Machinal

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF SOPHIE TREADWELL

Born in 1885, Sophie Treadwell grew up as an only child in Stockton, California. When she was still quite young, her father left the family and moved to San Francisco, where the future playwright visited him during the summers, experiences that first exposed her to the theater. When she attended the University of California at Berkley in 1902, she began writing and acting in plays while also serving as a correspondent for the college at *The San Francisco Examiner*. This position was only one of several jobs she held in order to support herself while attending school. During this hectic time Treadwell also dealt with mental illness—a battle against anxiety that would follow her throughout her life, sometimes resulting in lengthy hospital stays. After graduating college in 1906 and marrying a sports writer who worked for the *San Francisco Bulletin*, Treadwell and her new husband moved to New York, where the young writer became involved with the fight for women's suffrage. Because of her strong belief in female independence and freedom, she and her husband lived separately in the city as she quickly made connections with important modernist artists. This period saw some of her most important reporting and theatrical writing, and Treadwell became known not only for her impressive undercover and immersive journalism, but also for her advocacy of authors' rights. By the time she died in 1970, she had written four novels and almost 40 plays, several of which she produced and directed herself and which appeared on Broadway.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The plot of *Machinal* draws inspiration from the infamous 1925 case of Ruth Snyder, who killed her husband after starting an affair with another man. Unlike Helen and Mr. Roe, who don't work together to kill George, Snyder and her lover, Henry Judd Gray, collaborated in their plans to kill Albert Snyder. After persuading Albert to buy life insurance, Ruth and Henry strangled him and tried to make his death look like it was the result of a botched break-in. Like Helen, Ruth's story in court didn't hold up under intense scrutiny, and she finally broke when the prosecutors produced a piece of paper they found in the Snyder home. This paper bore the initials of Mr. Snyder's former wife, Jessie Guishard. In a state of panic, Ruth thought these were Henry's initials, an association that made her prosecutors suspicious, since Henry's name hadn't yet come up in the trial. Both lovers were eventually found guilty, and they tried to put the blame on one another. In 1928—the year *Machinal* was produced—Ruth went to the electric chair. The entire ordeal was sensationalized throughout the media; a reporter even snuck a camera into the execution room, and the following day the *New York Daily News* ran a picture of Ruth in the electric chair.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

When *Machinal* appeared on the stage in 1928, it was compared to Theodore Dreiser's novel *An American Tragedy*, published in 1925. This novel depicts a courtroom scene in which the protagonist, Clyde, must stand trial for murdering his lover—a section similar to *Machinal*'s penultimate scene, in which Helen delivers a weak defense in an attempt to avoid being found guilty of murdering her husband. Like Helen, Clyde is sent to the electric chair, and the emotional timbre of this scene—which presents a cascade of raw emotion and regret—matches *Machinal*'s skittish and fragmented expressive quality. Both works are poignant portraits of misunderstood and misguided individuals in the early 20th century. Another work to which critics compared *Machinal* is Elmer Rice's 1923 play, *The Adding Machine*, an expressionist piece of theater that recounts the story of Mr. Zero, an accountant who, after learning that he'll be replaced at his company by an adding machine, kills his boss. Found guilty, he is hanged and goes to a certain kind of afterlife, where he's made to work at an adding machine. In addition to the obvious similarities between Mr. Zero and Helen's death sentences, the two plays critically examine the heartlessly pragmatic and capitalist world of America in the 1920s, depicting the futility of emotionally vacant labor using surrealist and expressionist techniques.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** Machinal
- **When Published:** The play was written in 1928 and premiered on September 7th of the same year.
- **Literary Period:** Expressionism
- **Genre:** Expressionist Theater
- **Setting:** New York City in the 1920s
- **Climax:** Fed up with her loveless marriage and driven to a breaking point by her husband's emotionless companionship, Helen suddenly hears the voice of her secret lover narrating how he killed two men in Mexico with a bottle full of stones. Unable to control herself as she sits with her unsuspecting husband, Helen springs from her chair, yelling, "Oh! Oh!" before the lights snap off and a chorus of voices echoes the word "stones" time and again. In the following scene, the audience learns that she has killed George.
- **Antagonist:** The mechanical and impersonal world of 20th-century society, which oppresses Helen and refuses to

acknowledge her emotional needs, instead prioritizing capitalist and pragmatic concepts of success in a male-dominated world. George, her husband, is a human manifestation of this sexism and ignorance.

EXTRA CREDIT

Controversy. In the 1920s, Treadwell brought to court the well-known actor John Barrymore, who tried to put on a play about Edgar Allan Poe he claimed his wife wrote. Treadwell upheld that this play stole large amounts of material from something she herself had written and showed to Barrymore. Treadwell ended up winning the lawsuit and the play was stopped. Unfortunately, the media depicted her unfavorably because of this scandal.

Mexico. Treadwell's father was born in California but grew up primarily in Mexico, where his family lived. This is why much of the playwright's work somehow involves Mexico.

PLOT SUMMARY

Machinal is a play told in nine scenes, or "episodes." Before the curtain's first opening, machines can be heard rattling as office workers steadily plod along on their typewriters, adding machines, and other similar pieces of equipment. When the curtain lifts and the lights go on, the workers murmur to themselves as they go about their business. Between the telephone girl's cheery greetings, the adding clerk's spoken arithmetic, the filing clerk's murmurs, and the stenographer's correspondences, they talk to one another about a young woman named Helen, who's late to work. They remark that this is the third time that week that Helen has been delayed. When she finally appears, Helen tells them she had to get off the subway because she felt trapped. Her colleagues ignore her troubles, moving on to tell her that the boss, George H. Jones, has been looking for her. "He's bellowing for you!" says the telephone girl.

When Helen goes into Mr. Jones's office, her coworkers gossip about the boss's affinity for her, speculating that he'll ask her to marry him. Moments later, Helen returns and sits still in front of her typewriter. When the stenographer asks her why she isn't working, she says she can't because the machine is broken. Mr. Jones emerges from his office and puts his hands on Helen's shoulders, and when he leaves again, her colleagues ask why she flinched when he touched her. She merely says, "Nothing!—Just his hand." Then, as she sorts the mail, her coworkers talk openly about Mr. Jones's interest in her, saying that her job depends on whether or not she accepts his proposal. If she says no, they maintain, she'll be fired. If she says yes, she won't need to work anymore, and she'll have breakfast in bed every morning. As they chatter, the machines click and rattle and Helen thinks aloud to herself, considering Mr. Jones's proposal in a frantic, indecisive manner, saying, "Marry me—wants to marry me—George H. Jones—George H. Jones and Company—Mrs. George H. Jones—Mrs. George H. Jones." Helen carries on in this way until the scene goes black.

In Episode Two, Helen sits in a kitchen with her mother. The two women argue about the meal, and Helen tells her mother that George wants to marry her. At first, her mother is skeptical, but once she learns George is wealthy, she encourages Helen to move forward with the idea. "I can't, Ma! I can't!" Helen says. "I don't love him." Her mother scoffs at this, saying, "Love!—what does that amount to! Will it clothe you? Will it feed you? Will it pay the bills?" Still, Helen complains that George's hands are fat and that he's constantly "pressing" on her, but her mother waves this away, calling her crazy. "Ma," Helen exclaims, "if you tell me that again I'll kill you!" She then breaks into a short monologue, admitting that perhaps she *is* crazy before eventually asking for her mother's forgiveness. At the end of the scene, she decides to marry George, and the lights go off and faint jazz plays into Episode Three.

In Episode Three, George and Helen enter a hotel room on their honeymoon. While George is happy and boisterous, Helen is skittish, quiet, and hesitant to embrace her new husband. George urges her to relax, asking why she looks so scared. "Nothing to be scared of," he says. "You're with your husband, you know." With this, he puts her on his lap, touches her knee, and kisses her neck. As she squirms, he urges her to calm down. She stands to change her clothes, moving into the bathroom and closing the door despite George's protests that she shouldn't have to hide her body anymore. When she emerges, she's crying. She tells George she misses her mother, which confuses him, since she told him earlier that she was glad to spend time away from the old woman. "I want her now," Helen says. "I want somebody." As George tries to comfort her, the stage goes black.

In Episode Four, Helen lies in a maternity ward. As a nurse asks her questions about how she's feeling, she refuses to speak, merely shaking her head when necessary. "Aren't you glad it's a girl?" the nurse asks. Helen shakes her head and the nurse chastises her. The nurse asks if Helen needs anything, and Helen points outside, where construction is noisily underway, but the nurse can do nothing to stop the raucous sounds. When George arrives, the nurse tells him Helen's "getting stronger," and he says, "Of course she is!" He then moves toward Helen, telling her she needs to "brace up" and that he understands everything she went through in childbirth because he was standing in the hall listening while she was in labor. "Pull yourself together!" he says. As he goes on, Helen starts choking and pointing at the door. "She's got that gagging again—like she had the last time I was here," George tells the nurse before leaving and promising to return the next day. The doctor then enters, insists that she try breastfeeding, and demands that she start eating solid food. When he leaves with the nurse, Helen

speaks to herself at length, saying, in part, "Let me alone—let me alone—let me alone—I've submitted to enough—I won't submit to any more…" When the lights go out, the sound of construction accompanies an electric piano until the stage goes bright again for Episode Five.

Episode Five opens in a speakeasy with three tables. At one of the tables, two men sit waiting for Helen and the telephone girl, who are late. One the men, Mr. Smith, is having an affair and is depending on his friend, Mr. Roe, to preoccupy Helen so that he can quickly spend some private time with the telephone girl before rushing home to his wife. Finally, Helen and the telephone girl arrive. Helen quickly takes a liking to Mr. Roe, who flirts with her until Mr. Smith and the telephone girl leave to have sex. When they're alone at the table, Mr. Roe tells Helen that he was once captured in Mexico by bandits, and that he filled a bottle with stones and clubbed the men to death in order to escape. Not long afterward, they go to Mr. Roe's apartment, where Episode Six takes place. Once there, they listen to a hand organ playing in the streets outside, and the implication is that they've just made love. Mr. Roe tells her about Mexico, talking about the freedom one feels south of United States. Suddenly, Helen realizes she's late in getting home, and frantically gathers her belongings. Before leaving, she sees a flower on the windowsill and asks Mr. Roe who gave it to him. He tells her he bought it himself because it reminded him of San Francisco, and the lovers talk about riding free in the mountains around the Bay Area. They kiss, and Helen asks if she can take the flower with her. "Sure—why not?" Mr. Roe says. When she departs, the music in the street plays until abruptly cutting off at the opening of Episode Seven.

Episode Seven finds Helen and George in the sitting room of their house reading separate newspapers. The phone rings, and George learns that one of his business deals has gone through. Upon hanging up, he boasts about the success and goes over to Helen, who flinches when he touches her. He notes that she hasn't done that in a long time, but says he always ascribed the behavior to her "purity"—an idea she refutes. Later, Helen reads a headline about "jewels and precious stones" that sends her into a panic attack. "I feel as though I were drowning," she says, putting her hands around her neck. George discounts her complaints, telling her to breathe, but she can't shake the feeling. "And what is death?" she asks. Soon thereafter, George reads out a headline about a revolution "below the Rio Grande," and suddenly Helen starts hearing Mr. Roe's voice along with a vague chorus of other voices echoing his words. "I filled an empty bottle with small stones," Mr. Roe's disembodied voice says. "Stones—stones—precious stones—millstones—stones—stones—millstones," the chorus repeats. As the voices swirl, the sound of a hand organ grows, and amidst this cacophony, Helen jumps out of her chair, says, "Oh! Oh!" and the scene cuts to black while the hand organ and voices repeat over and over again until the light returns for Episode Eight.

In Episode Eight, Helen is in court. Her attorney, the Lawyer for Defense, questions her while the jury, judge, and reporters listen. Led by the Lawyer for Defense's inquiries, Helen says she didn't kill her husband. She maintains that she woke up on the night George died and saw two "big dark" men looming over the bed. One of them, she says, clubbed George over the head with a bottle before she could do anything to stop it. When the two "dark" men fled, Helen says, she got towels to try to stop the blood from coming out of George's head, but she soon discovered he'd died, at which point she called the police. Having concluded, the Lawyer for Defense takes his seat, and the Lawyer for Prosecution takes the floor. His questions slowly reveal that Helen's story is vague and that she has trouble substantiating or even fully remembering certain details. He shows her the broken bottle used to kill George, saying that he thinks its strange the glass bears no finger prints. "You are in the habit of wearing rubber gloves at night, Mrs. Jones—are you not?" She confirms that she "used to" do this before she was married, but that she no longer owned the gloves. The lawyer refutes this, presenting as evidence a pair of gloves found in her home on the fateful night. As he brings out other damning pieces of evidence, he shows the jury a bowl he claims Helen brought home a year ago that spring. He says the bowl contained a water lily, but Helen denies this. Finally, the lawyer produces an affidavit from Mr. Roe saying that he gave her the water lily and that she has visited his apartment nearly everyday since their first encounter. As the lawyer reads on, Helen becomes flustered and finally breaks out in confession, yelling, "I did it! I did it! I did it!" When the judge asks why, she says, "To be free." The court adjourns, and the sound of telegraph machines fills the air as the lights go out.

