the moral prohibitions of Quakers and Puritans set back the growth of theater as a whole and work by women in particular. However, there were women who wrote. Mercy Otis Warren, a friend of John Adams, wrote Tory-leaning satires in the late 1770s that circulated in manuscript form but were not performed. Susana Rowson, better known for her novel *Charlotte Temple*, wrote

and acted in her play *Slaves in Algiers* in 1794. Anna Cora Mowatt overcame her fears about the immorality of the stage, which she had learned as a child from a preacher, to write for the stage. Her play *Fashion*, a comedy about the American preoccupation with the fashions and tastes of Europe, was a success. Mowatt also became a professional actress and elevated the acceptability of women as actors, which also improved the type of audience. In 1906, Virginia Frame published “Women who have Written Successful Plays,” an article in which she noted more than a dozen women who are not familiar to modern audiences.

The 1920s and 1930s saw a flowering of women playwrights and women with roles in theaters, but they still lacked the prestige of their male contemporaries. Lillian Hellman may be the best-known female playwright.

Women often found roles in administration. Hallie Flanagan headed the Federal Theatre Project. Cheryl Crawford was one of the founders of the Group Theatre in New York, although her reputation has been eclipsed by the large personalities of her co-founders, Harold Clurman and Lee Strasberg.

In 1921, Zona Gale won the Pulitzer Prize for Drama for *Miss Lulu Bett*. Rachel Crothers also was immensely popular. In 1929, Sophie Treadwell’s *Machinal* debuted to nearly universal praise. Susan Glaspell switched from writing fiction to writing for the stage. Two of her works are *Trifles* (1916), which, like *Machinal*, examines the situation of a woman alone and isolated in a loveless marriage who murders her husband, and *Alison’s House* (1930), about Emily Dickinson and which won the Pulitzer Prize for Drama. However, she is probably better known for her work with the Provincetown Players, which she helped found, and as a “discoverer” of Eugene O’Neill. In 1935, Zoë Akins won the Pulitzer Prize for Drama for *The Old Maid*, but it is Eugene O’Neill and Thornton Wilder, male Pulitzer Prize winners of the same era, who are the household names today.

Judith E. Barlow in her revelatory introduction to *Plays by American Women: The Early Years*, points out that many of these women wrote in other genres. Several were journalists. She also notes, “Mowatt, Crothers, Glaspell, Gale and Treadwell (not to mention Lillian Hellman, America’s most outstanding woman dramatist)—is it coincidental that none of these women bore children?”

Newspapers seem to be asking the perennial question, “Where Are the Women Playwrights?” That was the title of a 1973 *New York Times* piece in which six women playwrights were asked to answer these questions: “Why don’t more women write for the theater? Why do those who do tend either to write sporadically or drift away altogether after a period of activity?” More than 35 years later those questions still do not seem to have been answered.

In 2008, similar articles questioning the lack of productions by female playwrights have appeared in the *New York Times* and the *London Times*. In the *New York Times* article, playwright Sarah Schulman contends that during the 2008-09 season, at least 50 plays by living American playwrights will be on view at 14 of the largest Off-Broadway theaters, but only 10 are by women. (“Charging Bias by Theaters, Female Playwrights to Hold Meeting,” *New York Times*, Oct. 24, 2008).

## Questions for Discussion

### About the Play

Sophie’s artistic process exacts a toll on her. What does it say about her as an individual and her process as a writer? The character of the Young Woman is very different than the Ruth Snyder; why is it important that they are different? What does the Young Woman represent to Sophie? What does Ruth Snyder represent to Sophie?

### About the Production

The actors in the play move the furniture and scenery to help create the scenes. What does it do to your experience of watching the play to see the empty space and the furniture moving? How is that different than if it were a very realistic set?

Light and sound are key to creating and understanding moments in the play. How are the lights and sound design used to represent changes in the scenes or in Sophie’s mind?

Three men play all the other characters. Is it important that the men change roles? Why? What is the relationship like between the three women in the play? How are they similar and how are they different?

### About the Context

The play raises questions about objectivity. Is the news media objective? Can a play be objective?

What is the value in watching a play based on historic events? What can a play do that a news account or a historical account cannot?

Sophie is interested in the reasons someone might commit a murder. Is it important to the legal process to understand someone's reasons for committing a murder?

What role or responsibility should artists have in addressing social issues?

Social roles change. In the 1920s, women had just obtained the right to vote. How does that influence your thoughts about Sophie Treadwell or Ruth Snyder?

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