

Clifford Odets' Social Criticism and Economic Determinism

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Abstract

This paper projects Clifford Odets 'Social Criticism' and 'economic determinism' employed in his plays. Clifford Odets is considered as one of the most prominent American playwrights and he tries to show the reality of the American society and the suffering of ordinary people and their struggle to fulfill their personal ambitions during the time of depression. Added to this, he had a belief that socialism offers only solution for the social economic problems.

Keywords: Clifford Odets, Societal relationship, economic determinism, Individual benevolence, depression, economic System

What is generally stated is that social criticism starts with a conviction that art's relation to society is vitally important and that the investigation of societal relationships may deepen one's aesthetic response to a work of art. Everyone knows that the social criticism has been discussed along three lines. The first line is of those critics who are political zealots, who did not view it outside their party politics and who have been attacked by the later generation for vulgarizing Marxist theories. Christopher Candwell and Granville Hicks are generally brought into this fold. The second category which includes George Thompson, Ralbh Fox, Terry Eagleton, Raymond Williams etc., made other go to Marx and Engels and reinterpret their theories. The third category includes those critics who became later disgusted with Marxist tools or who realized that the Marxist theory does not tell the whole truth. But at the same time could not part with them altogether. Edmund Wilson, Lionel Trilling and many others fall into this category. Therefore, the best social critics' duty is to place the work of art in the social atmosphere and define that relationship from point of view of social criticism.

What seems essential is to describe and define the influence of society on literature and to judge the position of literature in society. Very often literature simply means anything that is written

but it is more than that, for literature is considered an institution and as such, it grows and evokes in conformity with other social institutions. As an institution, it is subject to the pressure of the spirit of the age, giving expression to its conventions, standards, usages, norms, symbols and myths. It also obeys the pressure of social organization which includes technology, class-structure, economic and political foundations of life. According to Matthew Arnold, literature is a criticism of life. Truly speaking, a creative writer is not a lonely figure; he is part of the society. Sometimes the writer influences the society and vice-versa. This relationship between literature and society can be seen in Dicken's *Oliver Twist*. He was influenced by the industrial revolution. The society, in turn, was influenced by his writing and the result was improvement in the society. The writer is a constituent of the society, participating in its happenings. Wellek and Warren studies the actual relations between literature and society under three divisions: "The sociology of the writer, the social content of the works and the social influence of literature" (P 90).

Chaucer was the social chronicler of England at the end of the fourteenth century. He offered a direct transcription of reality, of daily life as it was lived Chaucer's deep insight and acute understanding enabled him to represent the very spirit of the age. The age was remarkable for many significant political, religious, social and literary activities. Chaucer's world was largely medieval, and he grew up under the influence of medieval literature and medieval ideas. The relation between literature and society can be determined by the social content of the work. As a social document, literature yields to the outlines of social history. Most histories of literature are either social histories or histories of thought or the impressions and assessment on particular works.

The English novel grew up and matured as a patterning of imagined events against a clearly realized social background. The English novel deepened on society and social relationship – love and marriage, quarrelling and reconciliation, gain or loss of money or of social status in such a way that the relation between spontaneity of feeling and social convention as Jane Austin did, or the relation between gentility and morality as Thackeray did or the effect of industrial society on private character as Dickens did. In every case, society is there to be taken account of and accepted as a basic fact about human life.

A similar series of social pictures can be assembled for American life from the novels of Harriet Beecher, Hawthorne and many others. In *The Scarlet Letter*, Hawthorne speaks of the collapse of spiritual consciousness in America. The awareness of American social and economic life was characteristic of the later literature of the realistic movement. The Restoration English Comedy also tells something about the society of a time. Ben Jonson wrote the comedy of humour having satirical aim. The comedy of manners reflects the society of Charles II's court, which was carless and was intent only on pleasure. Its aim was to show the manners of the upper ranks of contemporary society. William Congreve's play *The Way of the World* is the best example of this quality. In *the Way of the World*, Congreve has realistically portrayed the life of the court and the courtly circles of the day. In his *Hard Times*, Dickens shows a social picture in which the characters are arranged on class lines and the remedy is seen as the readjustment of the social system through individual benevolence and Lawrence in *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, the social symbols are transmuted into

personal sexual symbols and the social problem resolves itself into the personal one. Virginia Woolf, Galsworthy, Bennett and Wells were concerned with presenting life situations in terms of man's relation to social institutions.