In the ninth episode, Helen is behind bars listening to a priest pray for her. Eventually, two barbers enter the cell to shave her hair to make sure the electric chair has clean points of contact on her head. Helen resists, shouting, "I will not be submitted—this indignity! No! I will not be submitted!—Leave me alone! Oh my God am I never to be let alone! Always to have to submit—to submit! No more—not now—I'm going to die—I won't submit! Not now!" Her pleas fall on unsympathetic ears, and one of the barbers says, "You'll submit, my lady. Right to the end, you'll submit!" Before Helen is led to the chair, she hears an airplane flying above, and the thought of flight makes her think of freedom, saying that the only free moment of her entire life was when she killed George. As she's taken to the chair and strapped in, the priest's steady voice intones prayers. "Somebody!" cries Helen. "Somebod—." She never finishes the word, and the priest goes on solemnly praying until the curtain closes.

CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Helen Jones – A young woman who initially lives with her mother and works for a wealthy businessman named George H. Jones. Helen is characterized as "soft" and "tender," a person unfit for the hard "mechanical" world she lives in. Though she's primarily bothered by the impersonal and loveless manners of the people around her, she's also made uncomfortable by the actual machinery that surrounds her in daily life. Because of this, she acts skittishly, even getting off the subway one morning because she feels as if she's suffocating. When Mr. Jones proposes to her, she's deeply hesitant to accept, complaining to her mother that she doesn't love him. Nevertheless, she eventually relents and listens to her mother and coworkers' advice to marry George because he's rich and because refusing his proposal would likely mean losing her job. Once married to George, Helen rarely speaks up for herself, instead repressing her emotions in order to placate her ignorant husband. After having a baby, though, she begins to secretly rebel against her loveless marriage by starting an affair with a man named Mr. Roe, who tells her that he once killed several Mexican bandits with a bottle filled with **stones**. Taking this to heart, Helen murders George one night with the same rudimentary weapon, an action that leads to her execution in **the electric chair**.

George H. Jones – A successful businessman who falls in love with Helen and asks her to marry him. George is a simple man obsessed with making money and prospering in a straightforward, capitalist fashion. Unfortunately, this mindset renders him somewhat incapable of paying attention to life's emotional qualities, a fact that distances him from his wife. Indeed, although Helen quite obviously dislikes him, George believes himself to be happily married. Still, Helen clearly detests him, even telling her mother that his hands are like "sausages" and that they're constantly "pressing" on her, portraying him as both undesirable and licentious. When the couple has a baby and Helen refuses to speak (because she's so depressed and dispirited), George insists that he knows what she went through during childbirth, since he was outside the hospital room and heard everything. This ignorance infuriates Helen, though she does little more than shake her head, and George good-naturedly tells her to "brace up." It is this inability to empathize with or even pay attention to his wife that leads to George's death, when Helen clubs him to death with a bottle filled with **rocks**.

Helen's Mother – An old woman primarily concerned with her daughter's (Helen's) wellbeing and financial stability. Because of this preoccupation, she encourages Helen to marry George, who she argues must be a good man because he's the vice-president of a company. When Helen asks her mother if she ever loved her own husband, she responds by saying, "I suppose I did—I don't know—I've forgotten—what difference does it make—now?" In this response, she reveals herself to be a woman driven not by emotion but by a sense of pragmatism, a fact made all the more clear when she says, "Love! What does that amount to! Will it clothe you? Will it feed you? Will it pay the bills?" Of course, this mentality contrasts with Helen's more sensitive disposition, and her mother comes to exemplify what it looks like to live according to the orderly, non-emotional manner dictated by 20th-century American society.

Mr. Roe – Helen's secret lover, whom she meets in a speakeasy shortly after giving birth to George's child. When Helen's coworker, the telephone girl, takes her to the speakeasy, the two young lovers quickly make a connection. After the telephone girl and her own lover, Mr. Smith, depart, Mr. Roe tells Helen that he was once taken hostage by several Mexican bandits. In order to escape, he explains, he got them drunk, filled a bottle with **stones**, and clubbed them to death. Though this story frightens Helen, it also seems to excite her, and Mr. Roe's rugged but affectionate personality entices her, inviting her to ignore her inhibitions. Before taking Helen to his apartment, he tells her about his life as a traveller, waxing poetic about freedom, and though it quickly becomes clear Mr. Roe is a ladies' man primarily interested in having a casual relationship, Helen falls fully in love with him, returning to his apartment on a regular basis after their first meeting. Unfortunately for her, he appears far less committed to their relationship, which he makes clear by cooperating with the prosecuting lawyers in their effort to prove that Helen murdered George.

The Telephone Girl – One of Helen's coworkers in George's office. Chipper and young, the unnamed telephone girl takes Helen with her to a speakeasy to meet two men, one of whom is Mr. Roe, the man Helen takes as a secret lover. The telephone girl is herself dating Mr. Roe's married friend, Mr. Smith.

The Adding Clerk – One of Helen's coworkers in George's office. The unnamed adding clerk is accustomed to office life, a dull and sardonic man who, along with the other office workers, speculates aloud about Helen's engagement to Mr. Jones, telling her that she ought to accept George's marriage proposal if she wants to keep her job.

The Lawyer for Prosecution – The lawyer who cross-examines Helen when she's on trial for murder. The Lawyer for Prosecution easily unearths the flaws in Helen's story about the night George died, ultimately triumphing by producing a signed deposition he procured from Mr. Roe. By bringing this piece of paper to the court's attention, he elicits an adverse emotional reaction from Helen, who suddenly confesses that she killed her husband.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Mr. Smith – Mr. Roe's married friend, who is having an affair with Helen's coworker, the telephone girl.

The Stenographer – A woman Treadwell describes in her notes as the dull adding clerk's female counterpart. The unnamed stenographer—who works in George's office—is proper and judgmental, clearly looking down on Helen for arriving late to work.

The Nurse – Helen's nurse after she gives birth to her and George's child. Though she wants to help Helen, the nurse fails to recognize that the true source of her patient's discomfort isn't any physical ailment, but her lack of agency when it comes to her own life and health.

The Filing Clerk – An immature adolescent boy who works in George's office with Helen and the rest of her colleagues.

The Doctor – The doctor overseeing Helen's health after she gives birth.

The Lawyer for Defense – Helen's lawyer when she's on trial for murder. Pitching easy questions to Helen, the Lawyer for Defense portrays her relationship with George as idyllic, giving the jury the impression that she had no motive to kill her husband.

The Priest – A priest who reads prayers for Helen before she's led to **the electric chair**. He tells her to "trust in God" when she asks if she'll have "peace" and "rest" in death—two things she's never had in life.

The Judge – A judge who oversees Helen's trial.

The Reporters – Three reporters who cover Helen's trial and who also witness her execution in **the electric chair**.

The Barbers – Two barbers employed by the prison to shave Helen's hair in order to ensure her head makes clean contact with **the electric chair**.

The Jailer – A guard who oversees Helen when she's in prison.

THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.

MARRIAGE AND GENDER INEQUALITY

Machinal was written for the stage in the early 20th century, a time when patriarchal norms dictated the dynamics of romantic relationships. In this male-focused environment, women were expected to defer to their husbands, sacrificing their own individuality and agency in order to maintain respectable marriages. These sexist expectations often manifest themselves throughout *Machinal* in terms of financial stability, as Helen's coworkers and even her mother urge her to wed her boss, George H. Jones, because he's wealthy. In this way, financial concerns become an incentive to enter into a loveless marriage, and everybody ignores the fact that Helen has no desire to marry Mr. Jones—in fact, even Helen herself discredits her misgivings at first, deciding to say yes to George's proposal despite the fact that she can hardly bear his touch. Unfortunately, the cost of submitting to patriarchal norms in this way turns out to be quite high for Helen, and it isn't until Helen is about to be put to death that she finally explicitly declares her will to live freely. As such, Treadwell portrays the institution of marriage as something that all too often forces women into submission, denying them a sense of agency or a life in which their own desires are fulfilled.

The people surrounding Helen in *Machinal* all pressure her into marrying George, often citing practical reasons and framing the matter as though it should be an obvious decision. In the play's opening scene, Helen's coworkers discuss in front of her what will happen if she refuses his proposal. "Fired," one says. "The sack!" says another. These cynical statements illustrate the extent to which George's proposal is wrapped up in gendered power dynamics that clearly affect Helen's ability to decide for herself whether or not she wants to marry him. As such, from the very beginning the two future spouses are unequal when it comes to power.

Similarly, contemplating what Helen's life will be like if she says yes, her coworkers say, "She'll come to work in a taxi!," "breakfast in bed," and "lunch in bed!" By outlining the benefits of accepting George's proposal in this way, Helen's coworkers demonstrate that there are clear incentives when it comes to marrying a powerful man. In turn, Treadwell illustrates how society urges women into marriage for reasons unrelated not only to love, but to their own desires more generally. This point emerges even more obviously when Helen tells her mother that she's hesitant to marry George because she doesn't love him. "Love!" her mother says. "What does that amount to! Will it clothe you? Will it feed you? Will it pay the bills?" According to this way of thinking, Helen's emotional needs pale in comparison to the practical benefits of marrying a wealthy man. Of course, George himself actively *wants* to marry Helen, and so he's able to leverage his riches to convince her to ignore her misgivings—after all, as her coworkers point out, saying no to his proposal would most likely mean losing her job. Consequently, Helen must submit not only to the constant pleading of a man she doesn't love, but also to the economic system that gives him power over her—a system that everybody around her reinforces.

Aside from his personal riches, the power George wields over Helen comes from his position as a male in a patriarchal society that prioritizes men over women. Once they're married, he often places emphasis on his position of power by reminding

Helen that he is her husband, usually in order to get her to do something she doesn't want to do. For example, when Helen wants to go into the bathroom to privately change her clothes on their honeymoon, he reminds her of the intimacy their relationship is supposed to have, saying, "I'm your husband, you know." He then adds, "You aren't afraid of your husband, are you?" Through these incessant reminders that they're married, George effectively asserts his ownership over Helen. He also acts as if he expects a marriage ceremony to have changed the fact that she doesn't particularly like him or feel comfortable in his presence. Even though they still don't know one another very well, George believes he's entitled to new intimacies, and when Helen challenges George's entitlement, he reminds her that the institution of marriage denotes closeness. By saying, "You aren't afraid of your husband, are you?" he implies that it would be ridiculous for her to fear him. Nonetheless, she *is* afraid of him—at least when it comes to being intimate—but he only invalidates this fear, and in turn invalidates Helen's agency as a person.

In contrast to Helen's fear of George, he himself feels so close to her that he fails to see that she doesn't feel the same way about him. With this oblivious mentality, he confuses the simple fact of his proximity to her—and his station as her husband—with actual knowledge of her experiences. When she is depressed after giving birth, he ignorantly boasts that he understands what she had to go through in order to deliver the baby, a statement she rejects by shaking her head. "Oh, yes I do!" he says. "I know all about it! I was right outside all the time!" Again, Helen tries to refute this, but he presses on, saying, "Oh yes! But you've got to brace up now! Make an effort! Pull yourself together!" Of course, it's absurd to think that a man—who will never in his life experience the pains of child labor—would be able to understand the pain his wife has gone through just by standing outside the room and hearing her screams. Although it's painful and perhaps undesirable, Helen's experience giving birth is one of the few things her husband can't claim as his own, and yet he *does* do this by saying that he "know[s] all about it." As such, even Helen's unique perspective as a woman is taken from her and used against her, since George goes on to say that she has to "brace up."

The unequal power dynamics between men and women in 20th-century society drive Helen's actions throughout *Machinal*. Before she finally rebels against her husband's oppressive rule by killing him, she responds to gender inequality in a psychologically repressed manner, often only allowing herself to express her discontent in private, rambling monologues. It isn't until after she has killed George that she appears capable of speaking up for herself. Indeed, she shouts, "Oh my God am I never to be let alone! Always to have to submit—to submit! No more—not now—I'm going to die—I won't submit! Not now!" Unfortunately, she speaks these words mere minutes before her own death in **the electric chair**, and the barber who is cutting her hair (to prepare her head for the electrical contacts) merely responds, "You'll submit, my lady. Right to the end, you'll submit!" His reply cuts to the heart of society's oppression of women—not only does it frame male dominance as inescapable ("right to the end, you'll submit!"), but it also reminds Helen, in a patronizing way, of her gender: when the barber calls her "my lady," he condescends to her and even evokes his power over her by using the possessive "my," as if he has ownership over her simply because she's a "lady" and he's a man. In turn, Treadwell casts misogyny as hopelessly ever-present in female experience, though this pessimism is perhaps countered somewhat by the thought that Helen could possibly have avoided such traumatic experiences if she had spoken up for herself earlier on. Indeed, if Helen had stood up for herself when George originally proposed to her—if she'd trusted her instincts and declined his offer—she wouldn't have felt compelled to murder him, and her first true declaration of independence and agency ("I won't submit! Not now!") wouldn't have been a futile exclamation uttered too late, on her way to the electric chair. Considering this, Treadwell's play suggests that, though sexism and inequality run rampant throughout society, it's worth resisting oppression before it's too late.

