

MENTAL DISORDERS AS METAPHOR:

American Female Playwrights of the 1920s and the Depiction of Patriarchal Oppression

By

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MENTAL DISORDERS AS METAPHOR: American Female Playwrights of the 1920s and the Depiction of Patriarchal Oppression

Thesis directed by Professor Oliver Gerland

This thesis will examine three plays written by three female American playwrights of the early twentieth century and compare their depictions of female characters with mental disorders. I hypothesize that the playwrights used mental disorders as a metaphor for the patriarchal oppression that they experienced in their lives. After the ratification of the nineteenth amendment a backlash occurred; securing the right to vote had overcome one instance of patriarchal oppression but it had not conquered the oppression living within individuals or in societal institutions. I will specifically analyze *Everyday* (1921) by Rachel Crothers, *The Verge* (1921) by Susan Glaspell, and *Machinal* (1928) by Sophie Treadwell. To prove my hypothesis, I examine mental disorders experienced by a leading female character in each play, and prove a connection to the patriarchal oppression present in the 1920s. The basis of my theoretical lens will be Elaine Showalter's work, especially her 1979 article "Towards a Feminist Poetics." To define the mental disorders depicted in the characters, I shall use *The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, Fifth Edition* or *DSM-V*. Not only does the *DSM-V* provide a clear description of the characters' mental states, it also suggests the playwrights' prescience and their work's continued relevance.

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CHAPTER ONE: Introduction

America in the early twentieth century was a whirlwind of change and flux. World War I proved America's strength on a global scale. Originally, the United States claimed neutrality towards the war but, by 1917, the political field had changed. President Woodrow Wilson led the nation into war against Germany, joining America with the allies. It took only two months for US soldiers to begin arriving on the European front; within a year, one million US soldiers were on the battle field. The victory of the allied forces established America as a military threat. America was changing on the home front, too: The United States Coast Guard was established, the United States Post Office had begun to use airplanes to send mail more efficiently, and lower and middle class workers were fighting for basic wages.

The period after World War One was also the age of the suffragettes. The foundation of the movement started at the Seneca Falls Convention, the first women's rights convention, in 1848. Suffrage gained traction in 1869 when the first national suffrage organization was founded by Susan B. Anthony and Elisabeth Cady Stanton (Stanton). Protests, riots, and rallies followed until Congress, in 1919, passed the nineteenth amendment, giving women the right to vote. The amendment was ratified the following year. The suffragette movement helped create the idea of the "new woman," an independent woman. As author Lynn Dumenil explains the term, "new woman" was, and still is, often associated with flappers (short hair, short dresses, and a party lifestyle) where deeper analysis points towards "changes in the family, and sexual mores, women's participation in the work force, and political activism of these newly enfranchised citizens" (Dumenil 22). This was a time when inequalities between men and women were being questioned.

In the theatrical world, the Little Theatre Movement had started to gain traction, and there was an audience that wanted to see small experimental dramas, free from the large commercial norms (*Encyclopædia Britannica*). Within the last few decades, the 1920s has been rediscovered for its abundance of female playwrights. Lost to the canon by the start of World War II, numerous female playwrights had made names for themselves in the theatrical world of the early twentieth century. Their work was performed on Broadway, often exploring serious topics such as divorce, psychoanalysis, and mental illness. Those that depicted mental disorders and illnesses are of particular importance here.

Numerous western societies throughout history believed that mental illness was a form of religious punishment from higher powers. During the Middle Ages, people suffering from “madness” were often institutionalized to keep them off the streets (Craig 729). It wasn’t until the scientific advancements of the Industrial Revolution that doctors started to explore the human psyche (Unite for Sight). Soon after, society began to take notice of new developments concerning the human mind, particularly due to the popularization of hysteria by Robert Brudenell Carter, Jean-Martin Charcot, and Sigmund Freud. By the start of the twentieth century, European fascination with the human mind crossed the Atlantic and began to seep into American culture. In 1909, Freud visited the United States and delivered his *Five Lectures on Psychoanalysis* at Clark University, and interest spread even more (Ben-Zvi and Gainor 9). There was strong and growing fascination in the workings of the mind and how to understand it. Multiple female playwrights took these new theories and placed them into their work.

This thesis will examine three such plays written by three female American playwrights of the early twentieth century and compare their depictions of female characters with mental disorders. I hypothesize that the playwrights used mental disorders as a metaphor for the

patriarchal oppression that they experienced in their lives. After the ratification of the nineteenth amendment a backlash occurred; while one instance of patriarchal oppression had been overcome with the law, it had not conquered the oppression living within individuals or in societal institutions. I will specifically analyze *Everyday* (1921) by Rachel Crothers, *The Verge* (1921) by Susan Glaspell, and *Machinal* (1928) by Sophie Treadwell. To prove my hypothesis, I will examine the mental disorders experienced by leading female characters in each play, and prove a connection to the patriarchal oppression present in the 1920s. The basis of my theoretical lens will be Elaine Showalter's work, especially her 1979 article "Towards a Feminist Poetics."

I will invoke up-to-date medical descriptions regarding characters' mental disorders by using the *The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, Fifth Edition* or *DSM-V* (2013). This is the current standard of diagnosing mental illness. The term "diagnosis" usually evokes the primary definition: "Determination of the nature of a diseased condition; identification of a disease by careful investigation of its symptoms," (*OED Online*). This is not how I will use "diagnosis," however. Instead, I emphasize the term's secondary definition: "Distinctive characterization in precise terms" (*OED Online*). Within the *DSM-V* are detailed lists and descriptions of all current mental disorders. All of the female characters to be explored in this thesis can be connected to at least one specific disorders and the corresponding symptoms, or characterizations, as identified in the *DSM-V*. Not only does the *DSM-V* provide a clear description of the characters' mental states, it also suggests the playwrights' prescience and their work's continued relevance.

Not only will each character be described using contemporary medical terms, but another key connection will be seen. Motherhood and maternity were important themes in the lives of the playwrights; they are also important themes in the lives of the characters. Each character

approaches the ideas and responsibilities of motherhood in a different way; the patriarchy is involved in why, and how, each approaches her child—in each case, a daughter—in the way she does.

“Towards a Feminist Poetics” was written during a time when feminist criticism was new enough to be recognized as a theoretical lens, but not reputable enough to be taken seriously by all academic institutions. At the time Showalter wrote “Towards a Feminist Poetics,” feminist criticism was often singled out by male scholars as a lesser form of scholarship. Showalter begins her article by pointing out specific instances where male intellectuals made claims against feminist criticism, and how those claims are incorrect. In order to circumvent such debates, Showalter proposed a new form of criticism that focuses on the female:

In this essay, therefore, I would like to outline a brief taxonomy, if not a poetics, of feminist criticism, in the hopes that it will serve as an introduction to a body of work which needs to be considered both as a major contribution to English studies and as part of an interdisciplinary effort to reconstruct the social political, and cultural experience of women. (128)

In creating this poetic, Showalter anticipated that it would promote unity amongst members of the feminist critical community and counter the arguments of anti-feminist critics.

“Towards a Feminist Poetics” posits two divisions of feminist criticism. The first is *woman as reader*, which Showalter denotes with the phrase *feminist critique*. This kind of feminist criticism focuses on the women who consume male-produced literature, raising questions like “How might a woman reading a male-created play react to the representation of female sexualities?” The second division traced by the essay is *woman as writer*, or as Showalter terms it, *gynocriticism*. This form of feminist criticism focuses on the female writer,

and her relation to the contexts of history, literary structures, themes and more. “Towards a Feminist Poetics” is the inception of gynocriticism, and serves as a framework for analysis of the works of female writers. “Gynocritics begins at the point when we free ourselves from the linear absolute of male tradition, and focus instead on the newly visible world of female culture” (131). This theory was novel and important at the time, as it began to focus critical attention on female writers had been written out of the canon.

I have chosen to look at Showalter in particular because of her insistence on looking at the writer’s biography. “Without an understanding of the framework of the female subculture, we can miss or misinterpret the themes and structures of women's literature” (133). Without taking into account the backgrounds of Crothers, Glaspell, and Treadwell as strong, intelligent theatre makers how can we truly understand the mental disorders they framed in their works?

Showalter’s gynocriticism was instrumental to early feminist criticism. While a helpful tool to academics of the 1980s, gynocriticism came under scrutiny in the early 1990s. The broad terminology of *woman as writer* appeared to some to refer only to *white* women writers, omitting women of color, queer identities, and a fuller spectrum of what “woman” could mean (Friedman). In order to bring gynocriticism into the twenty-first century these aspects must be brought into account. To do so, Showalter’s chapter in *Hysteria Beyond Freud* (1993) will be added to my theoretical framework. The chapter, titled “Hysteria, Feminism, and Gender,” is a historical look at hysteria, and will act as a building block for understanding the mentally ill characters and, sometimes, the playwrights themselves. While Crothers, Glaspell, and Treadwell were all white, middle class women, “Hysteria, Feminism, and Gender” explores a fuller spectrum of “feminine” individuals dealing with hysteria throughout eighteenth and nineteenth century western society.

“Hysteria, Feminism, and Gender” will also act as a bridge connecting “Towards a Feminist Poetics” to the second aspect of 21st-century gynocriticism that I will pursue in this thesis—definitions of oppression and patriarchy as defined by Portland Community College (PCC). While a community college might seem like an odd authority, the PCC is home to “The Illumination Project,” an interactive theater troupe that in the last ten years has focused on challenging racism and sexism, and stigmas surrounding mental health and homelessness. The definitions created by the PCC have been used by queer scholar Jack Halberstam. I will use these definitions to further concretize the influence that patriarchal oppression had on 1920s female playwrights, while highlighting the importance of *woman as writer* not acting as an exclusionary ideology.

The two most important definitions will be the two types of oppression that are seen within the playwrights’ works and their own lives. The first, institutional oppression, “is the systematic mistreatment of people within a social identity group, supported and enforced by the society and its institutions, solely based on the person’s membership in the social identity group” (1). Institutional oppression will be seen in the lives of each playwright because they all were women. The second category is overt oppression. These “forms of oppression are open and observable, not secret or hidden. The target of overt oppression is very aware of the intention and action of the oppressive act, and of the oppressive person or group” (1).

Such cases of overt oppression will be seen when men attempted to control Crothers, Glaspell, and Treadwell. Overt oppression is also present in each play to be discussed. By blending these current terms with Showalter’s slightly dated idea of *woman as writer*, this thesis will update gynocriticism for use in the current academic field. Showalter’s framework for discovering female culture becomes more rounded and inclusive when institutionalized and overt

oppression are kept in sight. By exposing these forms of oppression in the characters with mental disorders depicted by Crothers, Glaspell, and Treadwell, this thesis can expand on Showalter's importance for feminist criticism.

Mental disorders are nothing new to society, yet only in the last century have strides been taken that allow for greater understanding of the human brain. In the last few years, my attention has been drawn to the sharp increase in media attention on mental illness. With mass shootings in America becoming more prevalent, the relation between gun rights and mental illness is receiving more attention in the news. By examining historical depictions of mental disorders through a feminist lens, one can explore how our understanding of mental disorders has evolved in the last one hundred years.

Theatre is a medium in which mental disorders can be truthfully explored. In the 1920s radio was just beginning to emerge in American households (Robertson), and the first talking motion picture premiered in 1927. Thus, theatre was a prime platform for exploring difficult issues like mental instability. I focus my study on theatre because it had an audience, had critics responding (both positive and negative), and was expressing the issue at hand. Mental disorders are not the only reason why this study merits the reader's consideration. My thesis allows for new research in theatre through a feminist lens. This study will connect Crothers, Glaspell, and Treadwell—three playwrights often categorized as feminist playwrights—to a new perspective on feminist writing.

The closest book that comes into contact with my topics is *Freud on Broadway: The History of Psychoanalysis and the American Drama* (1955) by W. David Seivers. Seivers explores Freudian psychology in plays by American playwrights including Crothers, Glaspell,

and Treadwell. What *Freud on Broadway* lacks is a connection to feminist theory. Since the book is over sixty years old, much of the medical information is out of date, or since been proven incorrect. Beyond *Freud on Broadway* I have yet to find theatre-based literature about Crothers, Glaspell, and Treadwell in connection with mental disorders.

