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A Case of Delicate Feminine Nerves:

Female Madness in Gilman's "The Yellow Wall-paper" and Treadwell's *Machinal*

Introduction

In 2009, the Pulitzer Prize winning musical *Next to Normal* opened on Broadway. The plot centers around a housewife, Diana Goodman, who struggles with bipolar disorder and delusions. *Next to Normal* begins with Diana in a manic state as she sings how her family is perfect and that she will "hold it all together / I will hide the mess away / And I'll survive another day" (Yorkey 12). As the song progresses, she frantically prepares a mountain of sandwiches and sings, "I will keep the plates all spinning / And the world just keeps on spinning / And I think the house is spinning…" (Yorkey 14). This is the audience's introduction to Diana and her mental illness.

Over the course of *Next to Normal*, Diana is treated with medications and electroconvulsive therapy. She discovers that her teenage son is a delusion, and she learns that he passed away when he was only a baby. Diana is told by her psychiatrist, Dr. Madden, to "Make up your mind to explore yourself … Then make up your mind to be well" (Yorkey 45). However, she is later told by Dr. Madden that mental health treatments are not an exact science, and she experiences a moment of clarity when she decides to go without treatment and leave her husband and daughter. Diana sings, "I'll try this on my own / A life I've never known / I'll face

the dread alone… / But I'll be free" (Yorkey 97). In a move that might be seen as selfish, she leaves her loved ones to explore life without the safety net of her family.

The story of *Next to Normal* is a descendant of "The Yellow Wall-paper" and *Machinal*. In the span of a century, many factors in the stories have changed, from medical terms to style, but the core element remains the same. All three texts look at a woman who is suffering from some form of mental illness, trying to escape the societal confinements placed upon her. However, as I argue below, Diana is the only one who is able to successfully break away from her condition. She does not heal herself per se, but she learns to live a life that is "next to normal" as she discovers her own strength and does not need to rely on her family and doctor. The women of the modernist texts do not forge their own paths like Diana; they do not break away from the pressures of society.

Next to Normal, "The Yellow Wall-paper," and *Machinal* all belong to a category of texts that Susan J. Hubert labels "women's madness narratives" in her book, *Questions of Power: The Politics of Women's Madness Narratives*. This paper will explore the latter two texts, "The Yellow Wall-paper" and *Machinal*, as narratives of female madness and ask whether these narratives achieve their goal of challenging societal norms. To begin, a brief history of madness beginning in the eighteenth century will establish the foundation to understand the historical contexts of Gilman's and Treadwell's narratives. I will then turn to women's madness narratives themselves and the typical critical view of female madness as empowering. The core of the paper will be an examination of "The Yellow Wall-paper" and *Machinal* as madness narratives. It is my thesis that "The Yellow Wall-paper" and *Machinal* demonstrate that gender is complexly intertwined to ideas of madness and neither madness nor gender can be fully escaped. Although scholars hold that female madness is a mode of empowerment, I disagree and will show how the

women of these narratives fail to overcome societal demands. By exploring these links in the modernist period, it is my hope that parallels will appear concerning current ideas of gender and madness.

American Nervousness and Gendered Medical Practices

Hysteria was on the rise in the late Victorian period according to many doctors. The famous American physician Silas Weir Mitchell nicknamed the disease "mysteria" for its mysterious and various symptoms. Mitchell's English colleague, George Beard, explained the commonly held view of hysteria, saying, "nervousness is a physical not a mental state, and its phenomena do not come from emotional excess or excitability or from organic disease but from nervous debility and irritability" (qtd. in Scull 93). Hysterical women were seen as lacking moral fiber and the will to control their bodies and minds.