COMMUNICATION

The characters in *Machinal* often fail to effectively relate to one another using language. Instead of communicating clearly and listening to what other people have to say, they hold forth with their own monologues and ideas, showing themselves incapable of engaging in the give-and-take of successful conversation. Under these fraught circumstances, Helen finds herself hopelessly estranged from her husband, who never opens himself up to the possibility that their marriage has made her utterly miserable—instead, he speaks to her at length about things that clearly do nothing but deepen her feelings of unease, rendering it impossible for her to make him see that she's unhappy. In other words, the characters in *Machinal* do not use communication as a relational tool, but rather as something that heightens their own senses of individuality, thereby driving them apart instead of bringing them together. Dialogue, then, ceases to be collaborative, and language takes on an isolating function.

When George interacts with Helen, he misses (or perhaps willfully ignores) all verbal and physical clues that indicate she's uncomfortable or unhappy. Nowhere is this more evident than when the couple arrives in their honeymoon hotel room. "Say," George intones, "you look a little white around the gills! What's the matter?" Somberly, she replies, "Nothing," to which he says, "You look like you're scared." "No," she says. And as if this settles the matter, he concludes, "Nothing to be scared of. You're with your husband, you know." Although George does recognize something amiss in his wife's behavior, he does very little to

actually address whatever is bothering her. In fact, his questions are more self-centered than empathetic, since his concern about Helen's grim attitude seems to come mainly from his notion that, like him, she ought to be happy on their honeymoon. When he says Helen has "nothing to be scared of" because she is "with [her] husband," he shows a total lack of understanding that he is the thing that scares her most. Unfortunately, her monosyllabic, solemn replies aren't enough to tip him off to the fact that her experience is vastly different from his, and George and Helen find themselves trapped in a pattern of conversation that is completely uncommunicative.

This unfortunate uncommunicative dynamic sits at the heart of Helen and George's relationship. Significantly, when Helen is most distressed, she fails to express herself at all, at least until the end of the play, when she finally stands up for herself and speaks out. In the scenes leading up to George's death, Helen retreats into silence when she feels particularly aggrieved. This is evident when she lies in her hospital bed days after having given birth, and hardly speaks any words at all. Instead, she shakes her head vigorously and refuses to communicate, but George and the nurse are perfectly willing to speak on Helen's behalf: when she doesn't respond, they fill the silence with their own thoughts—thoughts that depict her health and mentality in ways that they (George and the nurse) find agreeable. "She's getting stronger!" the nurse insists. Although they should be able to intuit from Helen's silence that she's unhappy, they instead use her refusal to speak as an opportunity to advance their own narrative about her experience. This allows them to take possession of any agency Helen may have, though one can also argue that Helen strips herself of this agency by giving up her right to speak.

At the same time, though, Helen and George's previous conversations have already demonstrated that Helen gains very little in the way of power even when she *does* communicate with her husband. Perhaps, then, she's silent so often because she has come to understand that her words don't matter when she talks to George. Although he picks up on her discomfort, asking, "Everything O.K.?," he actively ignores when she shakes her head "no," pushing on by spewing platitudes about "brac[ing] up," which ultimately keep him from paying sincere attention to his wife's concerns. Treadwell suggests that it ultimately doesn't matter whether or not Helen speaks. Since George only ever uses language to propagate his own narrative, any attempt to effectively communicate with him is pointless. In turn, this is what drives Helen to kill him, since killing him seems to be the only path out from underneath his oppressive, silencing effect. In a twisted way, then, the murder is Helen's most drastic act of communication, borne of all her failed and repressed attempts preceding it.

The disconnect preventing effective communication in *Machinal* grows out of the characters' inability to step outside their individual perspectives. Indeed, Treadwell shows that each person clings to his or her own interpretation of a situation. When Helen is on trial, for example, the courtroom reporters jot down wildly different accounts of the event. Although this is just a minor example, Treadwell fills her play with such instances of people investing themselves in their individuality and choosing to use language to reinforce their own perspectives. In the same way that all of George's conversations with Helen are non-collaborative opportunities to advance his own ideas about marriage, the reporters' divergent accounts use language to broadcast what they believe are unassailable facts. As such, the characters in *Machinal* repeatedly use language to emphasize and protect their individuality, not to relate to one another.

THE MECHANICAL WORLD

Machinal is a play inundated by machines. The constant presence of mechanical sounds and industrialized landscapes shapes Helen's life into an existence ruled by isolation, monotony, and anxiety. In a note titled "The Plan," Treadwell comments on the nature of the play, explaining Helen's relationship to the external world: "The woman is essentially soft, tender, and the life around her is essentially hard, mechanized. Business, home, marriage, having a child, seeking pleasure—all are difficult for her—mechanical, nerve nagging." This "nerve nagging" quality is evident from the very beginning of the play, as the characters must contend with the sounds of "typewriters, adding machine[s], manifold[s], telephone bells, [and] buzzers." Machines, in other words, are everywhere, creating a cacophony of meaningless, random sounds that mount in the background and reflect the play's (and Helen's) nervous energy, her growing sense that she's at odds with the surrounding environment. Unfortunately, she's unable to thrive within this mechanical world, and Treadwell showcases how the machine-like (or "machinal") society of the early 20th century can be cold, impersonal, and oppressive to those who are already struggling against patriarchal power structures. Indeed, when Helen meets her death in **the electric chair**, Treadwell demonstrates how a misogynistic society wields the power of the mechanical world to punish those who act against it.

The people who thrive—at least initially—in *Machinal* are those who treat *themselves* like machines. For example, George, who is wealthy and who successfully pursues the woman he loves, shows himself to be a repetitive, unfeeling, and one-dimensional character—inhuman in more ways than one. After making a business deal one night, he prompts Helen to ask him about it. Knowing exactly what he wants to hear, she asks him the following questions: "Did you put it over?"; "Did you swing it?"; "Did they come through?"; "Did they sign?"; "On the dotted line?"; "The property's yours?" When the phone rings moments later, George says to his business partner: "Hello—hello D.D.—Yes—I put it over—they came across—I put it over on

them—yep—yep—yep—I'll say I am—yep—on the dotted line." In this way, it's clear that George recites this series of statements every time he makes a deal. Later, while reading the newspaper, he says, "Here's a man says 'I owe my success to a yeast cake a day—my digestion is good—I sleep very well[…].'" In this passage especially, George's appreciation of routine casts him as orderly, structured, and automated, as if he's a well-calibrated machine designed to yield specific results. What he fails to pay attention to, however, are the elements of existence that make a person human, such as thoughtful interaction with loved ones. Rather, he is so hung up on talking about his deals and what he "owe[s] his success to" that he neglects to nurture his relationship with Helen, a failure that eventually leads to his death, since she perhaps would not have wanted to kill him if he had genuinely listened to her and considered her thoughts and emotions—if, in other words, he had treated her as a human being. Consequently, although George's mechanical personality allows him to thrive in the world at large, it dooms him in his personal life.

In contrast to George, Helen wants to live on her own terms, and so she rejects the tyranny of industrial or mechanical life. This is why she can't stand to ride on the subway. "I had to get out!" she says, justifying why she's late to work. When her colleagues ask, "Out where?" she says, "In the air!" She then clarifies, saying, "I thought I would faint! I had to get out in the air!" This response perfectly juxtaposes the mechanical world with the natural world—suffocation versus fresh "air"—and Helen speaks about riding the subway as if it's a threat to her very life, framing it as something that deprives her of the most fundamental biological necessity: oxygen. Because this conversation occurs at the beginning of the play, Helen's fear of the mechanical world may at first seem overdramatic, but considering that she's later put to death by an electric chair—an ordinary piece of furniture repurposed and outfitted with fatal machinery—her concerns emerge as valid and even visionary.

Not only is Helen fearful of the effects of the mechanical world, she's also uninterested in using it to her advantage. This is evident in the opening scene, when she sits down at her office desk and does nothing but stare at her own hands because her stenography machine is broken. The fact that she doesn't even make an effort to fix the machine indicates her complete lack of interest in joining or utilizing the mechanical world, instead wanting to indulge more natural, human modes of being, which she does by contentedly studying her hands. Even when she *could* make use of a machine, she opts for more rudimentary objects—indeed, when she murders George, she doesn't use a gun, but rather a bottle filled with pebbles. Not only is this bludgeon a primitive weapon, but it's also emotionally significant to her, since the man with whom she's been having an affair told her that he once used a pebble-filled bottle to escape from and kill several bandits in Mexico. Therefore, there is a small amount of sentimentality to Helen's choice of weapon.

And because sentimentality is a very human thing, Treadwell presents Helen as a character who stands in complete opposition to the mechanical world. Unlike her procedural, predictable husband, she pays attention to her emotions and rejects the impersonal monotony of a mechanical existence.

However, Helen's resistance of the mechanical world ultimately fails to liberate her from the 20th century's structural oppression of women. Unfortunately, society uses the mechanical world against her, forcing her to submit to a male-dominated society by killing her with an electric chair. The play therefore suggests a rather bleak, defeatist message, indicating that the impersonal industrial world has been given unchecked power that rarely fails. Just before the jailers turn on the electric chair, one reporter says to another, "Suppose the machine shouldn't work!" In response, the other reporter says, "It'll work!—It always works." Technically, this is untrue—there have been a significant number of instances throughout history in which the electric chair has failed to kill the condemned prisoner. Nonetheless, the reporter's statement that "it always works" is accurate in a larger sense, especially when one defines the "it" in this sentence as the broader patriarchy and its oppression of women. In other words, the oppressive patriarchal society—in conjunction with the mechanized world—*does* seem to "always work," at least in *Machinal*. If this is true, then the only possible optimistic conclusion audiences can take away from this aspect of the play is that a person must work *within* the system that oppresses her if she hopes to change it. Although it's important to reject harmful structures of power, one can only hope to effect change by challenging society on its own terms.

FRAGMENTATION AND EXPRESSIONISM

Machinal is an example of Expressionist theater, a style of performance that aligns itself with the modernist artistic concept of Expressionism, which sought to represent not tangible, external reality, but rather the inner and subjective world of emotions and personal experience. In keeping with this, Treadwell imbues her scenes with disorder and chaos, qualities often invoked by the use of everyday sounds, needless repetitions of speech, and exaggerated linguistic clichés. In fact, she takes these elements to extreme heights by giving Helen long and nearly dissociative monologues in which the she almost nonsensically regurgitates common turns of phrase, repeating them time and again in a way that lends pathos to her words. By using fragmentation and the emotional distortions of Expressionism, then, Treadwell is able to use language to vividly represent Helen's attempts to liberate herself from the oppressive structures surrounding her.

Helen's tendency to repeat ideas and phrases she has heard throughout daily life indicates just how much of the surrounding discourse she absorbs and subsequently struggles

with internally. This private battle against what other people tell her is apparent in her very first monologue, when she thinks aloud to herself in the office, speaking fervently amidst the "subdued accompaniment of the office sounds and voices." In this monologue, Helen voices complaints, saying, "don't touch me" and "no—I can't" when George makes advances in her imagination (or perhaps in her memory). As in real life, however, these small protests get lost amidst the babble of other peoples' words; thus, even in her own head, Helen can't escape George H. Jones and his commanding name, his commanding title. She even evokes the *company*'s name, inserting "George H. Jones and Company" into her thoughts about marriage. This aligns with her mother's eventual assertion that Mr. Jones must be a "decent man" because he's the Vice-President of a successful company. Indeed, it's clear that Helen has internalized the fragmentary bits of advice and opinion forced upon her by everyone she encounters. Treadwell projects these internalizations outward, creating a cascade of disconnected speech that reveals to the audience just how many thoughts Helen is dealing with—a stark contrast to George's calm, one-track mind.

While Helen's thought patterns anxiously reflect the chaos of the world around her, George seems to only ever think about business and about how he wants his wife to behave around him. It is perhaps because of this discrepancy that their conversations are themselves so fragmented. On the night Helen kills George, they pass the time in a sitting room, both lounging and reading newspapers. As they sit, they read out various lines from the news that strike their interest, creating a mosaic of the outside world that highlights the differences between them. George reads aloud the phrases, "Record production," "Sale hits a million," "Market trend steady," and "Owns a life interest." Helen, on the other hand, quotes, "Girl turns on gas," "Woman leaves all for love," and "Young wife disappears." In this way Treadwell emphasizes the couple's conflicting interests. Moreover, she highlights how fragmented conversation—nonlinear dialogue that doesn't connect one idea to the next—allows Helen to hide her worries in plain sight. Busy vocalizing the financial stories that draw his interest, George doesn't pick up on the fact that his wife is clearly preoccupied by morbid stories of death, loneliness, and forbidden love.