In Chapters Two through Four I will look at the plays in chronological order: *Everyday* by Crothers will be the focus of Chapter Two. *The Verge* by Glaspell Chapter Three, and *Machinal* by Treadwell, for Chapter Four. Each chapter will be broken up into three parts. First, the playwright will be introduced with a short, two-page biography. This will allow for facts to be made known, in order for the reader to have a basic understanding of the playwright. Second, the play will be introduced with a two-page summary of the plot. This will allow for the reader to understand the play's analysis even if they are unfamiliar with the text. Finally, I will begin analysis.

In my analysis, I will diagnosis the female character using criteria presented in The *DSM-V*. This will allow for an understanding of mental disorders and what it means for a person in the twenty-first century. I then will elaborate on Showalter's idea of the "framework of the female subculture" (133) of the play to gain a historical understanding of life during the playwrights and character's time period. This use of Showalter's gynocriticism will highlight the patriarchal oppression and will be supplemented by the definitions of oppression defined by the PCC. In this section of the chapter, I will connect the text and its feminist themes back to the playwrights' lives and the oppression that patriarchy inflicted upon them.

By the time Chapter Five, the conclusion, I will unpack the clear connection between Crothers, Glaspell and Treadwell. Not only will each of the characters created by the playwrights be clearly suffering from a mental disorder (that is connected to the patriarchal oppression,) but

these playwrights themselves will be connected to this oppression, as well. This thesis is just the beginning of a larger theory that can span beyond merely America in the 1920s. The conclusion will act as a preview for what else this hypothesis could do with more time, and research. For now, the time period of interest is the 1920s, the place is America, and the topic at hand is madness as a metaphor for oppression.

CHAPTER TWO: *EVERYDAY* MADNESS

Rachel Crothers is considered by some to be the most influential female playwright in America before World War I. She was born in December 1871 in Bloomington, Illinois. The youngest of eight children, she was sent away to live with an aunt while her mother pursued a medical degree. As a child, Crothers was artistic, albeit lonely. Her first play was completed at age twelve. She graduated from Illinois State Normal University in 1892. Against her family's wishes, she attended the Stanhope-Wheatcroft School of Acting, and lived as an actor and teacher in New York. During this time, she wrote and directed plays, culminating in the success of *The Three of Us* in 1906. *The Three of Us* made waves because it centered on the idea of the "new woman" that was beginning to emerge in the early twentieth century. This is one of Crothers' first plays to focus on a woman's desire to be free, and her need to make her own life choices.

From there her career grew. Crothers is known for her comedic style and highlighting of social problems, often female-specific social problems. Topics range from marriage, divorce, double standards between the sexes, Freudian psychoanalysis, and more. Her plays are highly regarded for their craftsmanship, and accuracy in depicting life during the early twentieth century. When America entered World War I, Crothers founded the Stage Women's War Relief, which entertained the troops. Crothers would return to this idea in 1932, co-founding the Stage Relief Fund to help out-of-work actors. She remained active in this relief project until it disbanded in the 1950s.

After World War I, Crothers continued to write, yet in a more serious tone, including the lesser known *Everyday* that this thesis will be focusing on. Interestingly, given the number of plays that Crothers wrote which focus on martial issues (*As Husbands Go*, 1931; *When Ladies*

Meet, 1932), she never married. Instead she focused on her craft. With many of her plays she also cast and directed, and the majority of her plays were commercial successes. Biographer Judith E. Barlow, explains in *Contemporary Authors Online* the key to Crothers' success. Crothers' "problem plays and comedies combine a genuine sense of what works on stage with a thoughtful investigation of such serious issues" (Barlow).

Her career lasted forty years: While other female playwrights drifted into theatrical obscurity during the Great Depression and World War II, Crothers kept working. She is credited with helping form the American Theater Wing for British War Relief, which operated the famous Stage Door Canteen. After the war, Crothers remained as executive director until 1950. Her final play was *We Happy Few* (1955), written three years before her death in 1958.

Everyday by Rachel Crothers: Summary

Everyday follows the Nolans, a prominent mid-western family from a small town, as the parents struggle to accept the younger generation's rise to adulthood. It is listed as comedy drama, and is broken up into three acts, with all of the action occurring in the family's living room. The character that I will be focusing on is the mother, Fannie Nolan. Act One begins with Judge Nolan, and his wife Fannie as they wait to be reacquainted with their daughter Phyllis, 20 years old, who has been studying abroad for five years. Fannie is constantly insulted, and put down by her husband throughout the play. She reflects the out-of-date, dreary fashion of the living room.

Phyllis enters, and is eager to redecorate the room. Friend of the family, Mrs. Raymond, and her children (May and T.D.) soon arrive to welcome Phyllis home. Mrs. Raymond and T.D. are stuck in the older generation's style, while May is eager to learn from the very modern

Phyllis. T.D. is quite smitten with Phyllis, and hopes that she will marry him. Judge Nolan informs everyone that Berry Wyman, a new-money businessman who is funding the Judge's gubernatorial race, is coming into town soon, and Phyllis is to meet him. Judge Nolan is eager for his daughter to settle back into everyday life, especially if it involves Wyman. Late in the act, we are introduced to John McFarlen, the butcher's son and WWI veteran who now is working for the Judge.

Act Two begins six weeks later. Phyllis has convinced her parents to refurbish the living room, and it is currently in a state of change. Phyllis, T.D., Mary, and John are preparing for a party. It is clear that Phyllis is being courted by both T.D. and Wyman, but the only genuine chemistry seen is with John. Word comes that Wyman is being investigated for dirty business practices and he requests the Judge's presence in court as his lawyer. In an act of solidarity, Phyllis tells her father she will marry Wyman, because she believes he is innocent. Fannie, still shy and soft-spoken, attempts to persuade Phyllis to withdraw her claim, but fails. As the Judge prepares to depart, John and Phyllis, both too stubborn to admit their feelings for one another, have a falling out. Fannie tries to prevent their argument, but is still not confident enough to fully stand up for what she believes is right.

Act Three, Scene One, one month later, takes place on the night the verdict in Wyman's trial is due. Fannie and Mrs. Raymond sit in the now remodeled living room and wait for news. Finally, it arrives: Wyman is innocent and Judge Nolan will arrive home soon by train. Phyllis is exuberant that Wyman is innocent, but a jilted T.D. informs her that, although Judge Nolan was able to make Wyman innocent in the eyes of the law, Wyman is not a moral or ethical man. Unable to believe this, Phyllis turns to John, who confirms that Wyman is dishonest. Phyllis and John proclaim their honest love for one another, just in time for Judge Nolan to arrive. Judge

Nolan becomes irate when he finds that his learned daughter wants to marry a poor butcher's son. When Fannie attempts to protect Phyllis from her husband's anger, the Judge begins to verbally assault Fannie again. Phyllis confronts the Judge about how poorly he has treated Fannie over the years.

Act Three, Scene Two takes place early the next morning. Fannie, who has found her voice, has been playing peacemaker between Judge Nolan and their daughter. Phyllis enters and explains that she doesn't mind being poor as long as she has love. Phyllis tells Judge Nolan that she wants to leave with John and her mother, but Fannie won't leave Judge Nolan because she knows he needs her; Fannie cannot leave him. Much to the judge's dismay, Fannie proclaims that Phyllis needs to go out and live life for both of them—both herself and Phyllis. Judge Nolan makes a claim that by letting their only child go, Fannie is (metaphorically) killing herself. Fannie is fine with that, as long as her daughter lives. Phyllis exits, off to her new life with John.

Connections

In Showalter's historical catalogue of female playwrights, *A Jury of Her Peers* (2009), over 500 pages are devoted to American female writers. In all of those pages, Crothers receives only a paragraph of attention. In it, Showalter credits Crothers for introducing feminist themes into her work, her success in commercial theatre, and the use of female characters that are "trying to fulfill their gifts in the face of discrimination and domestic pressure" (262). This statement refers to Fannie, along with numerous other Crothers characters. Fannie is an interesting female character, not only for her gradual growth in confidence on stage, but also for how Crothers begins to cultivate hints of the character's mind within the non-spoken text.

Everyday is a play about conflicting generations. The “children,” all of whom are in their early twenties, show character identifiers in the script using first names only. While the older generation is given formal names for character identifiers (Judge Nolan, Mrs. Raymond), Crothers denotes Fannie as Mrs. Nolan only once, in the opening stage directions. All of Fannie’s lines list her as “Fannie,” just as if she were one of the children. By identifying the character as Fannie and not Mrs. Nolan, Crothers suggests that she is a child-like woman.

In many ways, Fannie is a woman stuck in the mental state of the younger generation. Her mental instability is rooted within a societal normalization of unhealthy thought processes. The non-spoken text of *Everyday* continues to give insight into Fannie’s inner workings. As the play begins, Fannie is sitting with her husband, awaiting their daughter’s arrival. Fannie is described as “nervous,” and

Is a small woman about fifty, who has been pretty and lovable and charming in her youth — and might have stayed so with encouragement, but she has faded into a timid, fretful little person, intent upon effacing herself, as being the easiest way to combat the overpowering dominance of her husband and the world in general, which she has found too strong for her. She is a kitten who has grown old, but remained a kitten, having given up its purring and pretty ways. She wears rather a becoming soft blue dress which is neither in fashion nor out, just having her own air of fading away out of the trouble of fashion. She wears a good many rings and trinkets and fingers them restlessly. (1)

Crothers’ description of Fannie is the most in-depth of any character. This description shows Fannie’s relationship to the world, and draws strongly from the symptoms and signs associated with a Dependent Personality Disorder. As the name implies, Dependent Personality Disorder

(DPD) “is a pervasive and excessive need to be taken care of that leads to submissive and clinging behavior” (*DSM-V*).¹

Such a personality disorder does not just come into existence out of nowhere. Buzzwords are laced throughout the play that give a hint of her mental state. She is “timid,” and “fretful” in a world “too strong.” She fidgets easily, often a sign of anxiety. To best understand Fannie, her history needs to be taken into account; thankfully, Crothers’ description shows this by using a kitten as imagery. Kittens are known for being cute and sweet, but in need of a mother for survival. Fannie, who was “charming in her youth” like a kitten, has been nurtured into believing she still is a kitten. The patterns of DPD begin by early adulthood, i.e., when Fannie was still a “kitten.” Such a pattern in American society was seen during Crothers’ time. Showalter highlights such actions in “Hysteria, Feminism, and Gender.” “Reared to be weak, dependent, flirtatious, and unassertive, many American girls grew up to be child-women, unable to cope with the practical and emotional demands of adult life. They defended themselves against the hardships and obligations of adulthood ‘by regressing towards the childish hyper-femininity of the hysteric’” (302-303). In order to survive, Fannie has remained child-like, dependent.

The introduction continues to show subtle signs of Fannie’s DPD. Individuals with DPD have “difficulty making everyday decisions without an excessive amount of advice and reassurance from others” (*DSM-V*). Such decisions can include what clothes to wear or how one’s hair should look. Fannie’s dress is so mundane; did she really truly select it? As dialogue begins, clues point to Fannie’s inability to complete such tasks on her own. Even her first line, “I’m not—thinking” (1), shows Fannie’s incapability with everyday tasks.

¹ Quotations from the *DSM-V* are taken from an online version that is without pagination. For this reason, parenthetical citations to the *DSM-V* do not contain a page number.

In order for individuals to be diagnosed with DPD, they must exhibit five of the eight criteria listed in the *DSM-V*. Fannie fits the first two, “difficulty making everyday decisions” and “needs others to assume responsibility” (*DSM-V*) for areas of her life, as seen in Crothers’ character description. The third criterion, “difficulty expressing disagreement with others because of fear of loss of support or approval” (*DSM-V*), is seen in how Judge Nolan and Fannie interact.

Judge Nolan constantly insults Fannie, making note of how she isn’t smart, pretty, or clever enough for his standards. Fannie does not challenge his comments. Phyllis, now old enough to see the relationship, becomes fed up in the second act and inquires why they hate each other. Judge Nolan’s response is to blame Fannie for being too “fussy” (47), while Fannie replies that it’s her fault. “Your father's so much smarter than I am, I get on his nerves. I know I'm petty” (47). Fannie has become numb to Judge Nolan’s treatment because she knows that he is her only way of living securely for the rest of her life.