To be fair, hysteria did not appear only in women. Some men were also treated for hysteria and the new nervous disorder of "neurasthenia." George Beard coined the term and defined it as a weakness of the nerves, a condition caused by too much work and stress (Scull 95). The disorder was also known as "American nervousness." According to Andrew Scull in *Hysteria: The Disturbing History*, "Among Americans, male and female alike, it was the country's economic and cultural superiority that provoked so many nervous crises" (95-6). Doctors and the public believed that humans were like batteries and their nervous energy, literally the amount of energy in their nerves, could be depleted. When the nervous energy became too low, the hardworking, often upper middle-class men and women would have a nervous breakdown. Scull notes, "Neurasthenia was a disease of the distinguished, of the best and the brightest, of the wealthy and the cultured, for it was these segments of society who were most exposed to the stresses and pressures of modernity, whose nervous systems were stretched

tightest, eventually to breaking point" (Scull 96). Hysteria and neurasthenia could be difficult to distinguish from each other; therefore, this paper will use the term hysteria to simplify the matter. American nervousness was seen as a badge of honor, a sign that proved one was industrious and professionally driven. This condition was documented in medical texts and appeared in popular culture, including literature and theatre.

The struggle of the hysterical woman is featured in two wildly different texts from the modernist period: Charlotte Perkins Gilman's short story "The Yellow Wall-paper" and Sophie Treadwell's play *Machinal*. Gilman's tale is a personal response to her own experience with what today would be labelled post-partum depression. Treadwell's play is also based loosely on the murder trial of Ruth Snyder, which intrigued the nation in 1927. Gilman and Treadwell wrote their respective works at very different times in the modernist period: Gilman published her story in 1890 while Treadwell's play did not debut until 1928. In addition to the distance in time, Treadwell's play is highly stylized in the expressionist mode. However, both Gilman and Treadwell are confronting the same subject of female madness in the modernist era. The texts explore their cultural moments by questioning what it means for a woman to have a case of delicate feminine nerves.

Women's Madness Narratives

"Yellow Wall-paper" and *Machinal* are stories that can be categorized as "women's madness narratives," a phrase from Hubert. While Hubert focuses on the autobiographical narratives of madness, it is important to note that *Machinal* does not seem to fit this mold. The little research I unearthed on Treadwell's play does not mention madness. However, I assert that *Machinal* is a woman's madness narrative just as much as "Yellow Wall-paper." I will explain the model of Hubert's women's madness narrative by examining Gilman's story. In the next

section, I will transpose that model onto Treadwell's *Machinal*. First, however, I will provide a brief history of the women's madness narrative and the changing ideas of women and madness that led up to the modernist period.

When "The Yellow Wall-paper" was republished in 1973, many second-wave feminists hailed it as a story of rebellion. Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar considered Gilman's tale as a woman escaping the world of patriarchy in their key critical work, *Madwoman in the Attic*. They read the eponymous and obnoxious yellow wallpaper as "correspond[ing] to the façade of the patriarchal text" (Gilbert and Gubar 90). After republication, the story and its author were recognized as new feminist icons and the story became a staple of anthologies.

Women's madness narratives are often seen as the story of a woman overcoming her oppressor. According to Gilbert and Gubar, "The Yellow Wall-paper" brought together "what women writers tend to see as their parallel confinements in texts, houses, and maternal female bodies" to create "a striking story of female confinement and escape, a paradigmatic tale which seems to tell *the* story that all literary women would tell if they could speak their 'speechless woe'" (89). While I do not fully agree with this traditional reading of "The Yellow Wall-paper," the realities behind Gilman's story fascinates me far more than this cursory reading allows.

The madwoman has a long and colorful history that reaches back to literary creations such as Cassandra. The woman is often seen as speaking nonsense that is later revealed to be prophetic or otherwise important. Shakespeare used the madwoman trope in *Hamlet* when he wrote the character of Ophelia. Charlotte Brontë famously employed the figure in *Jane Eyre* that Gilbert and Gubar later investigated in their large critical tome. These are just a few examples that come to mind, although there are many more.

Elaine Showalter, another feminist scholar focused on female madness, describes the reception of the madwoman image as a two-sided figure. Showalter writes in *The Female Malady: Women, Madness, and English Culture* that madness was and remains to be seen as either "one of the wrongs of woman" or it is considered "the essential feminine nature unveiling itself before scientific male rationality" (3). In other words, female madness is either a horrible fate that befalls a woman or a woman's feminine essence breaking free of patriarchal social bonds.

