How sex and gender are presented under patriarchal society within the plays Machinal and Spring Awakening

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There are almost too many ways to name in which cisgender men (men who identify with the gender they were assigned at birth) have built, regulated, and perpetuated a society in which they are always placed at the zenith of social hierarchy. The rules of patriarchy are so entrenched into the collective unconscious, that it almost does not matter which cultures, societies, and countries you look to, you will find in some form, a gender bias towards men. Considering that within modern Western culture, the terms gender and sex incorrectly hold the same meaning to many people, it is not unreasonable to extrapolate that the power dynamics contained within the act of sex have influenced how power is distributed within society.

Within '*Machinal'* (Sophie Treadwell, 1928) and *'Spring Awakening'* (Frank Wedekind, 1906) the playwrights set out to demonstrate to their audiences how totally rigid and immovable the traditions and expectations of patriarchy are. To that end, the female characters within the plays are always the oppressed party, and are shown to, at best, often be incapable of making their own decisions not due to incompetence but by societal expectation; at worst, they can make decisions for themselves, but doing so comes with grave consequence.

It is no coincidence that the plays focus so heavily on these issues considering the time at which they were written. Treadwell was a writer of thirty-nine plays, with seven being produced on Broadway. To say she was an unimportant writer of pre-40s America would be doing her a great disservice: ten years prior to the first performance of '*Machinal',* World War One, or as it was then known, The

Great War had concluded. In its wake, it resulted in almost a decade that was mostly prosperous for the United States; the 19th Amendment was written into the US constitution giving women the right to vote but, 1920s America also brought about the Prohibition period and with it, albeit somewhat ironically, an era of frivolity, recklessness, and joviality. However, the tail-end of 1929 saw the stock market crash and the start of The Great Depression; the roaring twenties came to a screeching end thus beginning an era of complete and total uncertainty for both the United States and the world at large.

> *"The most striking development of the great depression of 1929 is a profound scepticism of the future of contemporary society among large sections of the American people." (Johnson, J.R. (1944) In the International Tradition)*

Even though the stock market crash occurred in October and the true inspiration for Machinal, the trial and execution of Ruth Snyder, took place in late 1927 and early 1928, the treatment of Snyder in her trial is something that greatly affected not only Treadwell, but many women across America, because it showed that, despite the introduction of the 19th Amendment, women were still seen as objects incapable of making decisions for themselves. To that end, it is to be expected that Treadwell would practically mirror the life of the average young American girl in the 1920s, and the path she would take in *'Machinal'.*

Considering Wedekind was only writing roughly 30 years prior to Treadwell, it should come as no surprise that the attitudes regarding sex and gender did not progress much since *'Spring Awakening'* was published: as stated, about the only notable thing to move in a positive direction was that women gained the right to vote in the US and most of Europe. One very key thing to note however, is that he was writing before the time of The Great War, in Imperial Germany – a Germany in which the concept of masculinity and femininity was defined by the ruling class to be a very immovable binary system, that existed only to the benefit of men; Wedekind shows us the kind of men in control of the school system that practically bred boys to be constantly mentally stressed and

dangerously ignorant authority figures, and the girls to be obedient, unquestioning servants. This attitude was arguably strengthened and reinforced by the Scramble for Africa, a movement that began at the Berlin conference of 1884 in which a handful of European powers gathered to regulate occupation and colonization of Africa – by 1914, 90% of Africa was under European control. It was during this period in which the world began to look to Germany as a true imperial power.

As written by Ali A. Mazrui in his 1977 essay *'The Warrior Tradition and the Masculinity of War:*

> *"In cultures which are otherwise vastly different, the role of the warrior has been reserved for men… This is virtually universal" (Mazrui, A. (1977). The Warrior Tradition and the Masculinity of War)*

The "virtually universal" rule of masculinity being intrinsically tied to the role of the warrior was a certain driving force behind why colonial imperialism is so entrenched into the ideas of European culture. It is no secret that white supremacy has its roots in Europe, even if it has since expanded to other parts of the globe – for many people, the roots of bigoted and hateful attitudes we know today, start with Europe's colonisation of the rest of the world; by enforcing their traditions onto different cultures, they also taught the hateful version of Christianity they perpetuated and obeyed. It is clear within *'Spring Awakening'* that Wedekind intended to demonstrate to his audience the dangers of Christianity being enforced onto children. It is nigh transparent within the play that Wedekind pins this brainwashing and conditioning of children during their formative years, on the strict, cruel, and oppressive late 1800s German system of education and how it does not mould self-respecting children into people capable of confident decision making but turns them into the 'idealised' patriarchal binary forms of women and men.