Showalter’s discussion in “Hysteria, Feminism, and Gender” allows us to dig into Fannie’s mentality. Showalter quotes feminist historian Carroll Smith-Rosenberg who “argued that the American hysteric was typically the idle middle-class woman, both ‘product and indictment of her culture’” (302). Fannie has been raised in a hysteric-centric culture that makes her a product of her time. She was raised to be what society trained her to be, which makes a statement about what early twentieth century American culture valued. Fannie now has to give silent approval to Judge Nolan’s treatment in order to survive.

After her first entrance, Phyllis is eager to inquire about the out-of-date style of the living room. When she asks her mother if she likes the room, Fannie replies, “It was very expensive” (8), a ten-year-old price tag about which Judge Nolan is very vocal. When Phyllis convinces

Judge Nolan about a remodel, Fannie embodies another sign of DPD: “difficulty initiating projects...because of a lack of self-confidence in judgment” (*DSM-V*). When Phyllis begins to move furniture so that Fannie can sit and look out the window, Fannie admits she doesn’t want to be seen—low self-esteem also affects one’s need for dependency. Fannie isn’t in favor of changing the room because she lacks the confidence to make decisions. Phyllis attempts to boost her mother’s self-worth by saying that she looks pretty in the new light but Judge Nolan tears her down by saying, “She was [pretty] when I married her,” (11) but not now.

Set design was a key element for Rachel Crothers when she was writing her plays. In 1928, she was one of a small number of guest lecturers at The University of Pennsylvania to discuss the art of playwriting. Within her lecture “The Construction of a Play,” Crothers touches on the important aspects that go into making a play, one of which is the set. “The choice of setting—how much change of scene will help the story, or how much more effective for the characters to remain in one room throughout the play—all enters into construction. That’s why playwriting includes all the other arts” (125). This statement on her appreciation of the set points to the fact that *Everyday*’s living room’s makeover is not just a coincidence. Crothers allows the room to be made new, just like she lets Fannie’s character grow stronger by finding her voice. Yet, at the end of the day, the play doesn’t move out of the living room. The space is still the same space; it is still locked into the parameters of the house. While Fannie is able to stand up for what she and Phyllis believe in, Fannie is unable to leave. She and her DPD remain locked into the house with her dependent, Judge Nolan.

The final piece of evidence proving that Fannie suffers from PDP is that she cannot be alone. Those with PDP will seek out “another relationship as a source of care and support when a close relationship ends” (*DSM-V*). At the end of Act Two, Judge Nolan leaves to represent

Wyman in court. Fannie does not allow herself to be alone. Act Three begins with Fannie passing time by the fireplace with Mrs. Raymond. Even though Fannie knows that Judge Nolan will return, she must have Mrs. Raymond's support. In fact, Crothers never stages Fannie alone throughout the course of the production.

One important aspect of gynocriticism that Showalter identifies in "Towards a Feminist Poetics" is historical context. "Gynocritics must also take into account the different velocities and curves of political, social, and personal histories in determining the woman's literary choices and careers" (132). Not only is understanding the playwright's point of view important, but it is also key to explore how such influences (these "curves" of political, social and personal histories) affect the characters within the written work. Rachel Crothers' history can give context to the character of Fannie Nolan.

Rachel Crothers is credited in *American Feminist Playwrights: A Critical History* (1996), "From Boston to Harlem: The Varied Voices," by Sally Burke, for being one of a small number of feminist playwrights who "raised their voices against the oppression meted out by a patriarchal society that discriminated along lines of race, class, and gender" (Burke)². Crothers ignored her family's concerns about the life of an actor, went out on her own, and became a successful theatre artist. Taking such action at the end of the nineteenth century could cause scandal, yet Crothers forged her own path. Discrimination against women was strong in the theatre, and female playwrights "experienced difficulty getting their plays produced in the commercial theater" (Burke). Crothers, much like Mrs. Raymond, had to raise her own voice for she did not have, or perhaps did not want to have: a man's voice speaking for her. Crothers

² Quotations from the *American Feminist Playwrights: A Critical History* are taken from an online version that is without pagination. For this reason, parenthetical citations to the *American Feminist Playwrights: A Critical History* do not contain a page number.

overcame the patriarchal prejudice that women could not write/direct/cast shows, and became a success.

Like Crothers, Fannie faced both overt and institutionalized oppression; unlike Crothers, she was unable to overcome it. Society as a whole raised Fannie to be a codependent, self-doubting woman whose best chance at a secure life was to live with a man that embodies both types of oppression. What does not help Fannie's condition, and likely helped to cause the DPD in the first place, is Judge Nolan's distasteful approach to his wife.

Throughout the play, Judge Nolan is belittling and insults his wife. When speaking to Phyllis in Act One, Judge Nolan says, "I'm glad you've got ideas, child. Your mother never had one in her life" (10). In Act Two, when Phyllis confronts her parents about their relationship, Judge Nolan blames Fannie for any negativity in the marriage. "You've made her think all kinds of things. It's your confounded littleness, Fan...nag, nag, nag" (47-48). It is not unheard of for verbal abuse to wear down the victim over years. This causes Fannie to be trapped in a cycle of verbal violence. With her DPD, she cannot leave those that she depends on, yet her husband makes her mentally ill.

The only other character of Fannie and Judge Nolan's generation, Mrs. Raymond, does not see Nolan's oppression as an issue. Never in the story does she stand up for Fannie. This begs the question, was Judge Nolan doing something culturally acceptable for the time period, or was Mrs. Raymond choosing to ignore it? If we look to Smith-Rosenberg's notions about early hysteria's historical impact, it appears that the earlier conclusion is the correct one. Male physicians of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century might have sounded harsh and insensitive in their medical opinions on women "but they were not necessarily more misogynistic

than other men of their time” (Showalter 303). In other words, the oppression that many women lived under was larger than a single individual or even a single profession: it was institutional.

Judge Nolan's attitude towards his wife begins with institutionalized oppression. Crothers wrote *Everyday* to take place in the time period when it was written, 1921. This is most obviously highlighted in the character of John, a World War I veteran. Knowing this gives historical context to Judge Nolan whose generation was raised during the late nineteenth century, a period when hysteria was being defined and treated by Sigmund Freud and others. Freud and Josef Breuer's 1895 book *Studies on Hysteria* is a famous exploration of the idea of female hysteria.

How to treat and react to “wild” women was ingrained in the male minds of Judge Nolan's generation. Judge Nolan, like many of the male physicians spoken of by Smith-Rosenberg, sees nothing wrong with pointing out flaws in his wife and paying her backhanded compliments. While Judge Nolan's treatment of Fannie would be unacceptable in the twenty-first century, during the early twentieth century it was seen as appropriate, a male strategy for reinforcing the institutionalized female oppression.

It is important to note that Crothers is a member of Judge Nolan and Fannie's generation. Born in 1878, Crothers was in her early forties when she wrote *Everyday*. She was within the ten-year age gap between Judge Nolan and Fannie. Crothers grew up during the heyday of hysteria. Because the playwright shared in the generation that she paints as toxic, we can get a sense of what she thought about real life problems for people of her generation.

When Judge Nolan takes the negative ideas of institutionalized oppression and vocalizes them, he makes the oppression overt. It is now “open and observable, not secret or hidden” (PPC). When Phyllis tells her father that she is going to marry for love, Judge Nolan turns his

frustrations to Fannie. He tells her, “You’ve let this happen” (82). Social institutions have taught Nolan where the blame should be placed. The PPC defines institutions as “fairly stable social arrangements and practices through which collective actions are taken” (PCC). In this case, the social arrangement is that mothers teach their daughters how to be successful future wives. By marrying for love, Phyllis will not be continuing this cycle and that is unacceptable to her father. Judge Nolan makes Fannie “the target of overt oppression” (PCC) and “is very aware of the intention” (PCC).

When Phyllis and Fannie attempt to explain to Judge Nolan that this is not Fannie’s fault, Judge Nolan resorts to overt insults once more. “Have you let your mother’s pin point of a head—” (83). This insult remains unfinished, as Phyllis silences him, “Don’t say another word about my mother. You’ve made her afraid to live. You were doing that to John, but he’s standing up now. You can’t hurt him” (82-83). Phyllis is of the new generation. Unlike Fannie, Phyllis was able to go out and learn about the world around her; this action forced her to mature and live her life. While Nolan and Fannie grew up during a period when hysteria was prevalent and under examination, Phyllis and John grew up seeing women protesting the right to vote.

As I stated in the biographical section, Crothers never married, though many of her works focus on the issues that married life can bring. It is not clear from the research that I have done why she did not marry. (Did she never find the right person or was her love forbidden by society?) The answers to these questions are mysteries, but we can see a number of marital options being played out in *Everyday*. Phyllis marries for love; Fannie is weakened by the oppression of her loveless marriage, while Mrs. Raymond has gained some voice since the passing of her husband. Crothers presents these marital situations but not her own personal one.

Throughout the second act we see Fannie attempt to overcome her PDP, only to fail. The

living room is in the middle of being remodeled just like, symbolically, she is. In Act Two, Judge Nolan and Mrs. Raymond are discussing who should marry Phyllis, the rich Mr. Wyman or T.D. Raymond. Fannie rarely speaks, but when she does, her thoughts are on Phyllis' well-being. This is not the case for Judge Nolan and Mrs. Raymond. Tension builds between these two until, finally, Fannie declares, "Neither of you is thinking of Phyllis and her happiness and that's the only thing that matters" (51). This is a bold statement for Fannie. She is placing herself on the other side of her insecurity. For a few lines, Fannie has a confident argument against the two but Nolan's overt oppression puts her back in her "place." He tells her that she's "talking hot air" (51) and Fannie doesn't speak again for two pages.

Mrs. Raymond is the opposite of Fannie. While Fannie has difficulty speaking her mind, Mrs. Raymond has no filter. The biggest difference between these two women is the sense of security. Fannie has Judge Nolan to be dependent on, and Mrs. Raymond is a widow. Since Mr. Raymond is no longer a support in her life, Mrs. Raymond bends institutional oppression to make it work for her. If she can get her son to marry into a wealthy family (the Nolans) then Mrs. Raymond and her daughter will be supported again. When Judge Nolan greets Mrs. Raymond with overt statements of oppression, she attempts to challenge them. It isn't until Judge Nolan reveals that the company T.D. works for was recently bought by Wyman, and that Wyman's success in court is needed to keep T.D. and his company afloat, that Mrs. Raymond bends to the oppressions around her. She agrees to stop pushing T.D. toward Phyllis, and makes an effort to make Wyman look better in T.D.'s eyes. Though Mrs. Raymond shows no sign of mental illness, she and Fannie are eventually denied power due to institutional oppression. Perhaps Crothers paired Mrs. Raymond with Fannie to show two different sides of one coin. The women face similar oppressions, but react in distinctly opposing ways.

A fallout between father and daughter has just occurred before the start of the final scene. Phyllis has confessed her love for John and Judge Nolan will not stand for it. Fannie, playing peace-maker, has just come down from Phyllis' room. The living room is now fully renovated but still holds the same function as a living room. Fannie has gained confidence but its source is not entirely clear. My theory is that over the course of the play (which has spanned two and a half months) Fannie has picked up confidence and knowledge from Phyllis. Throughout the play Phyllis has stood up for her mother, and pushed her to be stronger; now her efforts are about to pay off. Fannie has no success reasoning with Judge Nolan, yet she doesn't back down. Such an event wouldn't even have been initiated in the first act.

Phyllis enters, and it is clear she will not change her mind. Phyllis is the new generation, one challenging the current institutions of society. Her father sent her off to travel and learn how to become good wife material but she returned too educated to allow herself to marry for money. Phyllis is leaving and attempts—but fails—to convince Fannie to come with her: “I've been trying to persuade Mother to come with me — but she won't. She's going to stay here — because she thinks you need her more than I do — and I have John” (86). Fannie is still dependent on Judge Nolan; she cannot imagine a life without him and vice versa. While the severity of her DP has lessened, it is still a part of her life just as institutionalized oppression is still a part of the world in which she lives.

What Fannie has challenged is the overt oppression in her life. She might not be able to fix the systematic mistreatment of women like herself in society, but she can stand against the overt forms that percolate through her life. Phyllis is about to leave when:

JUDGE NOLAN: Stop. What are you going to? Starvation and nothingness.

FANNIE: (With a sudden desperate outburst) Well, what of it? She's going out after what

we can't give her. I'd rather she'd walk out that door alone — than to stay here and have her heart and soul starved. I'd rather she died trying to get what she wants than to stay here and know she can never get it.