As the tendency to associate art and social values in natural circumstances is perhaps intrinsic of the realistic movement, in America, Howells, Jack London, Hamlin Garland and Frank Norris have all been concerned with the relation between literature and society. In the words of Wilber Scott, "When the critic substituted social or political theory for the term 'society', he found he had an integrating view of large masses of literature" (P 124). But with the economic depression, writers began to add a powerful tool of judgement to their examination of literature as a mirror of society: the Marxist interpretation and evaluation of social forces. Scholars, of course, have long been interested in the ties between the art, the writer and the social milieu and very often their studies contain implicit judgement based on those associations. Henry Levin has stated thus:

"..... the relations between literature and society
Are reciprocal – literature is not only the effect of
Social causes; it is also the cause of social effects" (126)

So, it becomes clear that as long as literature maintains its bonds with society, it continues to be a vigorous force in criticism. As the important role of social criticism is found to be visualized in all such genres as poetry, novel and drama, projection of social significance in the plays of Clifford Odets needs analysis from a societal point of view.

As a leading dramatist of the Group Theatre, Clifford Odets is said to have been the most important of the American social dramatists of the 1930's whose concern focused on the working class man, his aspirations and his place in the modern society. Odets wrote proletarian, social problem plays in the 1930's light Hollywood sceneries in the 1940's and psychological dramas for the Broadway stage in the 1950's.

Of Odet's three writing phases, the best dramas came out of his first period. *Waiting for Lefty* (1935), a one – act play concerned with the plight of striking taxicab drivers in a capitalist society, won first prize in the New Theatre – New Masses Theatre contest as well as the George Pierce Baker Drama Prize at Yale. *I've Got the Blues* displays at its best Odet's talents for psychological characterization and well-balanced tragic-comedy. *Till the Day I Die* (1935), a play about the problems of communists in Nazi Germany and *Golden Boy* (1937), round out Odet's efforts on behalf of proletarian drama, "Odet's contributions to proletarian literature in the United States should be placed at the qualitative summit of that movement in American Letters" (P 8).

Widely known as the Decade of the Great Depression, the 1930's in America were a period of turmoil and flux. This was an era of great social, economic, political and moral upheaval. One of the worst impacts of the economic collapse was to turn men into paupers and some of them quite unable to stand the humiliation committed suicide. Unemployment was a widespread phenomenon

during the Great Depression. As a result of poverty, unemployment, the dwindling away of personal savings, working families were faced with the real threat of death from starvation during the Depression. The condition of the farmers also took a catastrophic turn during the Depression. The ruined farmers either remained as tenants on their former holdings or packed up joined the huge army of the unemployed. Housing problem was also very acute during the depression. In New York, homeless people slept in subway stations, in doorways or on park benches and in Chicago thousands of homeless people slept on the grass of Grand Park. The fact of economic breakdown brought forth the search for social alternatives. In conformity with the Marxian theory that “It is not the consciousness of men that determines their being but, on the contrary, their social being that determines their consciousness” (Mishra 75). It was precisely the socio-economic pressure that worked hearing on men’s minds and ultimately played a significant role in shaping their outlook on life. Among the various literary forms, drama particularly offered a very powerful means for expressing the social concerns attracting a number of talented writers like Clifford Odets, Lawson, Sherwood, Rice, Behnman, Anderson, Barry Hellman, Kingsley who all joined hands in projecting socio-economic issues in their dramas, out of whom Odets in his more successful earlier plays fused the zeal of militant social reform with insight into human behaviour.

Having consistently shown as a profound respect for and understanding of human dignity, Clifford Odet’s basic concern rested with social issues for he viewed his obligation as a writer as being more social than artistic. Odets was aflame with indignation at the plight of men who had lost their self-respect and self-confidence. He transformed this indignation into a sound dramatic presentation in *Waiting for Lefty* and later in such plays as *Awake and Sing*, *Golden Boy* and *Paradise Lost*. *Waiting for Lefty* is undoubtedly the most-angry play which Clifford Odets has ever produced. In *Waiting for Lefty*, Odets is a righteously indignant man, speaking in his most stentorian tones, writing an angry social document, the product of youth and vigor. A sophisticated variant of the form *Waiting for Lefty* presents a struggle between the corrupt leaders of a union of taxi drivers and the honest rank and file who want a representative union and are considering a strike. Scenes of their meeting alternate with scenes of their private lives, which show why they became drivers and why they are in need of higher wages. When their leader, Lefty, is reported dead with a bullet wound in his head, they head another young leader Agate and call for a strike.