It is worth nothing that within *'Machinal'* the protagonist has an extremely generic name, "Helen Jones", but in the script, she is only referred to as "Young Woman". This is the most blatant and bold giveaway that the play is not merely a telling of the life of Ruth Snyder, but also an examination of the singular path that young women living in America in the 1920s had available to them. This path

did guarantee their safety, but not always their happiness. Of course, the Young Woman within *'Machinal'* does not abide by this path, but her disobedience of the patriarchal system, results not only in her self-ostracising from society, but also her execution. However, her divergence from this path does allow us to examine how permeated patriarchy envisions gender and sex in 1920s America; in short, men are responsible for almost every decision women, and even men, must make. For women, their sole path in life would look like this: marry a monetarily stable man; bare his children and successfully raise them whilst your husband works for 8 hours a day; cook his meals and clean his home. The depressing part about this is that this was not only expected, but also considered to be a great honour by older women in the 1920s, as we can see by the Mother's lines:

> *"Vice-President! His income must be – does he know you've got a mother to support… Not going to… are you crazy!" Treadwell, S. Machinal (1928) 2)*

She berates and insults her daughter for not immediately saying yes to the option that will secure both of their futures both in terms of finance and healthcare. This reliance on a husband that the Mother forces onto the Young Woman is partway inspired by Treadwell's own disdain for her mother because she had experienced her own mother's co-dependency on her neglectful husband, but also due to the well-known secret that a lot of women were forced into abusive marriages:

> *"The women who occupy the central positions in her plays often reflect this ambivalence: they seek lives on their own but frequently stop short of leaving their domineering husband or lover."* (*Ozieblo, B & Dickey, J (2008) Susan Glaspell and Sophie Treadwell, Routledge Modern and Contemporary Dramatists)*

Treadwell's upbringing was dominated by two antithetical female role models: as implied, one was her mother who was unable to follow through with her desire to divorce her husband; the other was her grandmother, a Scottish immigrant who inherited and maintained a 150-acre ranch left for her by her husband. It therefore comes as no surprise that Treadwell admired her grandmother's

independence as opposed to her mother's co-dependence, which the young Treadwell considered weak and detestable.

As Dickey asserts, the women in a protagonist role in Treadwell's plays often take on this bizarre mix of co-dependency and a fierce need to rebel and achieve their independence from men; this is absolutely true for the Young Woman, as in every scene we see her without safety and happiness, and yet is always dependant on other people – the paradox being of course, that it is those same people that are causing her unhappiness and lack of safety: for example in Episode 2 "At Home" the Young Woman is vilified by the Mother, and in Episode 4 "Maternity" she is being conditioned by the Doctors, Husband and even Nurse to believe that being a mother is the natural course for women. The Doctor describes the Young Woman as *"neurotic"* when she refuses to hold her child:

"These modern neurotic women, eh Doctor" Treadwell, S. Machinal (1928) 4)

Neurosis, the condition that the term "neurotic" stems from, denotes *"behaving strangely or in an anxious, worried and nervous way, often because you have a mental illness" Cambridge English Dictionary (2011)*. This ableist use of "neurotic" highlights the how utterly radical it was for women to not want to be mothers; this therefore demonstrates to the audience that it is not only expected for women to become mothers, but also mandated, regulated and monitored; from this we can see that men have control of a woman's bodily and sexual autonomy, because it is ultimately the woman who will have to carry the child and possibly risk her life – this then implies that women who did not wish to be mothers were ill or deranged despite how it in most marriages the role of mother is forced onto them, rather than accepted. Further, the use of the adjective "modern" by the Doctor is particularly relevant here – as stated, the character of the Young Woman is inspired both by Ruth Snyder and Treadwell herself, but her generic given name and beyond broad script name moves the character out of the realm of the specific, into the sphere of the general and in so doing, encompasses a much larger spectrum of women and the issues they faced: their suffrage, fight for sexual freedom and liberty was only something that began occurring at the turn of the 20th century