JUDGE NOLAN: So you have been at the bottom of it.

FANNIE: No, I haven't. But now that she's opened the door I'm not going to hold her back. I'm going to push her out.

JUDGE NOLAN: Can you stick a knife in yourself like that?

FANNIE: Yes — yes — I can — for her. (87)

Fannie is aware that, though her generation cannot change, there is hope for the new generation. She knows that Phyllis would continue the cycle of oppression if she stayed with her family. Fannie would rather “push her [daughter] out” into the world with the poor man that loves her then stay dependent on a rich man that tolerates her.

Judge Nolan, not used to Fannie standing up for her beliefs, attempts to manipulate her. He equates Phyllis leaving to Fannie sticking a knife into herself. Such violent imagery has not been expressed up to this point. Judge Nolan is making it clear that the departure of their only child will be the metaphorical death of Fannie as well. As long as she knows her daughter will break the cycle of oppression, Fannie is willing to face the isolation she already had endured for five years while Phyllis was away traveling. Judge Nolan remains defiant of his wife's claim while she encourages Phyllis to leave. Only after Fannie promises, “It's what I want. Go on. Go on” (83) does Phyllis exit the living room, leaving her parents' home for her true love.

Crothers' biographer Sally Burke points out a pattern that appears in many of Crothers' plays: “Crothers portrays many women who are unable or unwilling to pay that price, choosing

instead to submit themselves to the ‘rules’ of a patriarchal society” (Burke). While this statement is true, it also highlights the unique nature of *Everyday*. Fannie and Mrs. Raymond represent the women described by Burke. They submit themselves to the oppression that is around them. Then there is Phyllis. Phyllis breaks the mold of the average Crothers character. She defies the rules of marrying within her family’s guidelines and in doing so defies that tradition of the patriarchy. Yes, Phyllis is still marrying, but on her own terms.

Fannie begins *Everyday* as a downtrodden, self-criticizing woman with severe DPD. Crothers is able to highlight Fannie's mental state by contrasting her against Mrs. Raymond. With the influence of her recently returned daughter, Fannie begins to grow. While Fannie cannot fully break away from her DPD, she is a changed woman by the end of the play. She is now aware of the patriarchal oppression that has strangled her for so long. The only way that she can think to correct this problem is not to let it continue. By taking the “knife” for Phyllis, Fannie lets her daughter live the life that she never could have. Fannie’s PDP is essential to seeing the oppression within the play. If Fannie were just a copy of Mrs. Raymond, then the severe effects of patriarchal oppression would be lost to the audience. Crothers’ depiction of what the DSM-V identifies as “Dependent Personality Disorder” allows for an expression of patriarchal dominance that, according to her biographers, she herself experienced and overcame.

CHAPTER THREE: On *The Verge* of Insanity

Susan Glaspell should be considered a theatrical phoenix. She flourished as a playwright in the 1910s and 1920s but, after her return to writing novels in the 1930s, the theatrical community largely forgot about her, especially in comparison to her Provincetown Players colleague, Eugene O'Neill. Then, in the early 1980s, one of her works was discovered by the women's movement (Ozieblo 14) and she rose from the ashes of forgotten dramatists.

Glaspell was born in 1876, in Davenport, Iowa, and graduated from Drake University. Glaspell believed in social freedoms, and began challenging Victorian norms in her youth. She showed a knack for literature and started writing when she was young, including regular publications in the *Weekly Outlook*, a local paper. After graduation from Drake, Glaspell took a reporting job in Des Moines, Iowa, where she found inspiration for many of her works, including *Trifles*. She married playwright George Cram "Jig" Cook in 1913, and they moved to Greenwich Village. Their first play together was turned down by local companies for being too controversial; *Suppressed Desires* (1915) is a parody of the Freudian craze. When it was clear other theatre companies in New York were not interested in the play, the two decided to direct it themselves at their summer home in Provincetown, Massachusetts, on Cape Cod. In doing so, the two co-founded a theatre company that would become extremely influential, The Provincetown Players. During Glaspell and Cook's tenure with the Provincetown Players, Glaspell wrote many of her most well-known plays, including the one-act *Trifles* (1916) and *The Verge* (1921).

While not connected for life to a single movement—her interests included feminism, socialism, and idealism—Glaspell always looked for what upheld her beliefs in free speech and individual freedom of choice. In an interview in 1921, Glaspell said, "I am interested in all progressive movements, whether feminist, social, or economic...but I can take no very active

part other than through my writing” (Rohe 1921: 4). This is important because Glaspell should not be singularly categorized as a feminist playwright. Feminist beliefs are certainly expressed in her writing but there is also so much more. As Ozieblo states, Glaspell’s “feminism, socialism, and realism were always controlled by the tensions that arose from the inevitable clash of her convictions” (13). She was living and writing in a time of great social and theatrical change.

By 1921, The Provincetown Players had become a well-known entity. *The Verge* was Glaspell’s final play for the company. By 1922, she and her husband were tired of the quarrelling of the group, and moved to Greece. There they stayed until Cook’s death in 1924. When Glaspell returned to the States, she had no theater company for which to work. She floated between writing novels and plays. In 1930, she wrote *Alison’s House*, which won the 1931 Pulitzer Prize for Drama. During the 1930s, Glaspell worked for the Federal Theater Project, an important but short-lived program that ended in 1939 when controversy over its supposed leftist leanings led Congress to withdraw funding. Glaspell finished her remaining years in the summer home in Provincetown that she had shared with Cook, passing away of viral pneumonia in 1948.

The Verge by Susan Glaspell: Summary

The Verge follows Claire, a successful botanist whose objections to social norms oppressive to women have begun to take a toll on her mental health. The play is a drama in three acts and is considered an experiment in American expressionism. The character that I will be focusing on is the lead, Claire. Act One takes place in Claire's greenhouse, during and directly after a cold, difficult snowstorm. The greenhouse is home to a variety of new and experimental plants that Claire has been breeding for years. Her two most prized plants include The Edge Vine and The Breath of Life. Both of these plants are her pride and joy in scientific achievement.

During the snowstorm, all of the house's heat was diverted to the greenhouse which causes Claire's husband Harry and their two houseguests, Tom and Dick, to become anxious and angry. Much to Claire's dismay (for fear the plants may be affected by their presence) the three men have breakfast in the greenhouse in order to stay warm. Each time Claire is out of the room, conversation between the men fall back to Claire's mental well-being. Words like "disturbed" (233) "queer" (236) and "hysterical" (241) are used to describe Claire's current moods. Claire's daughter from a previous marriage, Elizabeth, age seventeen, arrives for a visit. It is clear that the two do not have a strong relationship as Claire has always pushed Elizabeth away to live with her aunt Adelaide or to travel abroad with teachers. Elizabeth tries her best to cultivate a relationship with her mother, but Claire cannot cope and becomes more distant and disassociated. Act One ends with Claire having a mental break, uprooting The Edge Vine, and attempting to beat Elizabeth with it while the men hold her back.

Act Two takes place inside the house's tall, womb-like tower, which has become Claire's refuge. Harry attempts to rally Claire to come downstairs by bringing Claire's sister Adelaide in for a visit. This is unsuccessful. Harry invites a neurologist to come to dinner to meet Claire, hoping he might help to fix her condition. Claire recruits her long-time friend and Platonic soul-mate Tom in an attempt to save her from Harry's plan. This too is unsuccessful. Act Two concludes with Claire admitting to an affair with Dick, after Tom declines to cancel his upcoming trip. This admission of adultery puts Harry into a rage and violence is imminent.

Act Three returns the audience to the greenhouse the next morning. Harry, still livid at Dick for the affair with his wife, has his rage subdued by Claire who is acting much more well-mannered than the night before. Tom enters, about to leave on his trip—from which he swears he will not return—and Claire again begins to mentally deteriorate. Her fractured reasoning leads

her to believe that the only way to free herself from the patriarchal grip of Tom, Dick, and Harry is to kill her soul-mate, Tom. Claire strangles the life out of Tom while her crowning botanical achievement, The Breath of Life plant, is only feet away. When Harry and Dick discover Tom's lifeless body, Harry declares that he does not know how to save his wife now. By this point Claire is entirely despondent. She begins to sing a patriotic hymn that she has despised throughout the length of the play and the curtain falls.

Connections

According to my research, the only other scholar to look at Glaspell in relation to mental illness is W. David Sievers. Sievers wrote *Freud on Broadway* in 1955. He gives a brief mention of Glaspell's use of Freudian theory. *The Verge* “is one of the truly remarkable pieces of psychological literature of our time. The author draws a terrifyingly real portrait of manic depressive psychosis” (70). Sievers’ medical knowledge, like much in his book, is now dated. Many of the medical terms are no longer used, rendering the author’s diagnoses of characters incorrect by contemporary standards; this is not surprising given that sixty years have passed since the work’s publication. Even if Sievers is correct and Glaspell was influenced by Freudian theory, much has changed in the almost one hundred years since *The Verge* was written and a more contemporary medical approach must be identified.

In the vocabulary used by today’s mental health experts, Claire’s symptoms align with Dissociative Identity Disorder. This disorder occurs when there are two or more distinct personality states within an individual. The *DSM-V* states:

Dissociative disorders are characterized by a disruption of and/or discontinuity in the normal integration of consciousness, memory, identity, emotion, perception, body

representation, motor control, and behavior. Dissociative symptoms can potentially disrupt every area of psychological functioning. (*DSM-V*)

Dissociative Identity Disorder (DID) is often associated with Multiple Personality Disorder. A diagnosis of DID follows when five criteria are met: Claire fits all five.

The first criterion for a diagnosis of DID is a “Disruption of identity characterized by two or more distinct personality states...The disruption in identity involves marked discontinuity in sense of self and sense of agency, accompanied by related alterations in affect, behavior, consciousness, memory, perception, cognition, and/or sensory-motor functioning” (*DSM-V*). Claire shows this distress and impairment early in Act One. Claire’s other state of identity evolves from her plants:

Plants do it. The big leap—it’s called. Explode their species—because something in them knows they’ve gone as far as they can go. Something in them knows they’ve shut in to just that. So—go mad—that life may not be prisoned. Break themselves up—into crazy things—into lesser things, and from the pieces—may come one sliver of life with vitality to find the future. How beautiful. How brave. (240)

Notice within this quotation the break in thought processes produced by the pauses and sudden subject changes. Stammering is something that Showalter mentions in “Hysteria, Feminism, and Gender.” During a section of the chapter covering male hysteria and war, she observes, “Speech disorders, especially stammering, were the most common neurasthenic symptom among officers” (326) suffering from shell shock. In the nineteenth century those considered effeminate, or not masculine enough, could be susceptible to female-centric illness. Claire has moments of stammering and stuttering, just like the men with shell shock who were too “weak” for war. By writing the text in this stumbling fashion, Glaspell has given more of a “sense of agency” (*DSM-*

V) to Claire's plants than to Claire; The Edge Vine and The Breath of Life are Claire's way of creating agency for herself.

The second criterion of dissociation is "recurrent gaps in the recall of everyday events, important personal information, and/or traumatic events that are inconsistent with ordinary forgetting" (*DSM-V*). A prime example of a gap in recall is forgetting that one's daughter is visiting after a lengthy absence. This happens when Claire forgets that Elizabeth is visiting. Harry is the one that first brings up Elizabeth's arrival to which Claire responds, "I knew something was disturbing me. Elizabeth" (240). Claire has no motherly feelings towards her child. In fact, Claire looks at the arrival as a disturbance, the source of which she could not place. When Elizabeth arrives, Claire does not want to see her or spend time with her. When Elizabeth tries to hug Claire, Claire is more concerned about the container that she is carrying, and makes Elizabeth back away in order to not interfere with her botanical work. This is important to note because it reinforces Claire's care for her plants—her plants have become an externalized expression of her sense of self.

The third criterion details symptoms that "cause clinically significant distress or impairment in social, occupational, or other important areas of functioning" (*DSM-V*). While Claire embodies numerous examples of social impairment throughout the play, the most telling one occurs when she meets with Dr. Emmons in Act Two. Claire greets the doctor by saying, "It must be very interesting—helping people go insane" (258). This statement causes an outcry from Adelaide who tells Claire that she is acting preposterous.