The reality of female madness is not as clear as this double model suggests. While gender played an important factor in the view of female madness, there was also a class structure at play. As Marianne DeKoven and many others point out,[1] nervous conditions like hysteria and neurasthenia tended to strike down a wealthier class of women. As mentioned above, conditions like "American nervousness" were reserved for the women who could afford treatments. For example, Gilman belonged to a well-established family, so she could pay to see the top specialist, Silas Weir Mitchell. Although she detested the rest cure he prescribed, she was able to seek treatment which other women could not afford.

Weir Mitchell, Gilman's doctor, was a leading specialist in the field of nervous disorders in nineteenth century America. He was part of a larger, international trend that surfaced at the end of the previous century. According to Denise Russell in *Women, Madness, and Medicine*, it was in the late eighteenth century that psychiatrists "started to refer to specifically female mental problems as if there had been a new medical discovery" (18). While everyone realized that male and female biology differed, it was this group of doctors who began to divide mental illness by gender.

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[1] Such as Russell, Hubert, and Scull.

Women were seen by these gentlemen of medicine as lesser than their male counterparts, even when it came to mental disorders. Henry Maudsley was a colleague of Weir Mitchell and part of what Showalter labels the "Darwinian psychiatrists" (121). According to Showalter, these Victorian psychiatrists, including Henry Maudsley, used Charles Darwin's theory of evolution to explain that the mind and mentality of the sexes was inherently different. Darwin himself agreed with this idea (Showalter 121-23). Darwinian psychiatrists believed women were therefore inferior to men and only capable of giving birth and caring for children.

Hysteria was used to justify not only a woman's lack of mental prowess, but it also served as a scapegoat if the woman in question was behaving in a negative manner. Maudsley claimed that "some hysterical women were morally perverted" (Russell 19). It was believed that these ethically questionable women could transmit their madness and perversion to their children, but only if those children were daughters. Darwinian psychiatrists held the view of women were weaker creatures who could not handle any intellectual stimulation. As Showalter writes, "Mental breakdown, then, would come when women defied their 'nature,' attempted to compete with men instead of serving them, or sought alternatives or even additions to their mental functions" (123). It was a no-win situation for women who developed hysteria. Their only hope was a remedy.

The cure that Weir Mitchell devised would drive a sane person mad in short order. One of the doctor's patients was Charlotte Perkins Gilman, who was seeking help for what modern psychiatrists now recognize as postpartum depression. Like the woman in her story, which was inspired by her rest cure procedure, Gilman was isolated and confined to bed rest. After one month of this treatment, she was sent home with the following prescription from Weir Mitchell: "Live as domestic a life as possible. Have your child with you all the time … Lie down an hour

after each meal. Have but two hours' intellectual life a day. And never touch pen, brush, or pencil as long as you live" (qtd. in Hubert 64). The rest cure did not work. As Gilbert and Gubar note, Weir Mitchell's cure was worse than the disorder it hoped to cure and caused Gilman to suffer more than before (89). Gilman did eventually become well and wrote a fictional account of a woman experiencing the rest cure in "The Yellow Wall-paper."

"The Yellow Wall-paper"

Gilman called "The Yellow Wall-paper" "a description of a case of nervous breakdown" (qtd. in Gilbert and Gubar 89). Her experience with Weir Mitchell's famous rest cure lead her to write the story. She even sent a copy to Weir Mitchell to show the damage his "cure" did to women. "The Yellow Wall-paper" is a classic example of Hubert's women's madness narrative. Although Gilman's story is not autobiographical, the author infuses much of her own rest cure experience into the short story.

In "The Yellow Wall-paper," the narrator, who is never given proper name,[2] is confined to a room inside a rented "colonial mansion" to take the rest cure (Gilman 3).[3] Her husband, a doctor, does not allow her to do anything, including write in her journal. She defies this order, claiming "not a living soul" will read the story that she's written on "dead paper" (Gilman 3). Although her husband, John, is trying to help his wife, he does not truly believe that she is sick. The narrator questions, "If a physician of high standing, and one's own husband, assures friends and relatives that there is really nothing the matter with one but temporary nervous depression—a slight hysterical tendency—what is one to do?" (Gilman 3-4). Seemingly helpless in the face of male medical authority, the narrator tries to obey her husband by quitting all mental activity.