and as a result, was met with a very large amount of resistance (by almost exclusively men). From this angle, we can extrapolate what the Doctor says into a much wider image: that the men of society uphold tradition, whereas the women strive for modernity and change. This stance is arguably strengthened even by the very structure of the play itself – *'Machinal'* is structured episodically with each episode seeking to demonstrate a phase in life: this deviation from a 'Master Narrative', that is a linear narrative with small gaps in time that has a clear opening and climax, lends the play to a more feminist structure: by utilising a variety of non-realistic theatre techniques commonly employed in expressionist theatre, she devises a feminist style of expressionism. Within Treadwell's unpublished stage directions, she implies that *'Machinal'* would be more likely to resonate with a female audience:

> *"Influenced by French feminist theorists of l'ecriture feminine, (…) [Sue-Ellen] Case outlines a concept of dramatic "contiguity," a structural methodology which she describes as "elliptical rather than illustrative, fragmentary rather than whole, ambiguous rather than clear, and interrupted rather than complete" (Ozieblo, B & Dickey, J (2008) Susan Glaspell and Sophie Treadwell, Routledge Modern and Contemporary Dramatists)*

Considering that the 'Master Narrative' holding the title "Master" is due to it being the ruling story form, and its perpetuation by men as the only credible way of storytelling, once again, we are shown that patriarchy only empowers things which empower it, and feminist viewpoints and literature are not among them; consequently, *'Machinal'* and Treadwell are able to demonstrate the power over gender and sexual liberty that patriarchy and men hold, even down to the structure of the play itself.

'Spring Awakening' very similarly to *'Machinal'* presents blatantly, powerfully, and bluntly, the sheer dominant force that patriarchy is and how it totally and entirely controls people's perception of life itself; however, contrary to *'Machinal'*, Wedekind chooses to place the focus on the act of sex, what value it has in society and how it is taught. From what *'Spring Awakening'* shows us, sex itself is a taboo and to know about the intricacies of it, is to reduce yourself to a lower class; whilst not stated

within the play, the school that the events of the play revolve around a 'gymnasia' (the closest British equivalent being a grammar school): Wedekind attended one of these schools and they were structured establishments specifically made for the sons of the ruling class to breed them into, as Frau Gabor would describe them, *"splendid scholars who did not especially prove themselves in later life" (Wedekind, F. (1906) 2.5)*. The students who attended were those from prominent families that were often forced into careers they were not interested in – Wedekind himself was forced into the path of law by his father. Due to the overwhelming stress that the students attending these schools were under, many of them remained woefully uneducated about anything that was not on their school syllabus, and as a lot of gymnasias were governed by Christian hypocrisy, formal sex education was never going to be in consideration. It is for this reason, that obtaining knowledge and understanding of sex, such as what Melchior and Ilse achieve, is to ostracise yourself from society. However, we are shown that both Melchior and Ilse, whilst having obtained the knowledge to be free from their very controlled life, neither are able to properly utilise said freedom: Melchior's paper to Moritz gets him sent to a reformatory, and Ilse is constantly sexually abused and raped by the "Phallustics".

To demonstrate the suffering that children going through the early 1900s German school system, Wedekind utilises a transitionary form of theatre that acts as a precursor to modern Absurdism.

> *"…, Wedekind employed episodic scenes, fragmented dialogue, distortion, and caricature in his dramas, which formed the transition from the realism of his age to the Expressionism of the following generation." (Britannica. Frank Wedekind – accessed 7th May 2021)*