By Act Two, Claire is dealing with the repercussions of her outburst from Act One. She still doesn't see anything wrong with beating Elizabeth with one of her plants. Although Claire attempts to reason with Tom, Dick, and Harry, she is unsuccessful due to her social impairment.

Instead of using reason and logic to persuade the men in her life that she is feeling well, she resorts to mocking the doctor and his methods.

The fourth diagnostic criterion focuses on a disturbance or disturbances that are “not a normal part of a broadly accepted cultural or religious practice” (*DSM-V*). By far, the largest disturbance that Claire produces is her murder of Tom:

No! You are too much! You are not enough. (*Still wanting not to hurt [Claire, Tom] is slow in getting free. He keeps stepping backwards trying, in growing earnest, to loosen her hands. But he does not loosen them before she has found the place in his throat that cuts off breath. As he gasps.*) Breath of life—my gift—to you! (265)

In no way is committing murder a “normal part of a broadly accepted cultural” practice of the 1920s. Claire has finally had a full mental break and she no longer cares, or wants to care, about what society expects of her. Claire’s identity disorder has taken full control of her. Tom’s death occurs because he is the only one that offers to see Claire’s genius, yet he has the mistake of not seeing her dangerous faults at have been growing throughout the play. This mistake costs him his life.

The fifth and final criterion of DID is, “The symptoms are not attributable to the physiological effects of a substance (e.g., blackouts or chaotic behavior during alcohol intoxication) or another medical condition” (*DSM-V*). There is no mention within the text of any past issues with Claire’s health. When Tom, Dick, and Harry speak about her state of mind in Act One, there is only mention of her current state. In Act Two, Adelaide mentions that Claire has never been too maternal but it is a topic regarding her character and not a reference to postpartum depressive tendencies. There is no proof of any other medical condition that could be responsible for Claire’s actions; DID, therefore, seems the most likely mental disorder.

Claire's mental state is highlighted further from the perspective of gynocriticism. The settings of the scenes in *The Verge* are ripe for consideration. Glaspell sets each scene in a location that is heightened by the use of expressionistic stylization. Acts One and Three take place within the greenhouse. A greenhouse is known for its nurturing qualities; indeed, greenhouses are often identified as "nurseries." *The Verge* isn't home to an average greenhouse; that choice would contrast with Claire's extraordinary demeanor. "This is not a greenhouse where plants are being displayed, nor the usual workshop for the growing of them, but a place for experiment with plants, a laboratory" (230). Claire is like a mother to her plants in the nursery that is her greenhouse. Claire's greenhouse is not a place for pretty plants but rather for exciting experimental botanical work. Presenting a greenhouse as a place where a woman can work and create something new breaks from feminine ideals of the time period.

After Claire's mental break at the end of Act One, she leaves the safety of the nursery for the tower. The stage directions describe it as "A tower which is thought to be round but does not complete the circle. The back is curved, then jagged lines break from that, and the front is a queer bulging window—in the curve that leans. The whole structure is as if given a twist by some terrific force—like something wrung" (247). Many scholars have used the word "womb" to describe Act Two's location. That makes sense due to its secluded nature, "bulging" window, and curves, yet, the unspoken text also depicts a coldness and ferocity. What has been wrung? Why are there jagged lines? If this is truly a womb, what force has twisted it all up?

I hypothesize that the tower is a depiction of Claire's womb. It has housed life but something about it is peculiar, unwelcoming. Claire has turned away from her daughter which contradicts role expectations for mothers at this time. By the start of Act Two, Claire has shown signs of a mental disorder. It is as if Glaspell is echoing the unease of Claire's mental state with

the embodiment of the twisted, jarred tower. In the dialogue, Harry explains how it is Claire's tower. "Claire calls this the thwarted tower. She bought the house because of it" (248).

Something about this tower spoke to Claire so much that she wanted the rest of the house just to have it. With Glaspell's use of a tower, ideas of Freudian theory in regards to the phallus can be implied. In regards to of Freudian theory the mixing of the phallic tower and the mothering womb shows mixed gendered norms.

This womb imagery doesn't end with the text, it also connects to a dark side of Glaspell's life. After their wedding, Glaspell and Cook attempt to have children of their own. In the book *Susan Glaspell: A Critical Biography*, biographer Barbara Ozieblo explains, "Cook helped Glaspell recover emotionally from the still birth of their child, and in early 1915, she had a fibroid tumor removed; they both wanted to children, but sadly 'there were other disappointments'" (54). While Claire was able to have children, but didn't want to, Glaspell wanted children, but could not. In this case, Claire is a foil for Glaspell.

The safety of Claire's tower does not last long. The act ends with nearly everyone on stage, invading Claire's space and causing her to act wildly. When Act Three begins, Claire has abandoned her tower and returned to her greenhouse. Glaspell returns the audience to this location to show the cyclical power that has taken hold of Claire. There is nowhere else in the house, or on the entire property, where she feels at home. When Claire appears for the first time in Act Three, she tells Harry and Anthony, "From the gutter I rise again, refreshed" (261) as if none of the difficulties of the day before have happened. All that matters to Claire is what is happening in her space in the moment.

A unique aspect of *The Verge* is Glaspell's choice to make it expressionistic. Biographer Ozieblo's biography, *Susan Glaspell and Sophie Treadwell* (2008), comments that *The Verge's*

“innovative stage design which relied on German Expressionism, a trend as yet barely known in the United States, perturbed the audience” (72). Glaspell was taking a leap in introducing a new style to her audience. Expressionism is known for distorting depictions of reality in order to show an inner vision: “The expressionist transforms nature rather than imitates it” (*Columbia Electronic Encyclopedia*). Glaspell transformed her story of a woman overwhelmed by the societal conventions, into a distorted reality, in which expressionism is used to visually highlight how Claire is on the verge of destruction.

Claire possesses a unique mind. She is a woman of great intelligence who also is intent on exploration. Female education has historically proven to dangerous in the patriarchy’s eyes. According to Showalter’s “Hysteria, Feminism and Gender,”

Edward Clarke in the United States and Henry Maudsley in England drew on new theories of the conservation of energy to argue that mental and physical energy were finite and competing. Women's energy, post-Darwinian scientists believed, was naturally intended for reproductive specialization. Thus women were heavily handicapped, even developmentally arrested, in intellectual competition with men. (297)

In this view, because Claire's energy was not being used for maternal pursuits, it could be displaced onto work in the sciences: a masculine endeavor. Harry and Dick show signs that they have grown tired of Claire’s work. In Act One, she directs all of the house’s heat into the greenhouse in order to protect her plants. When the men enter that space, they destabilize the temperature. Claire’s lack of concern for her husband and guests, angers Harry: “Claire, be decent...Tom and Dick are our guests. We can’t eat where it’s warm and leave them to eat where it’s cold (233). Harry doesn’t see the greenhouse as anything of importance. It is only her soul-mate Tom who believes that Claire and her findings are important.

Glaspell was likely used to a similar reaction. She was a woman born, and educated to a college level. She married late and was not able to have children, though she wanted them. In these ways, Glaspell mirrors Claire. Since Glaspell and Claire do not bend to the societal norms of motherhood, then the social expectation during the time was that something else must be wrong. Perhaps that is why female audience members reacted more positively to Glaspell's themes than male audience members did. "On the whole, women responded positively to this play, while male colleagues and reviewers were frequently baffled" (Ozieblo 71). *The Verge* was Glaspell's most daring play so far. She was demanding her audience to think more and aimed to provoke extreme reactions from them.

Glaspell pulls a trick out of Rachel Crothers' book by having another female character enter who acts as a foil to the lead. Glaspell uses Claire's sister, Adelaide, as a foil to Claire. She is spoken of in Act One due to the fact that she has taken care of Elisabeth during times when Claire did not want to deal with her. When Claire is secluded in the tower, Adelaide arrives in an attempt to bring her down into the house. Claire meets her with hostility,

CLAIRE: You were not asked up here now.

ADELAIDE: Harry asked me.

CLAIRE: This isn't Harry's tower. (248)

The tension between the two sisters is very clear. Adelaide is the classic nurturing, mothering type with many children of her own. Adelaide cannot understand why Claire would abandon her daughter, even calling her "monstrous" (248). The sisterly bickering continues and, in the end, a stalemate is reached. Adelaide cannot talk Claire into wanting her daughter and Claire cannot get Adelaide out of her life.

There is a historical context to Claire's mental health that must be examined as well. Glaspell takes into account the history of hysteria, and how its stigma can tarnish woman, and uses it against Claire. Soon after the play starts, Harry says, "I can't stand it to see her getting hysterical" (241). Harry is confident that something is not right with his wife. Words like "hysterical" echo in this passage and others throughout the play. During this time period, it was an easy word to stick on a woman in an attempt to discredit her. Showalter in "Hysteria, Feminism, and Gender" explains,

Any woman manifesting symptoms of hysteria aroused suspicions of a silent revolt against her domestic, class, and reproductive role. Thus nervous women received much more attention than nervous men, and were labeled as "hysterical" or "neurasthenic" in the contexts of a highly charged rhetoric about the dangers of higher education, women's suffrage, and female self-assertion in general. (306)

Intelligent women like Claire were a danger to the status quo and describing their actions as "hysterical" was a way of knocking them down. This is where we can see patriarchal oppression seep into the play.

Multiple male characters enact overt and institutionalized oppression against Claire. Dr. Emmons is professional and cool when the audience first sees him, in contrast to Claire's manic nature. When she grows angry, Dr. Emmons patronizes her by saying, "You are really all tired out, aren't you? Oh, we've got to get you rested" (258). With this line, Glaspell is referencing the out-of-date treatment of women with rest cures. Showalter explains, "First described in 1873, the rest cure involved seclusion, massage, immobility, and 'excessive feeding.' For six weeks the patient was isolated from her friends and family, confined to bed, and forbidden to sit up, sew, read, write, or do any intellectual work" (297).

Rest cures are a prime example of oppression. Women are put into hands of doctors only to be driven further down the rabbit hole by idleness and isolation. A classic example of the oppressive nature of rest cures can be found in Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *The Yellow Wallpaper* (1899). In this short story a young mother suffering from hysteria and nervousness is given a rest cure which, instead of curing her, takes her over the edge into a complete mental breakdown. In an interview fourteen years later in *The Forerunner*, Gilman explained that she, too, was suffering from nervous breakdowns and was prescribed a rest cure. "I went home and obeyed those directions for some three months, and came so near to the border line of utter mental ruin that I could see over" (Gilman³). It was only when Gilman tossed aside the rest and went back to daily tasks that she, with the help of a female friend, regained normality.

A rest cure did not help Gilman; it was a tool invented by the patriarchal institution in order to hold women back. It is both institutionalized oppression due to its relation to male-dominated health care institutions as well as overt oppression due to its targeting of an oppressed group. Glaspell only has Dr. Emmons on stage for a few pages. Still, in those few pages, she clearly shows how oppressive his medical knowledge would be for Claire.

The doctor is not the only character that expresses oppressive behavior. Throughout the play, Harry straddles the line between concerned husband and oppressive force. In Act One, when Claire is out of the room, Harry confides in Dick, "Then you think she's queer do you? Queer as you are, you think she's queer? I would like to have Dr. Emmons come out" (236). A footnote to the play specifies that "Glaspell uses the word 'queer' throughout her works to indicate a person who refuses to abide by societal mores. In her lexicon it is a positive word,

³ This quotation from *The Forerunner* is taken from an online version that is without pagination. For this reason, parenthetical citations to this quotation does not contain a page number.

synonymous with free-thinking" (236). The word "queer" is used in the sense of free-thinking many times throughout *The Verge* yet, in this specific example, it does not appear to be used in a positive way. While Harry is content to call Dick queer, he finds it alarming that Dick would consider Claire to be the same. It is so alarming that Harry now is going to call a doctor. Society has imprinted institutionalized oppression on these men by highlighting the importance of gender roles. Claire's freethinking queerness has gone too far for Harry's liking; now Harry will turn to overt oppression of Claire for her own (supposed) good.