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[2] There is a debate as to whether the character is named Jane or if she is the woman behind the wallpaper. For clarity, I will refer to her as the narrator.

[3] All page numbers refer to the Modern Library paperback edition.

The problem she faces is that the room she is confined in has horrible yellow wallpaper. Gilman writes, "I know a little of the principle of design, and I know this thing [the wallpaper] was not arranged on any laws of radiation, or alteration, or repetition, or symmetry, or anything else that I ever heard of" (10). Over the course of the story, she is both repulsed and fascinated by the paper, noting its odd features and patterns.

Assured that her case is not serious and told by John that "there is no *reason* to suffer," the narrator becomes obsessed with the patterns of the wallpaper (Gilman 6). The narrator spends her days in bed, bored and longing to go outside into the lovely garden she can see from her window. When she writes, trying to describe the room and the garden outside, her interest always returns to the wallpaper. She describes the room as once being a nursery and then a gymnasium, with rings on the walls and barred windows for the safety of the children. When she brings up the horrible décor to her husband, she is told that her thoughts on the matter are just "fancies" and the narrator feels silly "to make him uncomfortable just for a whim" of changing the wallpaper (Gilman 6-7). Alone in the same room for days at a time, the narrator begins to personify the wallpaper; but soon there is a turn for the worst. She writes, "This paper looks to me as if it *knew* what a vicious influence it had!" (Gilman 7). The narrator begins seeing a woman in the paper, trapped behind what appears to be bars. She recounts her childhood habit of seeing faces in furniture, as she now sees a woman in the paper. Of course, the brain is a curious thing, and it is common to see a face in an object, like a dresser, when there is obviously nothing there. However, the narrator starts to give personality to the paper woman. She notes that the figure is "a strange, provoking, formless sort of figure, that seems to skulk about behind that silly and conspicuous front design [of bars]" (Gilman 9). The narrator is beginning to lose her grip on reality.

The rest of the short story tracks the narrator's descent into madness over the course of a few months. In her own words, she becomes "dreadfully fretful and querulous" (Gilman 9). Soon the paper woman is seen not only in the wallpaper, but outside in the real world. When the narrator tries to talk to her husband about it, she is swiftly dismissed. As time passes, a strange relationship evolves between the narrator and the wallpaper. Where she was once revolted by the wallpaper and its pattern, she now becomes obsessive and possessive of it. The narrator writes in her journal, "no person touches this paper but me, --not *alive*!" (Gilman 18). The paper becomes parasitic as the maid says that "the paper stained everything it touched, that she found yellow smooches on all my [the narrator's] clothes and John's" (Gilman 14). The lines between the wallpaper and reality blur when the paper woman escapes the bars of the pattern. The narrator helps the paper woman as they both pull and shake and "peel off yards of that paper" to free the women behind (Gilman 18). The two women merge into one as the husband rushes in to find the narrator/paper woman "creeping just the same" around the room, causing the long "smooches" along the wallpaper (Gilman 20). When her husband faints at the sight, the hybrid woman continues her creeping routine, walking over him as she circles the room, carving a groove (smooch) into the walls.

When Gilman's text was republished in the 1970s, many feminists found the story a case of a woman overcoming the confines of patriarchal society. After all, Gilman's tale ends with a woman literally stepping over her husband who has passed out from shock. However, more recent scholars have complicated the formula of the madwoman escaping patriarchy through her madness. In her article, "Managing Madness in Gilman's 'The Yellow Wall-paper,'" Beverly A. Hume suggests, "Despite her triumphant unmasking of medical (predominantly male) gender bias in this tale, Gilman's narrator falls apart so completely in the end that she tends,

unfortunately, to reinforce the common nineteenth-century gender stereotype of the emotionally and physically frail nineteenth-century woman" (12). Hume points out that Gilman wrote other stories later that resolved the issue she sees in "The Yellow Wall-paper." Hume continues, "Although Gilman's narrator's final collapse threatens to sabotage the author's indictment of nineteenth-century medical (male) gender bias, she does not finally succeed in doing so—and manages, through indirection, to suggest the kind of remedy Gilman would explore in later reform fictions" (12). Gilman's story "Dr. Clair's Place" features similar themes of madness and gendered medical practices, but the protagonist becomes a caretaker of other madwomen instead of succumbing to madness, like the narrator in "The Yellow Wall-paper."