Even when George stops reading the newspaper and listens to his wife, he doesn't understand the implications of what she says. To him, her fragmentary way of speaking denotes nothing more than unsubstantiated anxiety. His misogyny comes into play here, as he discounts her strange and random declarations—which hint heavily at her macabre intentions—as silly and childish. When she reads aloud a piece of news about "jewels and precious **stones**," she worriedly puts her hand to her throat. "I feel as though I were drowning ... with stones around my neck," she says. In response, he merely says, "You just imagine that," to which she says only one word: "Stifling." Thinking he can easily solve this strange line of thought—which is far more complicated than he cares to believe—he says, "You don't breathe deep enough—breathe now—look at me." The problem with his dismissive attitude is that it allows him to ignore the true import of what Helen is saying—namely, that she is "stifl[ed]" by the lavish life she leads with him at her side. After all, the mere idea of pearls leads her to think about death. Because she vocalizes these feelings without fully explaining how they connect to her broader thoughts and emotions, though, George patronizingly ignores her, brushing all concerns away by telling her that the source of her discontent comes solely from her imagination. Using fragmentation, then, Helen voices her tormented thoughts while simultaneously obscuring them from her husband.

Fragmentation is also used in *Machinal* in a purely auditory sense to achieve moments of heightened emotion and pathos. This occurs most prevalently right before Helen kills George. After having read in the newspaper about "jewels and precious stones" and having a disconnected conversation with George about stones in general, Helen suddenly hears the voice of the man with whom she's been having an affair ("I filled an empty bottle with small stones," his voice says). Echoing this line, a chorus of voices chants, "Stones—stones—precious stones—millstones—stones—stones—millstones." In this way, Treadwell connects Helen's previous meditation on "jewels" with the lurking idea of murder, reminding the audience of the weapon Helen's lover used against the Mexican bandits. As such, Helen's fragmentary thought process brings her to a point of action, and the audience tracks her developing emotions in a nonlinear way that mirrors her desperation. In turn, Treadwell's expressionist technique of creating a fractal narrative about Helen's internal world allows audience members to better relate to her plight as an oppressed woman. That is, through the use of fragmentary voices and narration, Treadwell invites the audience to actually *experience* Helen's emotions. Ultimately, this makes Helen a sympathetic character rather than a cold-blooded psychotic killer—a dynamic that's important to the play's feminist and anti-establishment values, since for Treadwell to entirely condemn Helen would be equivalent to condemning her struggle against oppression.

SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.

THE ELECTRIC CHAIR

Throughout *Machinal*, Helen is pitted against the harsh mechanical world. In the first scene, for example, she must contend with the noise of typewriters and

other office machines as she delivers her very first monologue, interrupted periodically by clicks and buzzers and bells. Even the subway—a simple mode of transportation—overwhelms her so much that she needs to escape from its turning gyres. While machinery is all around her, though, she finds small ways of escaping or avoiding mechanical problems that make her uncomfortable. When she sits down at her desk, she merely stares at her hands because her typewriter is broken and she doesn't want to do anything to fix it—and when the stenographer tells her to get to work, she decides to sort the mail instead, effectively avoiding having to interface with the mechanical world.

With this aversion in mind, it becomes clear that the electric chair is the ultimate manifestation of Helen's fears, as it is one machine she *can't* escape. Indeed, unlike the subway or her broken typewriter, Helen can't simply remove herself from the electric chair, which ends up claiming her life despite her crying lament that she won't "submit." As such, the electric chair demonstrates the ruthlessness of the mechanical world, which can be wielded against people like Helen by a patriarchal society. While her fear of the subway is perhaps irrational, her distrust of machinery is surprisingly prescient (considering that she dies in a mechanized chair), and Treadwell illustrates how a society obsessed with order, patriarchal norms, and forced submission can easily build an infrastructure that supports systemized and industrially-equipped oppression.

STONES

After Mr. Roe tells Helen that he killed several Mexican bandits with a bottle filled with small rocks, she fixates on stones. From this point on, Treadwell's treatment of stones takes on a metaphorical aspect, in which stones represent Helen's burdensome responsibility as a wife and mother. Indeed, Helen tells George at one point that she feels like she's "drowning" with stones around her neck, though they're merely sitting in the living room on a normal night of their domestic lives. Helen then starts hearing voices that chant and echo Mr. Roe's words; "Stones—stones—precious stones—millstones—stones—stones—millstones," the voices say. The use of the word "millstone" is important, as a millstone (originally a large stone used for grinding grain) is normally understood as a symbol of heavy responsibility that a person wears around their neck. This image also comes from the Bible, in which Jesus tells his disciples that wicked people who cause "these little ones to stumble" should be thrown into the sea with millstones around their necks. As such, Treadwell evokes both the idea of responsibility *and* the idea of death and punishment, two notions that have strong emotional importance to Helen. Therefore, when these voices chant about stones, Helen is simultaneously reminded of Mr. Roe, of her supposed responsibility to make George happy, and of her own feeling of sinking under the pressure of her domestic life.

With these thoughts whirling through her mind, she kills George with the same weapon Mr. Roe used on his attackers: a bottle filled with stones.

In addition to the symbolic significance of stones outlined above (responsibility and death), Helen's choice of weapon also indicates her distrust of the mechanical world. Opting for to use a wine bottle filled with rocks, she chooses the most rudimentary possible way to murder George, thereby lending a sense of elemental simplicity to the already thematically-charged presence of stones in *Machinal*.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Nick Hern Books edition of *Machinal* published in 2014.

Episode 1: To Business Quotes

Before the curtain
Sounds of machines going. They continue throughout the scene, and accompany the YOUNG WOMAN*'s thoughts after the scene is blacked out.*

At the rise of the curtain
All machines are disclosed, and all the characters with the exception of the YOUNG WOMAN.

Of these characters, the YOUNG WOMAN, *going any day to any business. Ordinary. The confusion of her own inner thoughts, emotions, desires, dreams cuts her off from any actual adjustment to the routine of work. She gets through this routine with a very small surface of her consciousness. She is not homely and she is not pretty. She is preoccupied with herself—with her person. She has well kept hands, and a trick of constantly arranging her hair over her ears.*

Related Characters: Helen Jones

Related Themes:

Page Number: 1

Explanation and Analysis

Treadwell includes these descriptions before the script of Episode One begins, and her characterization of Helen is especially helpful when it comes to understanding the nature of the play's protagonist. First of all, Treadwell refers to the "confusion" of Helen's "inner thoughts, emotions, desires, [and] dreams," casting her as an emotionally complex and sensitive soul who has trouble sorting out her

feelings, perhaps because she has so many of them. Furthermore, reference to Helen's "desires" and "dreams" indicates that she *wants* something, though the object of her fantasies remains unnamed—a fact that aligns with Helen's vague longings throughout the play, such as when she declares that she wants "somebody," but can't specify whom she wants or why she wants them. Indeed, her complicated inner world "cuts her off from any actual adjustment to the routine of work," meaning that she's at odds with the everyday life of American society in the early 20th century. Relatedly, the word "routine" in this passage is important, as it alludes to the orderly, machine-like quality of Helen's surroundings—a quality that doesn't accommodate her "inner thoughts, emotions, desires, [or] dreams."

❝ Marry me—wants to marry me—George H. Jones—George H. Jones and Company—Mrs. George H. Jones—Mrs. George H. Jones. Dear Madame—marry—do you take this man to be your wedded husband—I do—to love honor and to love—kisses—no—I can't—George H. Jones—How would you like to marry me—What do you say—Why Mr. Jones I—let me look at your little hands—you have such pretty little hands—let me hold your pretty little hands—George H. Jones—Fat hands—flabby hands—don't touch me—please—fat hands are never weary—[…]—don't touch me—please—no—can't—must—somebody—something—no rest—must rest—no rest—must rest—no rest—late today—yesterday—before—late—subway—air—pressing—bodies pressing—bodies—trembling—air—stop—air—late—job—no job—fired—late—alarm clock—alarm clock—alarm clock—hurry—job—ma—nag—nag—nag—ma—hurry—job—no job—no money—installments due—no money—[…]—money—no work—no worry—free!—rest—sleep till nine—sleep till ten—sleep till noon—now you take a good rest this morning—don't get up till you want to—thank you—oh thank you—oh don't!—please don't touch me—I want to rest—no rest—earn—got to earn—married—earn—no—yes—earn—all girls—most girls—ma—pa—ma—all women—most women—I can't—must—maybe—must—somebody—something—ma—pa—ma—can I, ma? Tell me, ma—something—somebody.

Related Characters: Helen Jones (speaker), Helen's Mother, George H. Jones

Related Themes:

Page Number: 11

Explanation and Analysis

Helen speaks this highly fragmented monologue at the end of Episode One, just after her colleagues have all talked openly about her as if she isn't even present. In keeping with this strange kind of invisibility, nobody in the office pays attention to this speech, though Helen utters these frantic words mere feet from her coworkers. The speech itself is marked by her circular way of speaking, and she incorporates George's words into her monologue, saying phrases like, "How would you like to marry me" and "you have such pretty little hands." These lines are juxtaposed by her own thoughts about resisting George's advances. Indeed, Helen says "no" three times throughout the monologue—a surprising amount, considering that she doesn't ever actually stand up for herself in real life (that is, until she kills George later in the play). With this call-and-response style of speaking, Helen simulates a conversation. Unfortunately, because she's talking to herself, her words are essentially uncommunicative, and so her expression of her will remains a private sentiment.

On another note, it's worth noting that Helen randomly calls out for "somebody" several times throughout this speech. This is significant because "somebody" is also her last word before her death at the end of the play; thus, Treadwell shows the audience even at this early stage that Helen is desperate for "somebody" to liberate her, but because she's talking to herself, her call for "somebody" is essentially futile, just as it is before her death, when she's strapped into the electric chair and her fate has already been decided.

Episode 2: At Home Quotes

YOUNG WOMAN. Tell me—(*Words suddenly pouring out.*) Your skin oughtn't to curl—ought it—when he just comes near you—ought it? That's wrong, ain't it? You don't get over that, do you—ever, do you or do you? How is it, Ma—do you?

MOTHER. Do you what?

YOUNG WOMAN. Do you get used to, it—so after a while it doesn't matter? Or don't you? Does it always matter? You ought to be in love, oughtn't you, Ma? You must be in love, mustn't you, Ma? That changes everything, doesn't it—or does it? Maybe if you just like a person it's all right—is it? When he puts a hand on me, my blood turns cold. But your blood oughtn't to run cold, ought it? His hands are—his hands are fat, Ma—don't you see—his hands are fat—and they sort of press—and they're fat—don't you see?—Don't you see?

MOTHER (*stares at her bewildered*). See what?

YOUNG WOMAN (*rushing on*). I've always thought I'd find somebody—somebody young—and—and attractive—with wavy hair—wavy hair—I always think of children with curls—little curls all over their head—somebody young—and attractive—that I'd like—that I'd love—But I haven't found anybody like that yet—I haven't found anybody—I've hardly known anybody—you'd never let me go with anybody and—

MOTHER. Are you throwing it up to me that—

YOUNG WOMAN. No—let me finish, Ma! No—let me finish! I just mean I've never found anybody—anybody—nobody's ever asked me—till now—he's the only man that's ever asked me—And I suppose I got to marry somebody—all girls do—

MOTHER. Nonsense.

YOUNG WOMAN. But, I can't go on like this, Ma—I don't know why—but I can't—it's like I'm all tight inside—sometimes I feel like I'm stifling!—You don't know—stifling. (*Walks up and down.*) I can't go on like this much longer—going to work—coming home—going to work—coming home—I can't—Sometimes in the subway I think I'm going to die—sometimes even in the office if something don't happen—I got to do something—I don't know—it's like I'm all tight inside.

Related Characters: Helen's Mother, Helen Jones (speaker), George H. Jones

Related Themes:

Page Number: 18

Explanation and Analysis

Helen has this conversation with her mother while eating dinner in the kitchen of their shared home. The scene takes place after George has asked Helen to marry him, and his proposal has noticeably shaken her, as evidenced by the torrent of indecisive words she presents her mother. Treadwell's occasional notes speak to Helen's skittishness, as directions like "*rushing on*" and "*walks up and down*" build the feeling that Helen is deeply troubled and agitated. Of course, Helen herself confirms this sense of anxiety when she says that she's "all tight inside."

Interestingly enough, Helen begins by complaining about George, calling his hands "fat" and saying that her skin "curl[s]" when he approaches her. By the end of this passage, though, it becomes clear that not all Helen's tension has to do with George in particular. Rather, she shifts her attention to broader, more vague insecurities, admitting that boredom—a lack of activity—often makes her feel like she has to "do something," and commenting on how she sometimes feels suffocated in the subway. As she shifts away from complaining about George, she actually starts to wrap her head around the idea of accepting his proposal, saying, "And I suppose I got to marry—all girls do." By saying that "all girls" have to marry, she essentially subjects herself to society's expectations. Once she does this, her complaints cease to be about George. Instead, her criticism turns inward, and she chastises herself for her own discontent. In trying to conform to the patriarchal society's expectations, then, she blames herself for her problems.