The only man besides the servant Anthony who does not attempt to oppress Claire is Tom. Tom has known Claire longer than any other man in her life. In Act One, when Harry calls Claire a hysteric, Tom disagrees with him. In Act Two, Tom tells her, "You know I don't think you are a fool, or crazy" (254). Tom is the only one that sees Claire for her potential; in the end, this is downfall. He is so blinded by his love for Claire that he cannot see her unraveling within. Claire, who has been oppressed by so many men throughout her life, reaches a point where she no longer can see the difference between Tom and the oppressive men in her life. In Act Three, Tom admits, "I love you, and I will keep you... From harm. You are mine, and you will stay with me!" (265). But Claire is past the point of understanding. After she strangles him and Harry enters to see Tom's body, Claire admits despondently, "yes. I did it. MY—gift" (266). Harry asks Claire how he can save her now and she responds "saved—myself" (266). For too long Claire has been on the outskirts of acceptable society; now, with her mental break, she is past the edge. She has saved herself in the only way that she knows how—by ending the life of a man she feared would continue to hold her back.

Ozieblo explains it eloquently,

The play must be read as a reflection on the norms of society that imprison women or as a symbolic breakthrough into another dimension. Throughout *The Verge*, Claire struggles to overcome the limitations of a personal relationship, a family life, of science and nature and of all that holds human beings within bounds; she stands on the verge of society and therefore of sanity (73).

Glaspell is depicting the society in which she grew up, one that detains women in a specific role. If the woman attempts to break out of it, then society judges that there must be something wrong with her. In this case, Glaspell gives Claire a medical outcome to male oppression, Dissociative Identity Disorder. The more the men try to control her, she grows farther from her sanity. The plants give Claire a second personality or agency and pull her away from those who care about her. *The Edge Vine* places her on the edge, and *The Breath of Life* ends up taking a life. Claire is on the verge of many things and the audience experiences her fall as she does.

CHAPTER FOUR: *Machinal*'s Malady

Even with all of her published works, both for the stage and print media, Sophie Treadwell still is a mystery to academics in many regards. There is only a smattering of details about her life. What is known is Treadwell's determination and originality throughout her travels, writing, and creative practices. Over the course of her multi-decade career, Treadwell wrote thirty-nine plays which includes seven produced on Broadway. Treadwell also penned numerous journalistic articles and fictional novels. Treadwell was a writer who worked in many styles and mediums.

Sophie Treadwell was born the only child to a Mexican-American father and Scottish-American mother pioneering in California in the late nineteenth century. During childhood, she was particularly close with two opposing styles of women. On the one hand was her grandmother, a fiercely independent and strong-willed woman who emigrated from Scotland, and moved West by covered wagon; on the other hand, was her mother, a woman dependent on a neglectful husband who would eventually leave the family. These two kinds of women can be seen in juxtaposition in Treadwell's later work. Treadwell spent her youth living in California, eventually attending and graduating from University of California at Berkeley. Before she graduated in 1906, she had already started writing one-act plays that were produced on and off-campus.

In 1910, she married William O. McGeehan, a renowned sports columnist. Their honeymoon period was short lived. Biographer Jerry Dickey states, "Within six months of their marriage, McGeehan placed Treadwell in St. Helena Sanatorium in California to receive treatment and recuperation from what was diagnosed as 'nervous prostration'" (Dickey 100). Treadwell's stay in the sanatorium is later reflected in *Machinal*. Once Treadwell recovered, she

took a job writing for serials in San Francisco which gained her much notoriety. The couple moved to New York City in 1915. Biographer Jerry Dickey correlates the move with McGeehan's jealousy of his wife's success, and his desire for a more fruitful journalism position for himself. New York is where Treadwell started marching with suffragettes and became deeply engaged with women's rights organizations.

Treadwell continued to write plays during this time, finishing over two dozen by 1920. Treadwell's first Broadway production was *Gringo* (1922), which pulls from the connections to Mexican culture cultivated during her youth. Scholars agree Treadwell's most successful play is *Machinal* (1928), which was a result of her attending the trial of the Snyder-Gray murder case. The trial covered Ruth Snyder and her lover Henry Gray in the joint murder of Snyder's husband. In real-life, both Snyder and Gray were found guilty while in *Machinal*, Young Woman commits the act alone. The real murder case was a media frenzy; New York newspapers had over one hundred reporters assigned to it. In 1928, a year after the case, *Machinal* was first produced. Part of the initial success of *Machinal* is attributed to the notoriety of the murder case it is based on.

By 1950, Treadwell had moved to Spain to continue her writing, often rewriting and re-working her plays. Eventually she made her way back to the states and retired in Tucson, Arizona. Treadwell continued to write; her final play *Woman with Lilies*, was produced under a different title at the University of Arizona when she was 80. Treadwell passed away in Tucson in 1970. Treadwell did not live to see her theatrical works rescued from obscurity. It wasn't until the 1980s when feminist scholars rediscovered Treadwell's work that revivals began.

Machinal by Sophie Treadwell: Summary

Machinal, follows an average working class girl named Helen, though the text calls her “Young Woman” throughout, who cannot break free of the fast-paced world around her. The drama is rooted in German expressionism and divided into nine episodes. Episode One, “To Business” takes place in a rapid-fire office setting. Young Woman arrives late—once again—to work and is mocked by her colleagues. Her boss, Mr. Jones, invites her into his office, much to the chagrin of her co-workers. Episode Two, “At Home” takes place in the residence that Young Woman and her mother share. Throughout the scene Young Woman desperately attempts to have a serious conversation about marriage with her mother. Young Woman discloses that Mr. Jones has asked her to marry him but she does not want him because she wants to marry a man that she loves. During the scene her mother mocks her and calls her “crazy” numerous times. In the end, Young Woman decides to marry Jones.

Episode Three is “Honeymoon.” This is when Young Woman and Jones arrive at their hotel on their wedding night. Young Woman is nervous and afraid of her first time alone with her husband, while he is all too eager to get into bed. The scene ends with her in a nightgown crying, calling for her mother. Episode Four, “Maternal” (27), is one of particular importance for this chapter. It occurs after Young Woman has given birth to a daughter; she wants nothing to do with any motherly rituals. The male doctors ignore her physical and mental state while her husband visits and does not know how to respond to her wild reaction to seeing him. In Episode Five, “Prohibited,” a former co-worker introduces Young Woman to Richard Roe (whom the stage directions refer to only as Man). Man will become her lover. Once Young Woman and Man meet, they have an instant connection. Young Woman is docile as Man leads the conversation. Scene six, “Intimate,” takes place directly after the previous episode. Man and

Young Woman have just finished having their first sexual interaction with one another. This is the first and only time Treadwell denotes Young Woman's stage direction name as just Woman. In this scene (Young) Woman is confident, happy, and relaxed. Woman's emotional state is a stark contradiction to her state in "Honeymoon."

Episode seven is "Domestic," and revolves around Young Woman and Jones at home reading the newspaper. Young Woman wants nothing to do with her husband, and the domestic normalities that characterize the evening. Jones is constantly asking Young Woman what she's doing, up to, thinking, etc. Each time she replies "nothing." There is a growing tension. Episode Eight, "The Law," takes place in a courtroom. Jones has been murdered and a judge and jury are listening to testimony. By the end of the episode Young Woman admits to killing Jones after a letter is read condemning her actions by her now-former lover Man. Episode Nine, the final episode, is titled "A Machine." A priest comes to give Young Woman her last rites as the matron and jailer prepare her for the electric chair. Young Woman attempts to grasp at ideas of submission, life, and peace. As she cries out for help, the chair is turned on and the priest's voice is heard, asking the Lord to have mercy. The curtain falls.

Connections

As mentioned in Chapter One, I am not the first scholar to write about Treadwell in the context of mental health. Sievers also mentions Treadwell in *Freud on Broadway*. He gives a short mention of Treadwell's use of Freudian theory. "Among serious plays, a distinguished example of the fusion of expressionism and Freudianism in the American drama was Sophie Treadwell's *Machinal*...Treadwell explores the unconscious processes that might motivate a young girl such as figured in the famous Ruth Snyder murder case" (90). While complimentary

of Treadwell's writing ability, Sievers' medical knowledge, like much of his book, is now dated. Many of the medical terms are out of date and the diagnoses are incorrect since sixty years have passed since publication.

Starting in the first episode, Young Woman shows signs of a Social Anxiety Disorder. Symptoms of this disorder appear throughout the play. There are ten criteria in the *DSM-V* for diagnosing this disorder, and Young Woman exhibits all ten. The ten criteria include:

- A. Marked fear or anxiety about one or more social situations in which the individual is exposed to possible scrutiny by others.
- B. The individual fears that he or she will act in a way or show anxiety symptoms that will be negatively evaluated (i.e., will be humiliating or embarrassing; will lead to rejection or offend others).
- C. The social situations almost always provoke fear or anxiety.
- D. The social situations are avoided or endured with intense fear or anxiety.
- E. The fear or anxiety is out of proportion to the actual threat posed by the social situation and to the sociocultural context.
- F. The fear, anxiety, or avoidance is persistent, typically lasting for 6 months or more.
- G. The fear, anxiety, or avoidance causes clinically significant distress or impairment in social, occupational, or other important areas of functioning.
- H. The fear, anxiety, or avoidance is not attributable to the physiological effects of a substance (e.g., a drug of abuse, a medication) or another medical condition.
- I. The fear, anxiety, or avoidance is not better explained by the symptoms of another mental disorder, such as panic disorder...

- J. If another medical condition...is present, the fear, anxiety, or avoidance is clearly unrelated or is excessive. (*DSM-V*)

The first criterion, A, is seen when Young Woman arrives to work late, yet again. Her co-workers scorn her tardiness:

STENOGRAPER: You're late!

FILING CLERK: You're late!

ADDING CLERK: You're late! ...

STENOGRAPER: Excuse!

ADDING CLERK: Excuse!

FILING CLERK: Excuse! (5)

Young Woman's attempt at explanation does not stop her co-workers from mocking her, causing anxiety. Treadwell has written the scene to be an affront to the senses. The busy workers are in a constant state of speaking, rushing, and performing business tasks.

The second criterion, B, expands on the example stated in the paragraph above. In the above example, Young Woman explains that it was a social situation that provoked her tardiness. The subway made her late. All of the bodies pressed together made her think she would faint: "I had to get out in the air!" (6) she explains. Not only was Young Woman made anxious by being late and receiving the scorn of her co-workers, but also her subway commute caused her to be anxious.

Young Woman defends her actions on the subway by saying it was like she was "dying" (6). This feeling of life and death highlights Criterion E. Young Woman was in no physical danger on the subway. It was her state of mind that brought her to a life or death state.

Anxiety disorders cannot be turned off like a switch. They are constantly with the individual. In Episode Five, “Prohibited,” a former coworker of Young Woman introduces her to her soon-to-be lover, Man. When the women first enter the scene, Young Woman shows signs of anxiety. The other members of her party initiate conversation but she stays quiet. The former coworker has left the two men waiting for almost an hour. Young Woman asks, “was it that long?” (34). She is more interested in how long the men have been kept waiting, than meeting them. Shortly after Man tells Young Woman a joke, she responds,

YOUNG WOMAN: Why that's kind of funny!

MAN: Kinda!—What do you mean Kinda?

YOUNG WOMAN: I just mean there are not too many of them that are funny at all. (35)

Young woman has a persistent need to explain her actions and statements in order to feel accepted by the group. This aligns with Criterion C. This is just another social situation where she is feeling concerned about being accepted.

Often when an individual with a social anxiety disorder confronts a social situation, it can trigger responses that meet other diagnostic criteria. One example can be found during “Honeymoon.” Jones is eager to bed his new wife and Young Woman is full of fear and anxiety. Young Woman has wed Jones because social authorities (like her mother) have made it clear that she must find a man and settle down. Their wedding night exacerbates the disorder. The episode depicts Criterion D. First, Young Woman attempts to avoid intimacy by trying to get Jones and herself outside: “I just thought maybe—can’t we go out for a little while?” (24). Jones is not deterred, thus Young Woman attempts to endure her new husband’s advance, including his pulling her onto his knee (23). When Young Woman can no longer contain her anxiety, she breaks down crying and says she wants her mother, another symptom in the *DSM-V* described

under Criterion G. Her breakdown also reflects Smith-Rosenberg's insights into the child-woman seen earlier with Fannie in Crothers' *Everyday*. When thrust into a new situation, after being taught from infancy that sexuality is unmentionable, Young Woman is driven by a child-like instinct to want her mother: it is a tactic to cope with, and perhaps to avoid, her sudden change in status.