Another fault Hume finds with Gilman's story that I agree with is Gilman's view of madness and mental illness. That fault is the idea of choosing to be mentally ill. Hume explains her point by stating,

> This yellow world [of the wallpaper] is one in which a 'woman' can only become imprisoned, unable to recognize her rage, and unable to move (or even barely creep) beyond her delusions. Transforming into this [paper] woman, the narrator becomes as monstrous, frightening, and unpredictable as she imagines the yellow wallpaper to be. Thus, Gilman illustrates here … that there is a choice involved in health issues, particularly those related to mental health. (16)

The narrator does not come to terms with her madness but chooses to give into the paper woman and creep around the room endlessly. Gilman's character does not show how one can improve or come to terms with madness, but instead the story reinforces, as Hume notes, the stereotype of a Victorian woman as weak and frail. Although Gilman's goal of exposing the faults of the rest

cure are admirable, her text does not succeed in giving a voice to women suffering from mental illness.

While Gilman's "The Yellow Wall-paper" is an example of Hubert's woman's madness narrative. However, the story ultimately fails to resolve the issues it sets out to tackle. The narrator does not become well after her rest cure but instead descends further into madness. While many critics see the narrator's madness as a form of rebellion, I believe a better act of rebellion would have been found in a return to health and sanity or at least a recognition of her mental health issues. Even if the narrator continues to creep over her husband, she is still locked in a prison of her own making.

Unlike Diana from *Next to Normal*, the narrator never knows a life of freedom after her treatment. Although Gilman does not write about the woman's life after her merge with the paper figure, she will likely be sent to an asylum for the rest of her life. Despite claims that the narrator is free from patriarchal authority, she will likely never be sane again.

The narrator of "The Yellow Wall-paper" has much in common with Sophie Treadwell's protagonist in *Machinal*. Both women face restrictions when expressing themselves, either in writing or in speech. While Gilman's character is nameless, Treadwell's character is denoted in the play as "Young Woman" although the audience learn her name is Helen. Overall, Gilman and Treadwell create women who are generic, almost archetypal in their design. They are the everywoman, driven to madness by societal pressures to conform to gender norms. The question is, can Treadwell correct the faults that Gilman struggles with in her text?

Machinal

Sophie Treadwell's *Machinal* is a play about Helen, a woman who is unhappy with her life and job in a big city. In a twist on the medieval Everyman play, Treadwell writes an

allegorical tale of an average woman who goes through the typical stages of adulthood: work, marriage, and childbirth. As the play unfolds, the audience learns that Helen is unhappy with every part of her life. In fact, the only time she finds peace is when she has an affair with a man after they meet at a speakeasy. She finds her husband disgusting, especially his fat hands. She does not seem to care or take interest in her child. Helen progressively starts to hate her life. The play culminates in Helen murdering her husband. She is put on trial, found guilty, and sentenced to death by electric chair.

Gilman wrote "The Yellow Wall-paper" in the late nineteenth century, at the dawn of the modernist period.[4] Treadwell's *Machinal* was written in 1928, almost three decades later. Much had changed in the world of modernism. While Gilman wrote in a semi-surreal but mostly naturalistic style, *Machinal* uses the techniques of Expressionism in her play, which developed after the turn of the twentieth century. The Expressionist highlights the emotions of a moment (in painting, theatre, etc.), and the theatrical branch focused closely on the stylized portrayal of the characters. Generally speaking, Expressionism, in all of its forms, was concerned with the nature of feelings. In his essay "Modernism in drama," Christopher Innes explains,

> [O]ne major modernist concern was the depiction of interior experience, where reality is the subjective apprehension of the world, and art is an '*im*pressionist' record of 'stream of consciousness.' In drama the equivalent is *ex*pressionism, which seeks to represent … the *sub*conscious … [T]he Expressionists' focus on archetypes intrinsically denies the validity of both the individual ego and intellectual awareness. (138)

Key figures of Expressionism, such as Bertolt Brecht and Wyndham Lewis, championed dehumanization and alienation to reflect the disconnect of the modern industrial world.