Episode 3: Honeymoon Quotes

HUSBAND. […] Say did I tell you the one about—

YOUNG WOMAN. Yes! Yes!

HUSBAND (*with dignity*). How do you know which one I meant?

YOUNG WOMAN. You told me them all!

HUSBAND (*pulling her back to his knee*). No, I didn't! Not by a jugful! I got a lot of 'em up my sleeve yet—that's part of what I owe my success to—my ability to spring a good story—You know—you got to learn to relax, little girl—haven't you?

YOUNG WOMAN. Yes.

HUSBAND. That's one of the biggest things to learn in life. That's part of what I owe my success to. Now you go and get those heavy things off—and relax.

Related Characters: Helen Jones, George H. Jones (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 23

Explanation and Analysis

George and Helen have this conversation in their honeymoon hotel room. Perhaps nowhere else in the play is their conversation more strained, as Helen passively rejects all of George's attempts to make small talk. Of course, their failed communication is not Helen's fault, since the stories George wants to tell in the first place are more for his own entertainment than for Helen's sake. He even acknowledges that these stories—which Helen doesn't care to hear—have benefitted him financially and that he "owe[s]" his "successes" to the fact that he always has a tale up his "sleeve." In this moment, he acts as if he and Helen are doing business, as if Helen is a client he can win over with cordial jokes and idle chitchat. With this mindset, he fails to notice (or care) that Helen is clearly withdrawn and uncomfortable. Though he should be able to intuit from her monosyllabic replies that she is ill at ease in his presence, he instead pushes on with what *he* wants, telling her to go take her clothes off so that she can relax—but never does it cross his mind that the problem might have less to do with her clothes and more to do with his domineering, intolerable presence.

Episode 4: Maternal Quotes

Let me alone—let me alone—let me alone—I've submitted to 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—long golden stairs—climb those golden stairs…—no matter—nothing matters—dead—stairs—long stairs—all the dead going up—going up—to be in heaven—heaven—golden stairs—all the children coming down—coming down to be born—dead going up—children coming down—[…]—St. Peter—St. Peter at the gate—you can't come in—no matter—it doesn't matter—I'll rest—I'll lie down—down—all written down—down in a big book—no matter—it doesn't matter—I'll lie down—[…]—a girl—aren't you glad it's a girl—a little girl—with no hair—none—little curls all over his head—a little bald girl—curls—curls all over his head—what kind of hair had God? No matter—it doesn't matter—everybody loves God—they've got to—got to—got to love God—God is love—even if he's bad they got to love him—even if he's got fat hands—fat hands—no no—he wouldn't be God—His hands make you well—He lays on his hands—well—and happy—no matter—doesn't matter—far—too far—tired—too tired Vixen crawled off under bed—eight—there were eight—a woman crawled off under the bed—[…]—I'll not submit any more—I'll not submit—I'll not submit.

Related Characters: Helen Jones (speaker), George H. Jones

Related Themes:

Page Number: 30

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Helen speaks aloud to herself, rambling and freely associating her thoughts, some of which have more thematic significance than others. To understand this monologue is not necessarily to fully grasp the purpose or function of every word, but rather to experience Helen's fraught emotional state. Indeed, Treadwell uses the expressionist technique of rendering Helen's words abstractly, so that each fragment the character utters works to convey a *feeling* that explores a certain frantic mindset.

That said, there are phrases and words in this passage worthy of further scrutiny. For example, Helen says the strange and out-of-context line, "Vixen crawled under the bed." A vixen is a female fox, but also a word for an ill-tempered (usually elderly) woman. With this definition in mind, the otherwise random phrase is a bit easier to understand; Helen is comparing herself to the kind of

woman society casts to the edge of everyday life, the kind of person rejected by others (and even considered less than human). Clearly, Helen feels like she's unfit for the world she lives in, a fact that brings to her mind the image of a "vixen" crawling "under the bed" to hide. Later, she transitions into considering religion, imagining herself climbing "long golden stairs" until she meets St. Peter, who will decide if she can enter heaven. This is an important moment, for even in Helen's imagination she must subject herself to judgment; she becomes in this passage an outcast who must face the discerning eye of a holy man. Later still, she conflates God with George, saying that everybody has "got to love God"; "God is love—even if he's bad they got to love him—even if he's got fat hands." Given the amount of control George has over Helen (he has, after all, redirected her entire life by proposing to her and getting her pregnant), it's no surprise that she would compare him to God, an all-powerful being. Still, Helen sees herself as a "vixen," and she yearns to "crawl" away from this Godlike version of George, determining once and for all that she'll "not submit any more."

Episode 6: Intimate Quotes

❝ *She comes into the light. She wears a white chemise that might be the tunic of a dancer, and as she comes into the light she fastens about her waist a little skirt. She really wears almost exactly the clothes that women wear now, but the finesse of their cut, and the grace and ease with which she puts them on, must turn this episode of her dressing into a personification, an idealization of a woman clothing herself. All her gestures must be unconscious, innocent, relaxed, sure and full of natural grace. As she sits facing the window pulling on a stocking.*

Related Characters: Mr. Roe, Helen Jones

Related Themes:

Page Number: 50

Explanation and Analysis

This description of Helen appears just before she is about to leave Mr. Roe's apartment. In this moment, Helen has jumped up and started collecting her belongings after seeing a streetlight go on outside the window and realizing that she's late in getting home. For the first time in the play, Helen's bodily actions and appearances are described as flattering and confident. Whereas her movements in other scenes—in which she's upset, nervous, or angry—are fast and anxious, here she is described as moving with "grace and ease." Interestingly, this change in her physicality comes after she's cheated on George, as if doing so has liberated her from a life of constant anxiety. Unfortunately, though, her newfound sense of freedom only plays back into the hands of a patriarchal system, as Treadwell describes her movements and appearance as "a personification, an idealization of a woman clothing herself." Yet again, Helen must measure up to an expectation, and the mere thought that somebody can be the "idealization" of womanhood implies that there is some kind of perfect iteration of femininity toward which she must aspire.

Episode 7: Domestic Quotes

❝ YOUNG WOMAN (*reading*). Sale of jewels and precious stones.

YOUNG WOMAN *puts her hand to throat.*

HUSBAND. What's the matter?

YOUNG WOMAN. I feel as though I were drowning.

HUSBAND. Drowning?

YOUNG WOMAN. With stones around my neck.

HUSBAND. You just imagine that.

YOUNG WOMAN. Stifling.

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.

Related Characters: George H. Jones, Helen Jones (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 56

Explanation and Analysis

This conversation passes between Helen and George as they sit in their living room reading newspapers. When Helen speaks of "drowning," she calls to mind her earlier preoccupation with fresh air—a preoccupation she

expressed in the first scene when she told her coworkers why she had to get off the subway. This time, her feeling of suffocation is even stronger, and she imagines herself sinking in water with "stones around [her] neck." Her thoughts about stones can clearly be traced to the headline she reads aloud: "Sale of jewels and stones." As such, Treadwell once more employs fragmentation to create a mosaic of thought, an expressionist technique that uses small snippets and seemingly unrelated ideas to convey a certain feeling or psychological process. Of course, Helen's also probably thinking about Mr. Roe when she talks about stones, since he told her about how he killed several Mexican bandits by filling a bottle with stones and beating them over the head with it. She's also probably thinking about the Biblical image of a millstone being hung around a person's neck to drown them (considering the references to millstones later in this same scene).

As Helen sinks deeper and deeper into these complicated associations, it's no wonder she feels panicked. George, however, has no way of knowing what's fueling his wife's thoughts, since the couple is so bad at communicating with one another. Thus he discounts her claims, saying that she's only imagining things. When she asks him what death is, he responds facetiously by telling her that death is the absence of breath—a callous response that makes light of the fact that Helen is in the middle of a legitimate emotional struggle.

Episode 9: A Machine Quotes

The BARBERS *take her by the arms.*

YOUNG WOMAN. No! No! Don't touch me—touch me!

They take her and put her down in the chair, cut a patch from her hair.

I will not be submitted—this indignity! No! I will not be submitted!—Leave me alone! Oh my God am I never to be let alone! Always to have to submit—to submit! No more—not now—I'm going to die—I won't submit! Not now!

BARBER (*finishing cutting a patch from her hair*). You'll submit, my lady. Right to the end, you'll submit! There, and a neat job too.

Related Characters: The Barbers, Helen Jones (speaker), The Priest

Related Themes:

Page Number: 79

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Helen struggles against two barbers who have arrived in her prison cell to prepare her for the electric chair. As she protests, she shouts a phrase that has become somewhat of a refrain throughout the play: "I won't submit!" She also asks to be "let alone," another thing for which she has constantly pled. However, until this moment, Helen has never said either of these phrases to anybody except herself. As such, this is the first time she truly uses her language to stand up for herself, finally declaring, "No more—not now—I'm going to die—I won't submit!" The tragedy here is that by this point there's nothing she can say or do to assert her agency; though she may have been able to address her oppression using language *before* she was convicted of murder, now she's destined to die in the electric chair, and there's nothing she can do about it. The barber understands this when he says, "You'll submit, my lady. Right to the end, you'll submit!" Indeed, she will submit "right to the end" because she has no other choice, a fact that suggests Treadwell wants to convey the bleak inescapability of sexist oppression while also warning women against waiting too long to speak up for themselves.

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

EPISODE 1: TO BUSINESS

Before the curtain rises, mechanical sounds whirr in the darkness. Typewriters, adding machines, telephones, and buzzers click, rattle, and ring until the curtain opens on an office, where a stenographer, an adding clerk, a filing clerk, and a telephone girl work at desks, busy on their respective machines. As the adding clerk counts and the stenographer mutters while typing and the telephone girl answers phones, the workers intermittently talk about one of their colleagues, Helen, a young woman who's late yet again. When the boss, George H. Jones, calls, he asks if Helen has arrived yet, and the telephone girl assures him that she'll deliver a message to Helen from George as soon as Helen arrives. When she hangs up, the workers gossip about Helen, hinting that she has Mr. Jones in the palm of her hand.

From the very beginning of the play, the constant presence of fragmented noise is apparent. The sound of office machines is, in fact, the very first thing the audience hears, and the fact that this noise continues even as the characters try to hold conversation reveals Treadwell's interest in the chaos of industrialized America. This ultimately lends the play a certain anxious, nerve-rattling quality that eventually brings itself to bear on Helen, who is herself already wound tight by stress. By accosting the audience with hard, mechanical sounds, Treadwell prepares viewers to inhabit Helen's emotional world.

Mr. Jones arrives and asks after Helen again, but the telephone girl informs him that she still hasn't come in. "I just wanted her to take a letter," he says, and when the stenographer offers to do it instead, he refuses, saying, "One thing at a time and that done well." He retreats into his private office just before Helen finally rushes onstage. "You'll lose your job," the stenographer says, chiding her for being late four days in a row. Helen then explains that she had to get off the subway on her way to work because the bodies all around her were pressing in. "I had to get out!" she says. "I thought I would faint! I had to get out in the air!" She tells her skeptical coworkers that it felt like she was dying.

Within minutes of Helen's arrival onstage, it becomes clear that she's at odds with the mechanical world surrounding her. Her averseness to the subway—a highly mechanized and orderly mode of transportation—reveals her discomfort with the very city she lives in, and the fact that she thought she might die from this claustrophobic experience illustrates how severely threatening such environments seem to her. As such, it's easy to see that Helen is unfit even for the room she's just entered, which is abuzz with mechanical instruments and orderly people.

The telephone girl tells Helen that Mr. Jones wants her, saying, "He's bellowing for you!" When Helen goes into George's office, the other workers gossip about her once more. "Do you think he'll marry her?" the telephone girl asks. "Will she have him?" replies the stenographer. "Will she have him? This agreement entered into—party of the first part—party of the second part—will he have her?" she says, blending her notations and speech. When Helen returns, she sits at her desk. The telephone girl asks if she wants to come on a double date with her, but Helen says she can't because her mother would "nag" her if she went. "Why don't you get to work?" says the stenographer. "Can't," Helen says. "My machine's out of order." The stenographer responds by telling her to sort the mail.

In contrast to the stenographer, who can't seem to separate real life from her notations—as evidenced by her strangely blended dialogue—Helen is unable to set herself upon her work; when she sees that her machine is "out of order," she does nothing to fix it, a fact that indicates once again that she is at odds with the mechanical world surrounding her. In this way, she seems to separate her emotional life from her work life, choosing to sit quietly with herself rather than address her broken machine.