This 'transitionary expressionism' that Wedekind employs is what enables the play to brazenly display *"unthinkable subjects to the stage. The chief off these … sex"* (*Styan, JL (1981), Modern Drama in Theory and Practice, Volume 3, Expressionism and Epic Theatre)*. Therefore, it is not unfair to say that is the puritanical admonishment of sex that grants *'Spring Awakening'* its subtitle, *'A Tragedy of Childhood'* because the only character whose fate does stem directly from a lack of

understanding around sex, is Moritz' who commits suicide over his hopelessness for his future. One of the most tragic fates in *'Spring Awakening'* is that of Wendla; Wendla's defining trait within the play, is arguably her innocent curiosity, thus it is made clear to the audience that Wendla is blissfully unaware of the real truths of the world; this is in part due to her mother's own naivety and ignorance: we can see that in Act 2 Scene 2 that Frau Bergmann, in total honesty, tells her daughter that the only requirement to becoming pregnant and having children, is to be married and love your husband whole heartedly *("You must love him very much with your whole heart" Wedekind, F. (1906) 2.2)*. Bergmann's complete lack of understanding, alongside Melchior's *"masculine itch"(Wedekind, F (1906) 1.2)*, is what ultimately dooms Wendla because the doctor and Bergmann are certain that she is anaemic; in reality, she's pregnant – this then asks the question as to if her mother is responsible for Wendla's fate. Whist Bergmann's ignorance certainly factored into Wendla's tragedy, I would argue that it is in fact no fault of hers; she is a woman that has been raised and groomed in a monolithic authoritarian Christian environment, trained using cult tactics to think what the powerful members of both the church and education system want her to think. Both of those institutions were, and continue to be, governed by men and as a result Frau's entire perception of sex and gender roles has been conditioned into thinking what those authority figures want her to think – therefore it is to be expected that this brainwashing will be passed down to Wendla. Ultimately, it is the fault of men that Wendla suffers her tragedy – from Melchior's rape and the pillars of 1890s German society that uphold traditional patriarchal values - the system of education and the Christian Church - Wedekind shows the audience the invasive and infectious nature that hypocritical Christianity enables and perpetuates.

At the end of the 19th century, it is very apparent that in the mind of the German people (more specifically scholars) there was a lot of focus around sexual deviancy, as opposed to regular sexuality – sadomasochism. Carol Diethe states:

> *"As the received wisdom of [various] German… sexologists… gave medical support to the notion that the male sex role was aggressive and that of the female was passive, it is no wonder that a code was generated whereby a degree of unspoken sado-masochism was regarded as normal in sexual intercourse." Diethe, C (1988) Aspects of Distorted Sexual Attitudes in German Expressionist Drama*

This complete fascination regarding sexual deviancy and its implications for patriarchal society would involve what Karl Jung would refer to as 'the collective unconscious'; Jung theorised that the collective unconscious is common to all humans and stated that it is:

> *"responsible for a number of deep-seated beliefs and instincts, such as spirituality, sexual behaviour, and life and death instincts" (Fritscher, L (Medically reviewed 2020) Understanding the Collective Unconscious – accessed 9th May 2021)*

Considering this, we can look at *'Spring Awakening'* as Wedekind's response to a society that was needlessly fixated on the idea of admonishing sex in favour of bolstering a patriarchal idea of sexuality and gender, a society in which he aimed to:

> "*depict poetically the phenomenon of puberty so as to facilitate more humane and rational judgements among parents and educators" (Wedekind, F. Forsythe, J & M. (2014) Spring Awakening: Full Text and Introduction.*

To conclude, both *'Machinal'* and *'Spring Awakening'* demonstrate clearly the infectious, all-encompassing nature of patriarchal society, and the values it upholds and dictate over. From gender roles being reduced to a total binary that allows for men to do almost anything they wish provided they do it in private to women being regulated, controlled, and manipulated into positions of total subservience, we can see truly how tight a grip patriarchy has over the collective unconscious. Naturally, this then extends to how sexuality is enforced; much like gender, sex is made into a binary system that allows only for two truths: men are dominant, women are subservient. With those

truths an unspoken, but universally known, law of sadomasochism. Treadwell's first-hand experience as a victim of the unjust system ring out strongly and loudly in *'Machinal'* and Wedekind's own pain shown to us in *'Spring Awakening'* reminds us that it is not only women, but men that suffer under patriarchy. Ultimately, both plays, and their authors serve as a demonstration for how utterly pervasive patriarchal traditions are but protest for change not just in the mind of the individual, but also society at large.

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