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[4] Although there is much debate about the exact beginning and ending of the modernist period.

Although the Expressionist movement was strongest in Germany during the first three decades of the twentieth century, it did influence international theatre and spread to Great Britain and the United States.

Machinal is loosely based on the 1927 murder trial of Ruth Snyder, an American housewife who killed her husband. Working at a journalist at the time, Treadwell was inspired by Snyder's story and the reaction of the press during the trial. Snyder's case made national news, and many papers chronicled every twist and turn of the trial. She was found guilty and sentenced to die by electric chair. A cunning reporter snapped a photograph of Snyder in the electric chair, and it was circulated in the newspapers, to everyone's horror. Treadwell quickly wrote *Machinal* and the play was staged on Broadway in 1928.

Unlike Gilman's story, *Machinal* is not the subject of much scholarship. Therefore, my claims about this play are sailing into uncharted territory. As previously stated, I argue that *Machinal* belongs in the same subgenre as Gilman's "The Yellow Wall-paper" as both are women's madness narratives. And as with the case of the narrator in "The Yellow Wall-paper," Helen in *Machinal* fails to overcome social restrictions with her madness.

As a play, Machinal often focuses on sound, language, and silence. The background is often littered with sonic noise and many characters speak in a stylized manner. In the article, "Treadwell's Neologism: *Machinal,*" Ginger Strand notes that *Machinal* "reveals itself to be a play about the law of language: the hand of narrative ultimately sentences the protagonist not only to death, but to silence" (163). Strand posits that Helen cannot speak the language of men and law, so she struggles to express herself and her desires. In the first episode, "To Business," Helen tries to explain why she is late to her coworkers. Helen speaks of how she felt on the subway coming to work, "All those bodies pressing … I thought I would faint! I had to get out

in the air! … Like I'm dying" (Treadwell 6). During this moment, her fellow workers break up her lines of dialogue, not allowing her to finish her thoughts.

Helen is perpetually alienated from the world around her, often through the noise and grind of modern life. As Treadwell writes in the notes to the play, "The Plan is to tell this story by showing the different phases of life … and in none of which she finds any place, any peace … Business, home, marriage, having a child, seeking pleasure—all are difficult for her—mechanical, nerve nagging" (Treadwell xi). Although Treadwell was inspired by the Snyder case, she also infused one key autobiographical element into her play. As Judith E. Barlow explains in the play's introduction, Treadwell "suffered from debilitating illnesses (with symptoms resembling those attributed to Helen in *Machinal*)" (qtd. in Treadwell vii). Jerry Dickey suggests that Treadwell suffered specifically from neurasthenia and she was treated for her nervous condition with electrotherapy (qtd. in Weiss 8). In a move similar to Gilman's indictment of Weir Mitchell's rest cure, Treadwell's conclusion is an uncanny mirror of electroshock therapy as Helen is executed by means of the electric chair.

The "mechanical, nerve nagging" environment of the play wears on Helen as the audience sees her deal with neurasthenia. Helen's dialogue is her only outlet for her thoughts. Several times in the play, she expresses herself in "mad speech" or what might be labeled spoken *l'écriture féminine*. During these rare moments, she seems to ramble on about nothing, free associating words and phrases. In the first instance of this mad speech, Treadwell's directions note that Helen is "thinking her thoughts aloud—to the subdued accompaniment of the office sounds and voice" (11). Her monologue is a series of stops and starts, moving from subject to loosely connected subject. While contemplating marrying her boss, George H. Jones, she begins, "Marry me – wants to marry me – George H. Jones – George H. Jones and Company – Mrs.