Just as Helen's coworkers start asking her about Mr. Jones's proposal, he enters and goes to her desk, where he puts his hand on her shoulder and asks if she's finished his letter. She tells him she hasn't and goes on sorting the mail until he leaves. Once he's gone, the telephone girl asks Helen why she flinched when he touched her. "Did he pinch?" she asks. "No!" Helen says. "Then what?" asks the telephone girl. "Nothing!" she replies. "Just his hand." The telephone girl then says that if this is how she feels, she should refuse Mr. Jones's marriage proposal. "If she does she'll lose her job," the stenographer says. "Fired," offers the adding clerk. "The sack!" says the filing clerk. If she accepts, though, the coworkers speculate that she'll live a lavish life with breakfast in bed each morning, a life in which she doesn't have to work.

In this moment, the idea of marriage takes on implications that go beyond issues of love and happiness. Rather than focusing on whether or not Helen has feelings for George, her coworkers train their attention on the things she stands to gain by marrying him or lose by refusing him. In doing so, they incentivize marriage while also outlining the practical drawbacks of remaining a single woman, or disappointing a man who holds great power over her. It seems the telephone girl is the only one who considers Helen's emotions, since she tells Helen to say no to George, but this wise counsel is quickly drowned out by the opportunistic logic presented by the others.

Amid the office chaos—the sounds of typewriters and telephones and the murmurs of her colleagues—Helen thinks aloud to herself, considering Mr. Jones's proposal while also allowing her mind to wander, evoking the wide range of her daily worries. "George H. Jones," she says at one point, "—Fat hands—flabby hands—don't touch me—please—fat hands are never weary—please don't—married—all girls—most girls—married—babies—a baby—curls—little curls all over its head—George H. Jones—straight—thin—bald—don't touch me—please—no—can't—must—somebody—something—no rest—must rest—no rest—late today—yesterday—before—late—subway—air—pressing—bodies pressing—bodies—trembling—air—stop—air—late—job—no job—fired—[...]" As she continues, the lights go out and the sound of machines goes on until the stage brightens once more for Episode Two.

The strange and fragmented rhythm of Helen's monologue mimics the cacophonous sounds of the office, proving once more just how deeply she is affected by the nervous energy of the mechanical world. What's interesting about her speech, though, is that she both reiterates other peoples' ideas and *inserts her own strong opinions and desires. Indeed, she begins a sentence with the words "most girls," as if she's going to repeat something somebody has told her about how to behave. However, she later pivots, expressing her own will by saying things like "don't touch me" and "no." Unfortunately, nobody onstage is listening to her, and so her protests are ineffective.*

EPISODE 2: AT HOME

When the lights shine once more on the stage, Helen sits at a kitchen table with her mother while the sounds of apartment buzzers, radios, and the voices of people outside the window go on in the background. Interrupting a conversation in which her mother bugs her to eat more potatoes, Helen tries to ask something, but every time she begins, her mother talks at length about how Helen isn't "grateful." Finally, Helen gets a word in edgewise and tells her mother that George wants to marry her, explaining that he fell in love with her after seeing her beautiful hands. "You haven't got in trouble, have you?" Helen's mother asks. When Helen says that George is the vice-president of the company she works for, her mother drops all skepticism. "Vice-President!" she says. "His income must be—Does he know you've got a mother to support?"

The way Helen's mother reacts to the news of George's proposal is characteristic of how almost all the characters in Machinal *view marriage. Indeed, she busies herself first and foremost with logistical concerns. By asking if Helen has "got in trouble" (another way of asking if she's pregnant), she frames marriage not as something predicated on love, but as a way of covering up a mistake. Once this worry is out of the way, she still approaches the idea of marriage in pragmatic terms, suddenly framing it as something of a capitalist venture, a relationship from which she stands to benefit financially.*

"How soon you going to marry him?" Helen's mother asks, but Helen declares that she has no plans to accept George's proposal. To the bewilderment of her mother, she explains that she can't marry Mr. Jones because she doesn't love him. "Love!" her mother spits, "—what does that amount to! Will it clothe you? Will it feed you? Will it pay the bills?" Helen admits that it won't, but says that it's "real just the same." Her mother finds this ridiculous, saying she can't even remember whether or not she loved Helen's father. Offstage, a husband's voice drifts into the air, saying, "What's the matter—don't you want me to kiss you?" The unseen wife says, "You look so silly—oh I don't know what's coming when you look like that—and kiss me like that—don't—go away—"

Again Helen's mother fails to see marriage as a union built on love. Instead, she doubles down on her belief that Helen must remain practical, a belief she makes clear by asking if love will "clothe" or "feed" her daughter. In this way, she prioritizes economic necessity and prosperity over the emotional world, and Helen's desire to live according to her feelings and passions is once again completely ignored. On another note, the fragmented conversation between an unseen husband and wife gives a brief insight into what married life might look like for Helen (and perhaps also what it looked like for Helen's mother), as the man disregards his wife's wants in order to prioritize his lustful desires. It seems even in marriage, her agency will remain unnoticed.

Returning to their conversation, Helen's mother says that George must be a "decent man" because he's a vice-president. Helen argues that, though she wants to marry, she also wants to wait for the right man, a sentiment that strikes her mother as "crazy." Helen soon reveals that her "blood turns cold" when George touches her with his "fat hands" that "press" on her. With increasing fervor, she complains that she hasn't found somebody young and attractive, saying she "can't go on like this" because she's "all tight inside." "You're crazy," says her mother. "Ma—if you tell me that again I'll kill you!" Helen responds. "I'll kill you!"

Helen's mother falls back on another capitalistic cliché, declaring that George's financial success must also mean he's especially moral or worthy. Helen's assertion that she's "all tight inside" is the first indication that she's acutely aware of her anxiety. Furthermore, since Helen says this after talking about how repulsive George is, it seems she must be cognizant of the fact that her emotional distress is the direct result of the unwanted attention she gets from men. Unfortunately, her mother proves herself incapable of sympathizing with this feeling by calling her daughter crazy, and Helen's drastic response—"I'll kill you!"—foreshadows the violent impulse to which she (Helen) later succumbs.

Relentless, Helen's mother says, "You're crazy!" again, and Helen admits this is perhaps true. She then verbally attacks her mother, accusing her of laziness and a general lack of sympathy; "And you haven't got any pity," she says, "—no pity—you just take it for granted that I go to work every day—and come home every night and bring my money every week." This disturbs her mother, and suddenly Helen expresses remorse at having said these terrible things. Jumping up, she starts washing the dishes while wearing gloves, which her mother critiques, saying that she herself has been washing dishes for forty years without gloves. "It's my hands got me a husband," Helen remarks. When her mother asks if this means she's going to accept George's proposal, Helen says, "I suppose so." The scene cuts to black just as her mother says, "If you ain't the craziest—"

In this moment, Helen relents, acquiescing to the idea that beauty—the delicateness of her hands—yields a certain amount of capital that she'd be foolish to reject. In other words, she allows herself to believe that her mother is right and that she'd be "crazy" to reject George's proposal. Ultimately, this means that she accepts (however momentarily) the narrative about marriage forced upon her by her mother and coworkers—namely, that it doesn't have to be based on love, since there are so many other incentives (primarily economic) that make marrying worthwhile.

EPISODE 3: HONEYMOON

Faint jazz plays as the lights turn on for Episode Three, showing George and Helen entering a hotel room on their honeymoon. George is in high spirits, urging Helen to take off her hat and get comfortable. He brags to her about how expensive the room is, remarking upon the hotel's luxuriousness. Helen, for her part, remains unimpressed and rather quiet, saying that she thought their room would have a view of the ocean. "I was counting on seeing it!" she says. In response, George encourages her to lighten up, saying, "You look like you're scared," and, "Nothing to be scared of. You're with your husband, you know."

When George says, "Nothing to be scared of. You're with your husband, you know," he emphasizes the official nature of their new relationship, as if instructing her how to feel around him. His logic takes for granted that marriage automatically brings closeness. Unfortunately, he doesn't take into account the fact that his new title of "husband" means nothing when it comes to how Helen actually feels about him. Regardless, he draws upon the institution of marriage, using it as a tool of sorts to get Helen to behave the way he wants.

George takes Helen in his lap and kisses her neck while placing his hand on her knee. "Say—stay there!" he says. "What you moving for?—You know—you got to learn to relax, little girl." After only a few minutes in his lap, she gets up. George asks if she wants help getting out of her "heavy" clothes. When she refuses, he says, "I'm your husband, you know." She then retreats into the bathroom to change—much to George's disappointment—and when she re-emerges, she's crying. "I want my mother!" she says. "I thought you were glad to get away from her," George points out, but she tells him that she wants her now; "I want somebody," she says. George reminds her that she has him, a fact that does little to calm her. "Somebody—somebody—" she says, and the lights go out as George tells her "there's nothing to cry about."

Once again, George tries to use his new title of "husband" to his benefit, attempting to convince Helen to get naked in front of him simply because they're married, as if this changes the fact that they still hardly know one another. This clearly unnerves Helen, who suddenly feels as if she needs "somebody," perhaps to protect her from this man who so repulses her. Of course, there's almost no chance George can understand this emotion, since he himself is so deeply entrenched in his own idea that he and Helen are on a blissful honeymoon. As such, he proves himself incapable of shifting his perspective in a way that would allow him to empathize with his new wife.

EPISODE 4: MATERNAL

The sound of riveting comes through an open window of Helen's hospital room, where she lies in recovery after having given birth. A nurse enters and asks how she's feeling, but Helen doesn't respond. "Aren't you glad it's a girl?" the nurse asks. Helen shakes her head. "You're not! Oh, my! That's no way to talk! Men want boys—women ought to want girls." Moving toward the door, the nurse asks if Helen wants anything else. Helen points to the open window, but the nurse tells her the noise of construction outside "can't be helped," though she can close the window. Helen vigorously shakes her head, finally using her words and whispering, "I smell everything then."

The nurse's assertion that "women ought to want girls" because men want boys is in line with the idea that women of the early-20th century were expected to model themselves based on the behavior of their husbands. The nurse expects Helen to take cues from George. She also assumes that, as a woman, Helen is overjoyed to be a mother. When she discovers this isn't the case, she's offended, saying, "That's no way to talk," an interesting admonishment, considering that Helen hasn't yet actually said anything at all. As such, the audience sees how Helen is censored by the people around her even before she opens her mouth.

George enters with flowers and starts giving Helen a pep-talk, saying, "I know all you've been through," to which she shakes her head. "Oh, yes I do!" he says. "I know all about it! I was right outside all the time!" Again, Helen silently refutes this. "Oh yes!" George presses on. "But you've got to brace up now! Make an effort! Pull yourself together!" Going on, he compares her recovery to his own experiences. "Oh I've been down—but I haven't stayed down," he says. "I've been licked but I haven't stayed licked! I've pulled myself up by my own bootstraps, and that's what you've go to do! That's what conquers! Look at me!"

Besides the fact that George shows an utter lack of compassion when he tells Helen to "brace up," he also dares to revoke one of the only things she might safely assume is her own: her experience giving birth. Indeed, by saying that he understands "all [she's] been through," he intrudes upon her individual experience, ignoring the fact that he will never be able to understand what it's like to give birth. He then mindlessly transitions into talking about his own trials and tribulations, as if everything can be equated to the American Dream of pulling oneself up by the "bootstraps." Once again, he fails to show even a modicum of empathy, instead admiring his own capitalist triumphs.

In response to George's encouragements, Helen starts choking and pointing to the door. "She's got that gagging again—like she had the last time I was here," George tells the nurse, who then tells him to leave. He lingers, promising to return the next day and every day after that. When he's gone, the doctor arrives with another younger doctor. Over the sound of a riveting machine outside, he asks why Helen hasn't been able to breast feed yet. "These modern neurotic women, eh, Doctor? What are we going to do with 'em?" he says to his apprentice, and they both laugh. Reading Helen's chart, he says, "Gagging—you mean nausea." The nurse responds, "Yes Doctor, but—" Cutting her off, he says, "No buts, nurse" before ordering that Helen's diet change, whatever it is. "She says she can't swallow solids," the nurse informs him. "Give her solids," he says.

In this scene, the doctor models stereotypically misogynistic behavior. Not only does he openly speak about Helen in an unpleasant manner—"These modern neurotic women, eh, Doctor?"—but he also completely disregards the nurse, who clearly has been attending Helen longer than he has and who knows more about her current state. In the same way that the nurse censored Helen by telling her not to admit she didn't want a baby girl, the doctor censors (or revises, rather) the nurse when he says, "Gagging—you mean nausea." In this way, the audience sees how a pattern of sexist revision makes its way down the ladder of power in a male-dominant society.

When the two doctors and the nurse leave, Helen finally speaks. Her words are dissociative and strange, including the following fragmented phrases: "Let me alone—let me alone—let me alone—I've submitted to enough—I won't submit to any more"; "everybody loves God—they've got to—got to—got to love God—God is love—even if he's bad they got to love him—even if he's got fat hands"; "Let me rest—now I can rest—the weight is gone—inside the weight is gone—it's only outside—outside—all around—weight—I'm under it"; "I'll not submit any more—I'll not submit—I'll not submit—." When the lights go out, the riveting sound swells in the darkness and blends with the notes of an electric piano.