The social anxieties continue. For an individual to be diagnosed properly with an anxiety disorder, symptoms should last more than six months (Criterion F). *Machinal* takes place over the course of years. Between the first episode and when Young Woman gives birth in "Maternal," at least ten months have passed. During the course of those episodes, the Young Woman remains anxious in social situations, again affirming a diagnosis of Social Anxiety Disorder.

On a similar note, a Social Anxiety Disorder "is not attributable to the physiological effects of a substance (e.g., a drug of abuse, a medication)" or "better explained by the symptoms of another mental disorder" (*DSM-V*), which are Criteria H and I. Young Woman never is depicted on stage as taking any sort of substance. She also never discusses drugs or medications. Equally, there is no conversation or non-spoken text that points to another possible mental disorder that would explain all of the examples explored above.

The final criterion, J, mentioned in the *DSM-V* is "If another medical condition is present, the anxiety....is clearly unrelated or is excessive." During one episode of *Machinal*, Treadwell depicts Young Woman as having a second mental disorder. This is separate from the diagnosis identified above, because it only lasts one episode and is not persistent. Young Woman shows signs of Postpartum Depression in the "Maternal" episode. Postpartum Depression is a specific type of depressive disorder. Not only does Young Woman show the symptoms of this disorder—

“fatigue or loss of energy nearly every day,” “feelings of worthlessness,” and “markedly diminished interest or pleasure” (*DSM-V*), but also the male characters do not notice them. It is clear that the doctors, all of whom are male, and Jones are oblivious. Even as Young Woman shows all of the classic signs of Postpartum Depression, her social anxiety continues. When Jones enters the room, she makes a choking sound and acts “wildly” (28) according to the stage directions. This response does not align with her postpartum depression but, rather, with her social anxiety disorder.

I spoke of the structure of this play earlier, but it deserves a second look. Treadwell has made her female lead into an Everyman-type character. Young Woman is precisely that, a young woman. She is listed in the script as merely Young Woman, or Woman, and her birth name is only mentioned a couple times by other characters. It is as if the fast-paced world that drives Young Woman to the breaking point has taken everything, including her identity, from her.

Similar to Glaspell, Treadwell was using German expressionist techniques to show the audience female oppression. By the time *Machinal* premiered on Broadway, seven years had passed since *The Verge* was written in 1921. German expressionism was now something better understood by American audiences; that worked to Treadwell’s advantage but only when she wanted it to. Biographer Jerry Dickey explains in *Susan Glaspell and Sophie Treadwell*:

Pierre de Rohan, in the *New York American*, noted Treadwell’s abandonment of expressionist distortion in favor of a selective, simplified realism for scenes requiring a sense of intimacy, “She has created a complete picture of life’s bitterness and essential meanness, painted with the oft-repeated strokes of the realist, yet achieving in perspective the sweep and swing of expressionism.” (154)

Treadwell embodies the expressionistic style in more than just the unspoken text. The dialogue

is given at a fast pace, creating a rushing feeling that symbolizes what is hitting Young Woman constantly in her life. In Episode One when she has to escape the subway due to what may be considered a panic attack, her office mates create that rushing quality in their conversation:

STENOGRAPHER. Hew to the line!

TELEPHONE GIRL. He's hewing.

FILING CLERK. Hot dog.

TELEPHONE GIRL. Why did you flinch, kid?

YOUNG WOMAN. Flinch?

TELEPHONE GIRL. Did he pinch?

YOUNG WOMAN. No! (10)

The statements are short and appear one after another in rapid succession. There is also a repetitive pattern throughout the episode as in the character of the Filing Clerk who repeats the exclamation "hot dog" at random moments.

Treadwell differs from Crothers and Glaspell in that she provides no constantly recurring foil to the female protagonist. While the other two playwrights created characters that show the opposing side of the gender norms, Treadwell does not offer a continuous contrast to Young Woman. She is completely isolated and alone in this modern world beginning with Episode One. Her coworkers, like Telephone Girl, sees Young Woman as an outsider, and thus not on the same social level. In Episode Two, we see Young Woman's mother. She is harsh and cold, and constantly asking why Young Woman is acting strange:

MOTHER. You're crazy.

YOUNG WOMAN. Oh, Ma!

MOTHER. You're crazy!

YOUNG WOMAN. Mom--if you tell me that again I'll kill you! I'll kill you!

MOTHER. If that isn't crazy! (19)

Her mother is not even the opposite side of Young Woman's coin because the two are so different, of different age and mindset. Young Woman is trying to find the difference between love and security but her mother won't even listen to her. There is no one in this script that Treadwell created to act as a balance for the actions and decisions of the Young Woman. Although she is the play's central character, she is alone.

Treadwell, like Glaspell, uses terms like "crazy" in order to cut down the main character. The mother's use of "crazy" mirrors Harry calling Claire "hysterical" in *The Verge*. It is just another way for oppression to creep into the woman's subconscious, only this time it is a female character enforcing institutionalized oppression instead of a male one. In "Hysteria, Feminism, and Gender," Showalter writes,

As Lisa Tickner notes in her study of the British suffrage movement, "for half a century and more, feminism and hysteria were readily mapped on to each other as forms of irregularity, disorder, and excess, and the claim that the women's movement was made up of hysterical females was one of the principal means by which it was popularly discredited." (307)

Tickner is discussing the late nineteenth century in this quote, yet her comment still rings true to the 1920s. Young Woman's mother would have been familiar with the practice of discrediting women by applying to them pejorative terms like "crazy" or "hysterical." Such practices of institutionalized oppression apparently have rubbed off on her and now she attempts to apply them to her daughter.

Treadwell also takes advantage of the history of the rest cure like Glaspell did in *The Verge*. During the “Maternal” episode when Young Woman is in the hospital post-birth, the doctor and nurses are trying to get her to rest. Following Young Woman’s gagging response to Jones’ arrival, the nurse gets Jones to leave by saying “she needs rest” (28). Young Woman must have appeared as an ideal candidate for a rest cure. Showalter points out that treatment assumed that “the patient be ‘pliant and wealthy’: one who did not work, or at least did not need to work. Middle-class women were thus the best candidates for the rest cure, since men and the poor were unlikely to be willing to spend six to eight weeks in idleness” (299). With a rich husband and no job of her own, Young Woman was a good candidate for the rest cure in her male doctor’s eyes. Yet, just like with Gilman, author of *The Yellow Wallpaper*, the rest does no good. Young Woman had not been producing milk and the dietary changes made by the doctors have not helped her.

Treadwell uses both institutional and overt oppression in *Machinal*. When Young Woman meets Man in Episode Five, “Prohibited” (33), there is a quick attraction between the two yet Man is always in control of the situation. Young Woman is docile; she does not lead the conversation, he does. Man makes the first romantic move. The stage directions read: “*He puts his hand over hers*” (42). Man furthers the romance when he attempts to take Young Woman back to his apartment, “Come on, kid, let’s go!” (42). At no point is Man physically forcing Young Woman to stay and have a conversation. There is never a time when the stage directions show Man holding Young Woman back from leaving. Instead, Young Woman stays because of her blossoming attraction to Man. Young Woman allows Man to be the leader—the dominant member of the couple—because of the institutional oppression has been ingrained in Young

Woman from birth. If she were to act as the dominant member of the duo, she would be emasculating him which is not allowed in their society.

During the “Maternal” episode, in which Postpartum Depression is present, overt patriarchy can be seen. Throughout the scene, Young Woman is despondent, mute, and weak. Nurse attempts to rouse her spirits unsuccessfully. When Jones arrives with a bouquet of flowers, the nurse says “she's getting stronger” to which Jones replies, “of course she is!” (28). This same dialogue is mirrored later when Doctor and Young Doctor enter:

DOCTOR: How's the little lady today?

NURSE: She's better doctor.

DOCTOR: Of course she's better! (29)

Jones, Doctor, and Young Doctor are all complicit in this overt oppression. The men do not take note of the physical signs of Young Woman's lack of well-being. She gags, doesn't want to hold her baby, and cannot eat, yet the men are confident in believing that she is getting better. “Of course she's better” is the men's response because social norms demand a mother be healthy in order to take care of a child, and the men want to reinforce this idea.

Nurse, a woman, is the only one who seems truly to care for Young Woman's well-being but her medical advice is never taken seriously. When Doctor attempts to change Young Woman's diet—another example of overt oppression —Nurse attempts to explain how unfruitful a diet change would be. Doctor lashes out at Nurse. Doctor asserts his dominance over Nurse with an air of overt patriarchy. Nurse is female and thus lesser in the male Doctor's gaze. Societal norms hold that female nurses do not have the same intelligence as male doctors, and Doctor is quick to remind Nurse of that fact.

Another example of overt oppression occurs during the “Material” episode is much subtler. Throughout the scene, the sound of a riveting machine is heard. Young Woman is upset by the constant sound. Nurse explains, “The noise? Oh, that can’t be helped. Hospital’s got to have new wing. We’re the biggest Maternity Hospital in the world” (27). Treadwell is showing the audience that Young Woman is not the only woman with a new baby; other young mothers are all around her yet she cannot see any of them; Young Woman is isolated and alone. The noise of a riveting machine is an interesting choice for Treadwell. It is heavily laced with Freudian imagery. A riveting gun is phallic in nature, with the tool moving forward and back in order to pound the rivet into the structure. The thrusting motion of the riveting gun evokes the sexual act. While not as overt as the men’s language, the riveting gun becomes a Freudian symbol of overt oppression. It is loud, obtrusive, and causes Young Woman to feel targeted.

Young Woman exhibits all of the signs of a contemporary Social Anxiety Disorder. Such a disorder occurs in adult women twice as often as it does in men (*DSM-V*). Social Anxiety Disorders differ from normal experiences of fear and nervousness because of their persistence. Without treatment, it is unlikely that the disorder will disappear. Young Woman, finding comfort, happiness, and solace with Man during their affair could be a way of coping, or self medicating in an attempt to improve her mental health. When Man leaves Young Woman, she no longer has a coping mechanism. Jones is a physical embodiment of overt and systematic oppression. He constantly reminds Young Woman that she is lesser, while his career was handed to him through birth. After years of mental strain due to an untreated disorder, is it really shocking that Young Woman attempted to better her situation in the only way she knew how? I, for one, am not shocked that she murdered her husband, seeing in him a symbol of the overt and institutionalized oppression that she has suffered.

Treadwell herself was a victim of patriarchy. As stated earlier, Treadwell was diagnosed with “nervous prostration” (Dickey) and placed into The St. Helena Sanatorium in California by her husband McGeehan. From what is known, McGeehan and Treadwell’s relationship appears to have been based in consensus. While Treadwell appeared to respect McGeehan and his work, she rarely published as Sophie Treadwell McGeehan. In New York City, Treadwell joined a group of female journalists to form the Lucy Stone League. The goal was for female journalists to publish under their own name and not their husbands’. The League’s motto was “My name is the symbol for my identity and must not be lost” (Dickey 101). Even before the League was successful in lobbying for the right to use their maiden names, Treadwell used her maiden name in some instances. Treadwell was fighting the overt oppression that forced women to use their husband’s name around the time that she was covering the Snyder-Gray murder case. By the time Treadwell started writing *Machinal*, she and the Lucy Stone League had triumphed over this form of patricidal oppression.

While the 1920s began on a high note for feminism with the passing of the 19th Amendment which gave women the right to vote, the patriarchy was still in charge. Even with the right to vote women had more hurdles to clear. The new image of the modern woman was seen as an individual who was “loose” and wore short hair and short dresses. This persona was “disturbing to many suffragettes” (Ryan 25). This image was hard to shake. While there were victories in the early 1920s, including political achievements like The Shepherd-Tower bill for maternity and infancy care in 1921, and child labor reform in 1924, it was not long-lived. By 1925, gender equality laws were beginning to fail as a backlash against progressivism took hold. By 1929, with the Great Depression just beginning, this wave of feminism died out and overt patriarchy stepped in once again. The systematic patriarchy may have been rattled with the 19th

Amendment being passed and progressive laws being approved, but those developments did not tear down the system. Systematic patriarchy was rebuilt and reinforced with the Great Depression. “1930s public opinion polls found over 80 percent of Americans disapproved of wives working if their husbands had a job” (Ryan 36). With opinion polls critical of working woman as high as 80 percent, it is clear that feminism had retreated, and patriarchy was in power once again.