George H. Jones" (Treadwell 11). She voices her disgust about Jones by saying, "Fat hands – flabby hands – don't touch me – please – fat hands are never weary – please don't" (Treadwell 11). Helen then imagines her future as Mrs. George H. Jones: "married – babies – a baby – curls – little curls all over its head – George H. Jones – straight – thin – bald – don't touch me – please" (Treadwell 11). Helen repeats the phrase "bodies pressing" and continues to free associate words as she ends by saying, "can I, ma? Tell me, ma – something – somebody" (Treadwell 12). This last utterance of the word "somebody" will return in the last scene.

In a similar moment of mad speech, Helen finds herself alone in a hospital room after she has given birth to a child. In a long monologue of sorts, she moves from wanting to be left alone, to her childhood pet, to heaven and St. Peter at the gate, and so on. As the speech concludes, she declares "I'll not submit any more – I'll not submit – I'll not submit" (Treadwell 31). However, her desire to not submit will fail. Both the words "somebody" and her demand to "not submit" will be echoed in the final episode.

After Helen murders her husband, she is found guilty and sentenced to death. In the final episode, "A Machine," the audience sees her on her last day. Harkening back to Gilman, Helen is surrounded and confined by male authority in this scene and throughout the play. As Helen sits in jail, she is prayed over by a priest. When a man sings a "Negro spiritual," she finds more comfort in the song than the priest's words. She says, "He helps me" about the singer and adds, "I understand him. He is condemned. I understand him" (Treadwell 78). When two barbers come in the shave her hair, she is outraged. She yells at the barbers, "I will not be submitted – this indignity! No! I will not be submitted! – Leave me alone! Oh my God am I never to be let alone! Always to have to submit – to submit! No more – not now – I'm going to die – I won't submit! Not now!" (Treadwell 79). Helen does submit, against her will, to the machine of

society and the electric chair. In her last moment, she begins to call out: "Somebody! Somebod—" when her voice is "cut off" and we hear only the priest's prayers (Treadwell 83). Her cries of resistance are stopped by a machine designed to efficiently execute criminals. While Helen tries to remain rebellious until she is silenced forever, she does not escape the confines of society, the law, and male authority using her madness.

Therefore, much like Gilman's narrator in "The Yellow Wall-paper," Helen does not succeed in using her madness to resist societal norms. She marries a man who repulses her, fails to meet the standards of motherhood, and her act of murderous defiance ends not in a blaze of glory but an unfinished plea. Several decades after *Machinal*, *Next to Normal* would pick up the call to action of the woman's madness narrative. Where Helen fails and does not express herself and her desire in life, the character of Diana moves beyond (male) medical authorities as she accepts her mental illness. Only by coming to terms with her madness can a madwoman truly be free. Helen's expression of rebellion, the murder of her husband, does not end in her independence but rather her death by the state.

Conclusion

The final song in *Next to Normal* sums up the desired outcome of a woman's madness narrative. Together, the family sings, "We'll find the will to find our way, / Knowing that the darkest skies / Will some day see the sun— / When our long night is done … There will be light" (Yorkey 104). While Diana finds her way to the light at the end of the musical, Gilman's narrator and Treadwell's Helen do not accomplish their goal of overcoming male authority and social restrictions.

As this paper demonstrates, neither "The Yellow Wall-paper" nor *Machinal* are successful women's madness narratives in that neither woman overcomes her situation using her

madness to defy society. Gilman's narrator concludes her story lost in a prison of her own mind, wandering around in circles around the room. Helen is rebellious in the murder of her husband and her affair; however, she is defeated by the law. She is executed as her words of madness are silenced forever. Permanent insanity or death are not ways out of a patriarchal society; these women have their lives cut short, never to reach their full potential. These narratives fail to show a way out of the constricting norms using female madness as a tool. *Next to Normal*, on the other hand, provides a possible escape from the looming restrictions of society.

The answer to why Diana succeeds where her foremothers fail is beyond the extent of this paper. Perhaps the progress made by feminists in the years between the 1920s and the twenty-first century can account for the differences in the narratives. Whatever the case, it is important to understand that madness or mental illness is a complex issue, riddled with complications influences by gender, class, and environment. There are no easy answers to questions brought up by mental health, if there are answers at all. One can only hope to be like Diana, to find the light and learn to live with the pain.

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