Perhaps the most notable phrase in this monologue is about God, when Helen says, "even if [God is] bad they got to love him—even if he's got fat hands." This is an important moment because Helen frames God's authority as unquestionable, a powerful male presence that demands love even if He's evil. She then conflates God with George by saying, "even if he's got fat hands." Suddenly, then, she has framed George as a malignant but all-powerful God, and the audience begins to more fully understand the extent to which she feels his presence in her life as an oppressive force.

EPISODE 5: PROHIBITED

In Episode Five the lights turn on to reveal a speakeasy-style bar with three tables. At one, an older man sits with a younger man and flirtatiously encourages him to try a certain kind of sherry, saying he wants him to "taste pleasure." At another, a man tries to convince a woman to get an abortion. At the final table, a man named Mr. Smith sits with his friend Mr. Roe, whom he has promised to introduce to his lover's friend. Having waited for the two women for quite some time, Mr. Roe declares that he's leaving, but Mr. Smith begs him to stay, saying, "Listen—as a favor to me—I got to be home by six—I promised my wife—sure. That don't leave me no time at all if we got to hang around—entertain some dame. You got to take her off my hands."

Treadwell quickly establishes this bar as a place where taboo, illicit things take place, achieving this by peopling it with two male intimates (homosexuality was not yet widely accepted when Machinal *was produced) and a couple contemplating an abortion (an illegal procedure in the early 1900s). In this place of deviant behavior, Mr. Smith and Mr. Roe are relative interlopers, sneaking into this underground world from their own world—the world of patriarchy and good appearances. It seems, then, that in order to undermine or defy the institution of marriage, one must often venture to the very edges of American society, as Mr. Smith does in this scene in an attempt to cheat on his wife.*

Finally, the women arrive to meet Mr. Smith and Mr. Roe, and the audience recognizes them as the telephone girl and Helen. Apparently, Mr. Smith has been having an affair with the telephone girl, who introduces Helen to Mr. Roe. After a short conversation, Mr. Smith and the telephone girl decide to depart, meaning that Helen and Mr. Roe will be left alone (fortunately, they've clearly taken a liking to one another). Before leaving, Mr. Smith says to Helen, "Get him to tell you how he killed a couple of spig down in Mexico." Helen asks Mr. Roe about this, and he explains that he was captured by Mexican bandits. To escape, he got them drunk one night, filled the bottle with **stones**, and killed them with it.

Though the audience may not be surprised to find Helen in this shady bar, her presence—and willingness to talk to Mr. Roe—says something important about her: since the last time she was onstage, she has clearly changed. Whereas before giving birth she was frustrated with George's control over her but never crossed his authority, now she seems willing to exercise her independence, even (or perhaps especially) if it means undermining her husband.

At the table with the couple contemplating abortion, the man says, "What about your job? […] You got to keep your job, haven't you? […] Haven't you?" This convinces the woman, and they leave to go make arrangements. Back at Helen's table, Mr. Roe keeps talking about his escape from the Mexican bandits. At one point in the conversation, he puts his hand over Helen's, and she delights in his touch. They decide to go back to his apartment, and as they leave he puts a nickel in an electric piano, which plays as the scene goes black. When the lights come back on for Episode Six, the electric piano has faded into the soft music of a hand organ.

The unnamed man trying to convince his lover to get an abortion appears to have the same mentality as Helen's coworkers when it comes to love. Simply put, he approaches emotional issues with a business-oriented, capitalist mindset, drawing upon the idea of financial failure in order to get his lover to have an abortion. One thing that's worth noting is that by saying, "You got to keep your job, haven't you?" he uses the woman's independence against her, giving her the impression that she would be unable to work at all if she were a mother; thus, in order to maintain her self-sufficient lifestyle, she must consent to the procedure.

EPISODE 6: INTIMATE

In Mr. Roe's dark apartment, the sound of a hand organ in the streets drifts through an open window. Helen and Mr. Roe lounge together and speak intimately. Helen's voice is calm as she talks without strain about her childhood. When she asks what song the hand organ is playing, Mr. Roe says it's called *Cielito Lindo*, or "Little Heaven," which is "what lovers call each other in Spain." Pleased, Helen asks him to sing the song, eventually joining in and laughing. After a while, she asks him if he likes other women as much as he likes her, and he assures her that none of them are "any sweeter" than her. Shortly thereafter, though, he says, "I'll have to be moving on, kid—some day, you know." When she asks when, he replies in Spanish, saying, "Quien sabe?" He explains that below the Rio Grande, this phrase means "Who knows?"

Although Helen has exercised her freedom by sleeping with Mr. Roe, thereby slashing George's control, it's clear her liberation only goes so far. Indeed, Mr. Roe is blatantly noncommittal and even patronizes Helen, condescending to her by calling her "kid" and telling her that he'll "have to be moving on" sometime soon. Worse, when she asks when he'll leave, he shrugs off her question, as if he can't be bothered to consider the fact that she might be emotionally impacted by his sudden absence. As such, he hardly seems any more empowering than George, though he does represent individuality and free will by the mere virtue of the fact that he enables Helen to finally act upon her marital discontent.

"I'll never get—below the Rio Grande—I'll never get out of here," Helen says. "Quien sabe," Roe replies, and Helen's mood lifts. Mr. Roe then tells her that it's easy to feel free below the Rio Grande. When a streetlight flickers to life outside, Helen realizes how late it is and starts collecting her things. As she does so, she notices a flower on the windowsill and asks Mr. Roe who gave it to him. Roe tells her he bought it for himself because it reminded him of San Francisco, where he was born and where it's also possible to feel free. Helen says she'd like to go there someday with him, and before she leaves, they embrace. On her way out, she asks if she can take the flower, and he gives it to her. "Goodbye," she says. "And—thank you." The lights go off and the hand organ grows louder.

It's not hard to tell from the way Helen talks to Mr. Roe that her experience with him has liberated her, considering how much the couple talks about being "free." Despite the fact that he embodies the same kind of sexism George does—an inability to gauge Helen's emotions and an unwillingness to empathize—she apparently associates him with a newfound sense of independence. That he too is a misogynist only illustrates how pervasive sexism was in the 1900s, and Treadwell seems to suggest that American society has no shortage of selfish men.

EPISODE 7: DOMESTIC

When the lights turn on for Episode Seven, Helen and George sit silently in their home reading newspapers. When they see headlines that interest them, they read them aloud. The ones that interest George are: "Record production"; "Sale hits a million—"; "Market trend steady—"; and "Owns a life interest." Between each of these headlines, Helen reads aloud the titles that interest her: "Girl turns on gas"; "Woman leaves all for love—"; and "Young wife disappears—."

This small detail is yet another illustration of how ill-suited George and Helen are for one another. George can't take his mind off business, and his interest in sales and the market makes him seem almost brutishly stupid, as if anything that doesn't have to do with money is incomprehensible to him. Helen, on the other hand, melodramatically seeks out the saddest, most depraved headlines, all of them having to do with women unhappy with their current lives—in turn, this fascination foreshadows her own rebellion.

The telephone rings, and George speaks to his business partner. Upon hanging up, he says, "They signed!—aren't you interested? Aren't you going to ask me?" Indulging him, Helen asks him a series of questions that give him the opportunity to deliver a cliché—"Did they sign?" she asks. "I'll say they signed," he replies. "On the dotted line?" she asks. "On the dotted line." Pleased, he moves toward Helen and pinches her cheek, saying, "The property's mine! It's not all that's mine!" As he does so, Helen leans away, a movement he notices and remarks upon, saying that she hasn't shied away from his touch in a long time. "You used to do it every time I touched you," he says. "Oh, I liked it," he later says. "Purity." As she refutes this, the phone rings, and George tells yet another business partner the same exact things he told Helen about the deal he's just made.

The fact that George understood Helen's shyness and repulsion as "purity" aligns with the notion that he's completely out of touch with what she actually feels. Though she used to shrink away from him because he disgusted her, he thought her actions were based on a set of societal notions of proper female behavior. Of course, this is ironic, because societal expectations are the last thing on Helen's mind when it comes to her problem with George's intimacy. On another note, his repetition of the same few phrases—"I'll say they signed," "On the dotted line," etc.—casts him once again as a somewhat robotic, mechanized person, a man who adheres to order and is unable to deviate from his very narrow interests.

Shortly after George gets off the phone, another call comes in, and he repeats himself yet again. Meanwhile, Helen distractedly reads the newspaper, clearly restless and uncomfortable about something. "My, you're nervous tonight," George remarks when he's finally finished on the phone. Later, Helen finds a headline in the paper that says, "Sale of jewels and precious **stones**." Putting her hand on her neck, she tells George that she feels like she's drowning with stones around her neck. "You just imagine that," he says. "Stifling," she replies. Shortly thereafter, George asks her to close the window because he can feel cold air. "You just imagine it," she tells him. "I never imagine anything," he responds.

Helen's use of the word "stifling" is interesting because it can be applied either to the idea of drowning or to George's insistence that Helen's problems are the result of her imagination. When she later tries to discredit George in the same way—now telling him that he's the one imagining things—he says, "I never imagine anything," delivering what is perhaps his most self-aware statement in the entire play. After all, it's quite true that George doesn't imagine anything, as he's already proved himself incapable of thinking of anything but money and his own desires. Indeed, he is himself something of a machine, and thus has no access to the emotional world of the imagination.

Helen gets up and says she's going to bed, but George reminds her that it's still early. Standing there indecisively, she says, "Oh—I want to go away!" When George asks her where, she says, "Anywhere—away," continuing by admitting that she's scared and that she hasn't been able to sleep. George assures her they'll go away someday to Europe, because he wants to buy a Swiss watch. He then reads another headline aloud: "Another revolution below the Rio Grande." This grabs Helen's attention, and she asks if anybody was hurt or if there were any prisoners—George disinterestedly tells her everybody involved went free.

Yet again, George proves that he's completely immune to Helen's emotions, this time blatantly turning her intense need to go away into a trip that will benefit him in the form of a Swiss watch. Of course, Helen wants primarily to get away from him, and his subsequent mentioning of the Rio Grande certainly evokes thoughts about Mr. Roe, further exacerbating her desire to escape her husband.

Just then, the sound of a hand organ playing *Cielito Lindo* begins faintly in the background, and Mr. Roe's voice can suddenly be heard recounting once again his escape from his Mexican captors. A chorus of voices repeat his words, saying, "Free—free—free—." "I filled an empty bottle with small **stones**," says Mr. Roe. "Stones—stones—precious stones—millstones—stones—stones—millstones," the voices echo. "You only need a bottle with small stones," says Mr. Roe's voice again. As these words swirl along with the music of the hand organ, Helen leaps to her feet, crying "Oh! Oh!," and the stage goes dark. "Stones—stones—stones," the voices chant while the hand organ's notes twist in the blackness until the lights go on for Episode Eight.

In the Bible's New Testament, Jesus tells his disciples that anybody who causes his followers (or children in general, depending on the interpretation) to stumble should have a "millstone" put around their neck and be thrown into the sea to drown. The chorus of voices chanting Mr. Roe's words add this word ("millstone"), thereby evoking an old punishment as well as a more modern interpretation, which defines a "millstone" as some heavy responsibility that weighs a person down. Of course, this definition certainly applies to Helen, who as a mother and wife in a patriarchal society feels the burden of responsibility to act out her duty as a woman—at the same time, though, this responsibility is dragging her down, killing her. Faced with this impossible conundrum, she appears driven to action as she jumps out of her chair.

EPISODE 8: THE LAW

The stage brightens on a courtroom where a judge finishes a case and turns his attention to Helen and her attorney, the Lawyer for Defense. As Helen takes the stand, two reporters write rapidly in their notebooks. Offstage, telegraph instruments click and prattle. Apparently, Helen has been held in jail since the night George died. Beginning his questioning, the Lawyer for Defense asks Helen if her marriage was a happy one, and whether or not she and George ever quarreled. She tells him that they never even had one argument, to which he says, "Six years without one quarrel! Six years! Gentlemen of the jury, I ask you to consider this fact! Six years of life without a quarrel." As he says this, the jury members smile amongst themselves.

The fact that George and Helen never had an argument is true, and it seems surprising at first, given that Helen detested George. But upon further consideration, it makes sense that the couple never quarreled: fighting is what people do when they're in love and trying to communicate, not when they simply coexist in the same house. Indeed, arguing implies that both parties care about the wellbeing of the relationship. George, for his part, was always too wrapped up in his delusions about marriage to truly recognize Helen's discontent, and Helen never bothered to challenge her husband because doing so seemed futile. Instead of quarrelling, then, they plodded along like a senseless machine until eventually everything broke.