Strike, a contemporary symbol of Marxian revolution, happens to be the most important element in leftist drama as it involves direct warfare between the capitalists and the proletariat. Odet’s *Waiting for Lefty*, an excellent play based on a strike, was suggested by the strike of taxi drivers in 1934 and was very much effective as a ‘tour de force’. As they are *Waiting for Lefty*, the insurgent leader of the strike committee, a hot debate takes place between the corrupt head of the union and the committee of workers on the question of a walkout. While the corrupt, double-dealing head of the union is arguing against a strike, different drivers act out terse scenes commenting on the conditions which brought them to this underpaid profession, and which now compel them to call for a strike. The five episodes revealing the plight of the cab drivers lead to the protagonist’s final declaration, his cry for alliance with the proletariat. “It’s war! Working class, unite and fight! Tear down the slaughterhouse of our old lives!” (Mishra 77). Ultimately comes the triumph of Marx.

Agate : (To audience): Well, What's
the answer?)

All : STRIKE

Agate : LOUDER

All : STRIKE

Agate and others
On Stage : AGAIN

All : STRIKE, STRIKE, STRIKE!!
(WFL 31)

Odets' first produced play *Waiting for Lefty* has been called the definitive specimen of the whole proletarian drama in America. "Strike! Strike!" was something more than a tribute to the play's effectiveness, more even than a testimony of the audience's hunger for constructive social action. It was the birth cry of the thirties. Odets structured the play as a series of brief vignettes, each of which spotlights certain individuals and shows how their problems reflect the larger conflict which forms the framework of the play. The play opens with the Union Assembly Hall Scene, in which Harry Fatt, a union organization, is attempting to dissuade the members of the taxi drivers' union from striking. The play is staged so that the theatre becomes the union assembly hall, with the union officials sitting facing the audience and actors playing union members planted in the audience. It quickly becomes obvious that the taxi drivers are eager to strike and are awaiting the arrival of Lefty Costello, a leader who will support them. One man, Joe, speaks out, shouting that the country is on the brink, and he comes on stage to argue in favour of a strike. The final scene in the play is The Agate Episode, in which Agate Keller takes the floor to urge the members not to wait for Lefty but to strike now. His speech is impassioned, and when a man comes to announce that Lefty has been found shot dead, the men rise to their feet in a unified call to "strike".

Till the Day I Die is founded upon nothing except the printed word and the characters are mere men of wax. "In so far as we believe it at all, we do so only because we have been told that such things do happen" (P 323). There is little in the play itself to carry conviction and neither its hero nor its villains seem very much more real compared to those of the simplest and most old-fashioned melodramas. The acting in the two pieces is as different as they are themselves. His strikers are so real – perhaps so actual would be better – that when the play is over, one expects to find their cabs outside, *Waiting for Lefty* jerks along through resilient little scenes, sometimes remarkably graphic, secure or moving. It gains greatly over *Till the Day I Die* by its nearness and vernacular. The whole tone of it is essentially gay; which is a great compliment to it as theatre; and yet the conviction of grave reality is strong. Creation of character (realistic), if strongly achieved, is in itself so full of satisfaction for us that it rises above mere depression. The vim and sharp eyes and theatre invention of much of this play are such as to bring the whole of it up to theatre delight. And nothing is lost thereby, the progress of a zest for life, combined with a fighting spirit, is, however rousing, prophetic or passionate, not grim. In *Waiting for Lefty*, a taxicab strike become synonymous

with among other things, the overthrow of economic exploitation, betrayal by labour bosses, poison – gas manufacture, racial discrimination in medicine and unemployment in the theatre ...” (P 332). Though the play was acclaimed primarily as a political statement, one could argue that beyond the issue of the taxi strike, *Waiting for Lefty* asserts the right of every individual to have his share of human dignity. The villain in the play is not just Capitalism, but any system or set of values which strips a man of his self – worth and destroys personal relationships.