Young Woman is a character isolated with a Social Anxiety Disorder. She has tried to move through the fast-paced world around her only to come up short again and again. Every time she attempts to follow the societal norm, she feels fear and anxiety. Only when she allows herself an affair with Man is Young Woman freed of her anxiousness. In the end, the constant barrage of overt and institutionalized oppression drives her to kill her husband. When she is found guilty of the crime, she begs the priest at her execution to explain why she only felt right when she was doing something wrong. While Young Woman's actions are not something that should be praised, hers is a cautionary tale displaying the extremes to which oppression can drive a woman.

CHAPTER FIVE: Conclusion

At the start of this thesis I had one question: how do select works by Rachel Crothers, Susan Glaspell, and Sophie Treadwell use mental disorders as a representation of patriarchal oppression? I wanted to look at works by these three women because they each created a unique female character that appears to be suffering from some sort of mental disorder that is connected to the men and society around them. After exploring each of these playwrights and their plays in-depth, I now can answer this question.

In Chapter Two, I analyzed the character of Fannie in *Everyday*, by Crothers. Fannie's Dependent Personality Disorder was evident from the opening scene. While her daughter Phyllis was able to bolster her mother's self worth, in the end Fannie could not fully free herself from her husband, Judge Nolan. I argue that her DPD is due to the situation of patriarchal oppression of Fannie's upbringing which makes it impossible for her to leave her husband as an adult. Crothers was of the same generation as Fannie. The institutional and overt oppression that befalls Fannie is something that Crothers was able to witness herself firsthand.

In Chapter Three, I analyzed Susan Glaspell's *The Verge* and saw in Claire signs of a Dissociative Identity Disorder (DID). The play follows Claire as she falls deeper into psychosis. In the end, the only way Claire feels that she can break free from every Tom, Dick, and Harry around her is to disconnect herself from the only man with which she has a truly healthy relationship. Glaspell is biographically connected to her central character. Claire is a mother without maternal instincts, while Glaspell desperately attempted to have children, yet could not. Glaspell, like Claire, was trapped in a society that looked down on non-mothering women. Both Claire and Glaspell had to face the oppressive ideologies of a society that looked to women as mothers, first and foremost.

In Chapter Four, I explored the character of the Young Woman (Helen) in Sophie Treadwell's *Machinal*. Within this nine-episode story, Young Woman fails to thrive under the stress of the rapidly moving world that swirls around her. Throughout her life, Young Woman has attempted to follow the rules that society has put forth for her, yet the only time that she truly felt free was when she was breaking those rules. Young Woman's Social Anxiety Disorder (SAD) was something brought about by the oppressive society that strangled her. This society pushed her to the limit, eventually inciting her to murder her husband, Jones, in an attempt to be free. Treadwell, who was temporarily committed to a sanatorium by her husband, was not a stranger to institutionalized and overt oppression, especially as practiced by medical institutions. Treadwell might have been inspired by the Ruth Snyder murder case, yet aspects of her own past seep into Young Woman's story, especially during the days that follow the birth of her daughter.

Crothers, Glaspell, and Treadwell were able to take a step back, and to examine the "new woman" that was popping up in society. These new women were independent, intelligent, and eager to enter the work force, yet the oppression that was harbored within them as individuals and societal institutions made that difficult. Crothers, Glaspell, and Treadwell were all new women in this sense; By using theatre, they were able to mirror aspects of their own lives within their plays. Even more impressive, they created central characters whose behavior corresponds to contemporary descriptions of mental disorders. While the *DSM-V* was not in existence when they were writing, these three playwrights had enough insight into female mental health that they were able to accurately depict twenty-first century medical descriptions in their 1920s plays.

Furthermore, Crothers, Glaspell, and Treadwell gave causation to the mental disorders that were plaguing their characters. Overt and institutionalized oppression stands as the cause of Fannie, Claire, and Young Woman's mental disorders. As I explained in the Introduction,

women in the 1920s experienced a backlash following the nineteenth amendment's ratification. Crothers, Glaspell, and Treadwell saw this oppression in their own lives, and put it center stage. Not only were the playwrights able precisely to characterize illnesses that would be chronicled nearly one hundred years later, but they were also able to assign a root source of the disorders experienced by the characters: patriarchal oppression.

The relationship that Fannie, Claire, and the Young Woman each has with her daughter reflects the society's complex stance toward motherhood and maternity. On one end of the spectrum is Fannie, who has been crushed into silence by oppression, yet finds her voice in order to metaphorically save Phyllis' life. While Fannie is able to "save" Phyllis from repeating her own oppressive habits, Fannie remains with the Judge because she cannot overcome the oppression with which she has become accustomed. In the middle of the spectrum is Young Woman. At first she does not even want to see her child and, on a physical level, cannot even help the child due to lack of milk. Young Woman's child came into the world due to the overt oppression that Jones shows in "honeymoon" episode. After Young Woman is convicted of murder, she calls out for her child. She has grown to care for her daughter and, in her last moments, expresses concern for someone other than herself. Finally, on the other end of the spectrum, is Claire. She has no affection for Elizabeth. For years Claire has sent Elizabeth to live abroad or with family that she might focus on her work. Claire works in a male-dominated profession, and she has pushed away any maternal feelings and obligations in order to succeed in that field. By placing these characters on a spectrum I do not give a value judgment about which character is a "good" or "bad" mother; I want simply to remark that Crothers, Glaspell, and Treadwell create different representations of motherhood. Each mother is affected by oppression, and that affects the bond with her child—in each case, a daughter—in different ways.

These three playwrights represent the beginning of a much larger story that needs to be told. It is obvious that mental disorders continues to affect members of our society today. Recent plays suggest that, at least in the certain cases, mental disorders continues to be associated with patriarchal oppression.

One such play is *In the Other Room, (or The Vibrator Play)* (2009), by Sarah Ruhl. This play follows Dr. Givings as he treats women like Mrs. Daldry who suffer from “hysteria” by bringing them to orgasm in a clinical fashion. When Dr. Givings first diagnoses Mrs. Daldry, he explains, “Dr. Daldry, your wife is suffering from hysteria. It is a very clear case. I recommend therapeutic electric massage-weekly-possible daily, we shall see-sessions. We need to relieve the pressure of her nerves” (13). In the end, Dr. Givings and his wife must come to terms with their sexual relationship in order to live happily with one another. This play explores the early history of the vibrator which Ruhl uses as a way of exploring female sexuality, oppression, and sexual relationships during the late 1800s.

Even when looking at *In the Other Room* at a glance, the connections are numerous. Mrs. Givings has a tedious relationship with her husband, and it desperate to find her voice, just like Fannie. Dr. Givings’ entire career has been built up on the belief that woman suffering from “hysteria” need to be cured, just like Dr. Emmons’ relationship to Claire. Finally, Mrs. Givings is a new mother, but cannot produce milk which mirrors Young Woman. And all of these events in *In the Other Room* only cover Act One!

What interests me about *In the Other Room, (or The Vibrator Play)* is its connections to the other works studied previously in this thesis. While Ruhl was writing in the early twenty-first century, she set her story in the patriarchal-driven society of Victorian times, in the post-Industrial Revolution and post-Civil War era. This period coincided with the very early stages of

the suffragette movement. The first women's rights convention, the Seneca Falls Convention, had been held in 1848, and the first national suffrage organization was founded in 1869, by Susan B. Anthony and Elisabeth Cady Stanton (Stanton). While Ruhl does not set her play in the same historical moment as Crothers, Glaspell, and Treadwell—the United States in the 1920s—she is deep-rooted in early feminism and women's rights.

Ruhl—like Crothers, Glaspell, and Treadwell—uses the set in *In the Other Room* as continuation of the actions being depicted in the dialogue. *In the Other Room*'s set is divided into two: there is the doctor's office where the clinical treatment is applied to women, and the doctor's wife's parlor. Ruhl draws a stark contrast between the masculine and feminine spaces that are displayed on stage, as well as in the power dynamic displayed within the dialogue.

Nearly one hundred years separate Ruhl from the playwrights discussed previously in this thesis, yet the connections between them are clear. Women experience a mental state that correlates to the oppression that they experience at the hands of their husbands and in their social interactions. In Ruhl's case, the mental state is characterized as hysteria and the patriarchal medical community believes that they know the cure.

The connection between female mental disorders and patriarchal oppression does not end with Ruhl. Between the 1920s and today, numerous other playwrights have used mental disorders as a depiction of oppression, and it has not always solely been female playwrights. If I were to extend the argument begun in this thesis, I certainly would look closely at the works of Tennessee Williams. Williams had a strong correlation with “weak” women in his plays. Scholars often connected these female caricatures to Williams' own sister who was lobotomized in 1943. Depictions of frail women can be seen throughout his work, e.g., Laura in *The Glass Menagerie* (1945) and Blanche in *A Streetcar Named Desire* (1947).

The connection between female mental disorders and patriarchal oppression that exists in different historical eras also reaches across lines of race and class. *For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide / When the Rainbow is Enuf* (1978), by Ntozake Shange, is another play that connects mental disorders and institutionalized and overt oppression. Shange follows the stories of multiple African American women as they attempt to cope with men, society, and the hardships they face when suicide feels like a possible option. The addition of Shange's work to a future study would not only widen the kinds of literary structure that I investigate (much of the work is written in poems, and the characters are known by the color of their dress), but also would bring race into the picture. Similarly, Suzan-Lori Parks in *The America Play* (1994) and *Venus* (1996) link mental disorders in women to oppression by men and patriarchal institutions.

Writers have been using mental disorders as a way to represent oppressive situations for far longer than some might think. This is a topic that is ready to expand its visibility. America's interest in mental illness has never been stronger, and the time to explore this correlation between mental disorders and oppression is now.

I chose Elaine Showalter and her theory on gynocriticism as my analytical touchstone because her now 37-year-old theory suited well the three female playwrights that I focused on in this thesis. In 1979, feminist criticism was still not fully legitimized in the scholarly community. Showalter and other early feminist scholars had to fight for their critical voices to be heard. By outlining gynocriticism, Showalter was able to show that a meaningful literary theory could be constructed on the basis of feminist principles.

Crothers, Glaspell, and Treadwell all show key aspects of gynocriticism. These three women used non-spoken text and dialogue to press forward a feminist point of view. In addition,

each playwright had a connection to her central female character; as Showalter puts it, they each put focus “on the newly visible world of female culture” (131). All three of the playwrights examined in this thesis make female culture visible, even when it’s not pretty.

Perhaps gynocriticism worked so well for this project because all three of the playwrights reflect the pitfall of gynocriticism: they were white, middle-class, and, as far as we can tell, sexually straight female playwrights. While this framework worked well enough for Crothers, Glaspell, and Treadwell, I likely will have to expand the lens of gynocriticism if I wish to include playwrights who are of color or of a non-heteronormative sexual orientation.

Another way this project could be strengthened for future research is by deepening the discussion and analysis of oppression. I have used definitions brought forth by Portland Community College. This information was brought to my attention by queer scholar Jack Halberstam who used the definitions in his book *In a Queer Time and Place* (2005), as well as multiple blogs he has posted online.

The Portland Community College materials provide certain agreed-upon definitions for Institutional and Overt oppressions, but we cannot say that this institution of higher learning originated those definitions. Different definitions of oppression can be traced all the way back to Michel Foucault. If this thesis were to be further explored, I would dive into *Discipline and Punish* (1975) and *History of Sexuality* (1976). Within these texts, Foucault outlines different types of oppression and what they mean. If I use Foucault, I will be able to skip the middleman that is the Portland Community College.

Writings by female playwrights of the 1920s are just a starting place to explore the connections between social oppression and mental disorders in America. The 1920s was a time when The Little Theater Movement was allowing artists to break away from the melodramatic,

stereotypical plotlines of the 1800s in order to explore deeper, more meaningful topics. That kind of thinking did not end when the stock market crashed. Artists throughout the last century have explored mental disorders and how it can represent the oppression that minority groups face. Tennessee Williams, Sarah Ruhl, Ntozake Shange, and Susan-Lori Parks are just few American playwrights who have explored this topic.

Rachel Crothers, Susan Glaspell, and Sophie Treadwell were all artistic leaders of their time. They explored topics that others dared not touch, diving into serious societal issues that were plaguing the women of their generation. Now is the time to explore this history of oppression/mental disorders. Mental illness is a hot button topic for political parties and can no longer be ignored. A history of mental disorders as represented in the American theater will help to clarify how playwrights have expressed their opposition to the oppression around them.

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