Continuing with his questions, the Lawyer for Defense eventually asks Helen if she killed George. She insists that she did not, telling him that on the night of June 3rd—when he died—she awoke to find two "dark" men standing over her husband's bed. "Your husband's bed—" the Lawyer for Defense interrupts. "That was also your bed, was it not, Mrs. Jones?" She confirms that he's correct. "You meant his side of the bed, didn't you?" he presses. "Yes. His side," she says. Turning to the jury, the lawyer reiterates this fact, saying, "Mr. and Mrs. Jones slept in the same bed." Moving on, Helen says she saw two "big dark looking men" above the bed and froze in fear as one of them lifted something in his hand and hit George in the head with it. When George tried to sit up, she maintains, the man hit him again, and he collapsed on the bed.

Helen's lawyer does of course have more expertise than her when it comes to the law, but it's worth noting how eager he is to put words in her mouth, as if she herself is incapable of clarifying what she means. "You meant his side of the bed, didn't you?" he asks her, a question that recalls the doctor's revision of the nurse's notes about Helen's gagging in the hospital. Yet again, the audience sees how the men in Machinal *jump to attention when there's an opportunity to censor the women around them. To be fair, the lawyer is in this moment trying to portray Helen's relationship with George as idyllic and loving, so it makes sense that he wants to make sure the jury knows the couple slept in the same bed, but his manner of leading her to the answer is patronizing, in the same way that all the other men in Helen's life have communicated with her in a condescending manner.*

At this point, Helen explains, the two men fled the room. Quickly, she tried to stop the bleeding from George's temples with a collection of towels, but soon realized he'd already died. It was then, she says, that she decided to call the police. Satisfied, the Lawyer for Defense sits down and lets the Lawyer for Prosecution take over. "The accused woman told a straightforward story of—" writes one reporter. "The accused woman told a rambling, disconnected story of—" writes another.

The two reporters' conflicting interpretations of Helen's unfolding trial demonstrate the instability of language and truth in Machinal. *Indeed, words appear to be in this moment completely malleable, capable of twisting anything—even the same thing—in any direction. This has implications for how the characters interact, and it's no surprise that nobody in the play communicates very effectively, considering the strange way language functions.*

The Lawyer for Prosecution begins by confirming that Helen did nothing when she saw the two intruders appear over George's side of the bed. Pressing on, he points out that she "made no effort to follow them or cry out after them" when they left, either. Helen claims she failed to make these efforts because she could see that George had been hurt. "Ah!" the lawyer says. "You saw Mr. Jones was hurt! You saw this—how did you see it?" When she can't respond, he asks, "Then there was a light in the room?" At first, Helen agrees that there was "a sort of light," but then retracts her statement, saying—at the suggestion of the lawyer—that "perhaps" the light came from the window. "Oh," says the lawyer, "the shade was up!" Helen admits that it was down.

The Lawyer for Prosecution builds a convincing case supporting the idea that Helen is lying about the events of June 3rd. And although he's only doing his job, it's notable that he obtains the information he needs by leading Helen into questions, using her own words against her. As such, Treadwell portrays language as something that can be wielded against Helen by those in power. Whereas in the beginning of the play George and other characters refused to listen to her, now the lawyer obsessively scrutinizes her every word, weaponizing language.

The Lawyer for Prosecution hounds Helen with questions, asking why she didn't call a doctor. Producing a broken bottleneck, he asks whether she's ever seen it. She acknowledges that this was the instrument used to kill her husband, and the lawyer points out that the bottle has no fingerprints on it. "You are in the habit of wearing rubber gloves at night, Mrs. Jones—are you not?" he asks. She tells him that she used to do this before she was married, but stopped because George disliked the feel of them. She adds that she didn't mind changing her habits because she didn't care anymore whether or not her hands looked good. "You did not suddenly begin to care particularly for your hands again—about a year ago this spring?" the Lawyer for Prosecution asks.

This is the first indication that the Lawyer for Prosecution knows about Helen's infidelity in her marriage to George. The idea that Helen started caring about her hands again when she met her lover indicates that this affair truly was as liberating as it seemed it might be, since it clearly renewed her sense of agency, revitalizing her desire to care for her body in the way she saw fit—regardless of George's preferences.

Helen refutes the notion that she started caring about her hands again last spring, saying she didn't own any gloves at the time of George's death. At this point, the lawyer for the prosecution produces a pair of rubber gloves found in her home, along with the nightgown she wore on her husband's last night among the living. The nightgown is clean, and Helen explains that she washed George's blood from it before calling the police. Shifting his attention to the bottle and a small collection of **stones**, the lawyer asks when Helen first saw the items together. "The night my husband was done away with," she says. Sensing a weakness in her response, he continues, saying, "Mrs. Jones, do you remember about a year ago, a year ago this spring, bringing home to your house—a lily, a Chinese water lily?" She assures him she doesn't, but he remains unconvinced.

Slowly the Lawyer for Prosecution is amassing evidence against Helen. At this point, though, each fact seems unrelated to others. Indeed, the lawyer's approach depends upon fragmentation to create a mosaic of suspicion as he presents one possibly condemning item after another. In this way, he builds tension while also letting the jury try to make their own conclusions, clearly knowing that the most powerful kind of argument is one that requires listeners to connect the dots for themselves.

"You don't remember about a year ago bringing this bowl into your bedroom filled with small **stones** and some water and a lily," the Lawyer for Prosecution asks Helen. He then tells a story about Helen taking home this lily and caring for it until it died, at which point she placed it—with its small stones inside—on the top shelf of her closet, hiding it away. "Under the heavy artillery fire of the State's attorney's brilliant cross-questioning, the accused woman's defense was badly riddled. Pale and trembling, she—" writes one reporter. "Undaunted by the Prosecution's machine-gun attack, the defendant was able to maintain her position of innocence in the face of rapid-fire questioning that threatened, but never seriously menaced her defense. Flushed but calm she—" writes another.

Once again, Treadwell showcases the malleable nature of interpretation. When the reporters dictate their notes, their accounts differ to an absurd degree—so much so that the discrepancy takes on a comedic effect, as if the entire pursuit of objectivity is a farce in and of itself. This is a characteristic outlook of expressionist art, which places emphasis on subjectivity and perception rather than on objective fact, and it becomes clear that the outcome of Helen's trial will depend upon a triumph or failure of language; whoever can put the best spin on the truth (no matter what it is) will "win."

Cutting to the chase, the Lawyer for Prosecution introduces an affidavit signed by Mr. Roe. Though the Lawyer for Defense objects, the judge allows the paper to be introduced, and the Lawyer for Prosecution reads it aloud. In the affidavit, Mr. Roe upholds that he met Helen in a speakeasy a year before George's death and that she visited his apartment almost every day after that until he moved to Mexico in the fall. "I gave her a blue bowl filled with pebbles," he writes, "also containing a flowering lily."

Mr. Roe's willingness to betray Helen and testify against her innocence proves once and for all that he never cared about her in the same way that she cared about him. Rather, he was happy to have her company while he was around, but clearly had no emotional connection to her. As such, Helen's personal liberation from George—which she achieved by cheating on him with Mr. Roe—was predicated on yet another loveless relationship.

Suddenly, Helen breaks into a yell, pleading, "No! No!" When the Lawyer for Prosecution asks her what's wrong, she asks him to stop reading. "Why not!" he asks. "I did it!" she replies. "I did it! I did it!" Stunned, the judge asks, "You confess you killed your husband?" Helen responds, "I put him out of the way—yes," saying she did so "to be free." When the judge asks why she didn't simply file for a divorce, she says, "Oh I couldn't do that!! I couldn't hurt him like that!" The court erupts in laughter at this, and Helen begins to moan, overcome by her realization of—as the stage direction says—"the enormity of her isolation." As her moans continue until the end of the scene, the courtroom bursts into noise. "Murderess confesses," one reporter writes. "Paramour brings confession," scribbles another. "I did it! Woman cries!" says a third.

The loud courtroom—the laughter, the reporters, the judge—heighten the "isolation" Helen feels in this moment; in a sea of noise, she has nobody to turn to for support. Her heartfelt confession that she couldn't divorce George because it would hurt him is met with laughter, as if everybody is teaming up against her. In fact, even the reporters, who throughout the trial have had conflicting views, finally come together to publicize the same message: that Helen is guilty. In other words, the system Helen exists in functions like a well-oiled machine only when it comes to further suppressing and oppressing her.

EPISODE 9: A MACHINE

Emerging from the swell of telegraph machines and reporters' voices, the lights come on for Episode Nine. Helen is behind bars in a prison, a priest sitting next to her. As he reads prayers, the sound of a black man's voice singing a spiritual song can be heard offstage, along with the background din of an airplane flying overhead. "Stop that nigger yelling," the jailer says, but Helen protests, saying, "No, let him sing. He helps me." The priest asks if he himself helps her, but she ignores him, turning her attention back to the black man and saying, "I understand him. He is condemned. I understand him." At this, the priest resumes his prayers—now chanting in Latin—and two barbers enter the cell to shave off patches of Helen's hair to ensure that the **electric chair** will have clean points of contact on her head.

Helen's assertion that she "understands" the "condemned" black man indicates that she recognizes the bigoted and systemic nature of her oppression. Similar to how a black man was denied rights in the 1920s, women were also systematically subjugated by society and by a government that refused to acknowledge them. Helen's fellow-feeling in this moment is only made stronger when the priest resumes his prayers in Latin, further isolating her from religion despite the fact that the priest would claim he's trying to help her. Unlike the black man's sorrowful song, Helen literally cannot "understand" the priest.

"No!" Helen screams as the barbers approach. Trying to calm her down, the priest says, "Daughter, you're ready. You know you are ready," but she insists otherwise, saying, "Not for this! Not for this!" Nonetheless, the jailer and the barbers state again that they *must* shave her head, according to the prison's "regulations" and "routine[s]." As the barbers pin her arms, Helen screams, "I will not be submitted—this indignity! No! I will not be submitted!—Leave me alone! Oh my God am I never to be let alone! Always to have to submit—to submit! No more—not now—I'm going to die—I won't submit! Not now!" As he finishes shaving her head, one of the barbers says, "You'll submit, my lady. Right to the end, you'll submit!" He then praises his own work, saying that he did a very "neat job."

Helen's words in this moment echo phrases she's already uttered throughout the play. Most prominently, the words "submit" and "alone" both appeared in her monologue in the hospital, when she spoke similar phrases to herself, lamenting the fact that she has lived an entire life of submission, a life where she is denied individuality. Unfortunately, this is the first time she's ever voiced these thoughts to anybody else, and now it's too late—she's already in prison and about to be killed, meaning that (sadly enough) the barber is correct when he says she'll submit "right to the end."

Turning to the priest, Helen asks why she was born, but he only quotes scripture in response. She asks if nothing is hers—"The hair on my head! The very hair on my head—." She wonders aloud if she'll have peace when she's dead. Again, the priest only references Biblical passages. "Life has been hell to me, Father!" Helen insists, and he replies by saying that this is because she never sought God. "I sought something—," she says, "I was always seeking something." Just then, an airplane casts a shadow across the stage as the sound of its engine increases in volume. "He has wings—," Helen says, "but he isn't free!" She then admits that the only time she's ever felt free in her entire life was when she killed George.

The airplane overhead is a sudden reminder to Helen that even a pilot high above the earth can't escape the tyrannical hold 20th-century society has on a person. Even if she could fly, it seems, Helen would still be trapped in the mechanical world, an engine buzzing in her ears. This skepticism of machines runs throughout the play, beginning with Helen's inability to ride the subway. And it is this same skepticism that prompts her to say, "He has wings—but he isn't free!", a statement that indicates that freedom is more of an emotional phenomenon than something that can be reached using machines. Indeed, when she admits that killing George presented her the only sense of freedom in her life, she portrays liberation as a fleeting and temperamental feeling, albeit a twisted one in this case.

The priest launches into a long prayer. Helen's mother appears, but Helen calls her a stranger who has "never known" her. Just as her mother turns away, though, Helen reaches through the bars. It is then that two guards take Helen away, marching her down a hallway until they're offstage. The scene slowly fades darker and darker until there's nothing to be seen; only the priest's voice carries through blackness as he prays on and on. Eventually the voices of reporters join in. "Suppose the machine shouldn't work!" says one. Another reporter replies, "It'll work—It always works!" They talk nervously as the priest intones his holy words. Through everything, Helen's voice rings out once more. "Somebody!" she yells. "Somebod—" Then her voice cuts off, hanging in the air as the priest says, "Christ have mercy—Lord have mercy—Christ have mercy—," and the curtain closes.

Treadwell uses fragmentation in two ways in this moment. First of all, Helen's last outburst is an unfinished sentence, a desperate call that echoes her previous call for "somebody," which she issued to no avail in her honeymoon hotel when she was uncomfortable being with George. Second of all, the word itself is cut off at the very end, and the audience understands that death has robbed Helen of her voice. This, of course, is nothing new; throughout the entire play, many people have taken away her voice, and it's only fitting that this should happen at the end. However, it's important to note that, while Helen's voice and feelings have typically been curtailed or revised by men, now she gets cut off by a machine—the electric chair. In this way, Treadwell suggests that a system built to oppress women can use machinery to its benefit, turning innovation into a weapon that makes it easier to silence people.

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