Encouraged by the success of *Waiting for Lefty* the Group Theatre finally decided to run *Awake and Sing*. Their decision was hardly a mistake. Many critics include it among Clifford Odet’s finest plays. *Awake and Sing!* Presented with an extraordinary freshness, the story of Ralph Berger as he frees himself from his obsession with a purely personal rebellion against poverty which separates him from his girl and determines to throw himself with enthusiasm into the class struggle. Odets’ ability in bringing life into his play fascinated Alfred Kazani; “in Odet’s play, there was a lyric uplifting of blunt Jewish speech, boiling over and explosive, that did more to arouse the audience than the political catch words that brought he certain down.” (440). The very important thing about *Awake, and Sing!* is the fact that the play stems first from zeal character, life and social background of the people. His early version of *Awake and Sing!* Under the highly personal title of *I’ve Got the Blues* had to acquire a social rational before the play could emerge out of its private chrysalis into the Group Theatre’s repertory. “Ostensibly the moral of the play is a revolutionist’s moral” (Krutch 268). It ends when the young son of the family frees himself from his obsession with a purely personal rebellion against the poverty to throw himself with enthusiasm into the class struggle. Actually, the subject of the play is not one specific protest and rebellion but the persistent and many-sided rebellion of human nature against everything which thwarts it. All the characters in *Awake and Sing!* Share a fundamental activity; a struggle for life amidst petty conditions. Like *Waiting for Lefty*, the play *Awake and Sing!* Condemns the economic system which traps individuals into a treadmill of hopelessness. It is not an angry diatribe. Indeed, it is a full-length three-act play which examines the relationships, ambitions, and frustrations of the members of a struggling Jewish working – class family, the Berger. Clearly, the theory of economic determinism underlies *Awake and Sing!* There is no villain in the play except the economic system; the characters have all been gravely affected by their financial circumstances Moe and Morty, who have achieved success as capitalists, are crippled, me physically the other spiritually. The remaining characters are victimized by capitalism.

Awake and Sing! deals, no doubt, with a lower middle-class Jewish family in which characters with different temperaments are juxtaposed to highlight the various issues emerging out of the Depression. Portrayed as a miniature society, the Berger household consists of members who obviously assume allegorical significance; a dominant mother, a submissive father, a Marxist grandfather, a capitalist uncle, a radical son, a promiscuous daughter, a frustrated son-in-law and a bitter star boarder. “All of the characters,” says Odets, “share a fundamental activity: a struggle for life amidst petty conditions” (Mishra 70). The theme of *Awake and Sing!* is the perennial conflict between generations and Odets symbolically presents this conflict within the Berger household.

Gerald Rapkin observes:

“The basic image of *Awake and Sing!* is resurrection, the emergence of life from death. For the life of the Berger family in Depression – age America is spiritual death, dehumanized by a thousand irritants, frustrated by the exigencies of economic break down” (10).

The title *Awake and Sing!* is certainly an imperative call to awake from spiritual death and sing the songs of revolution in order that the blues can be eliminated. The person behind this imperative is Jacob, the spokesman of Odets. The characters in *Awake and Sing!* are extremely frustrated in their social relations, their normal development is blocked and as a consequence they seem to regress to primitive, or infantile, modes of desire and expression. As a result of their pervasive frustration on both the personal and the social level, the characters in *Awake and Sing!* evince strong aggressive drives and a preoccupation with death. It is still another mark of Odets’ skill as a playwright that he is able to fuse the death imagery of his language with the resurrection motif in the play. Somewhat similarly, *Paradise Lost* concludes with its middle-class, middle-aged protagonist, who has lost his home in a business failure, experiencing a sort of apocalyptic vision of the good life to be enjoyed soon by all men in a peaceful, fearless and presumably classless society. *Paradise Lost* (1936) presented the proposition that the middle class was dying and *Golden Boy* (1937) promoted the thesis that our materialistic society diverted men from humanly satisfying modes of self-realization. In *Golden Boy*, Odets continued to probe the themes of his previous plays but kept his political and economic theories in the background. The story of an Italian boy who abandons the fiddle for a fighting career, *Golden Boy* re-established Odets’s reputation as a leading dramatist. “Mr. Odets is the most promising writer our theatre can show” (Locher 440).

To conclude, it may be said that Clifford Odets privately harbored the belief that socialism offers the only solution for the social-economic problems. Perhaps his desire to share a comradely closeness to his fellowmen might attract him to those who hoped to bring about socialist society. The quality of his plays is young, lyrical, yearning – as of someone on the threshold of life. Odets may be called as the most accomplished of the American social protest dramatists of the nineteen-thirties.

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Language in India www.languageinindia.com ISSN 1930-2940 19:6 June 2019

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Twentieth Century American Dramatists.

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