Chapter III
Emerging from the Social Labyrinth
Gods of the Lightning, Winterset

And let me speak to the yet unknowing world
How these things came about. So shall you hear
Of carnal, bloody and unnatural acts,
Of accidental judgments, casual slaughters,
Of deaths put on by cunning and forc'd cause,
And, in this upshot, purposes mistook
Fall'n on the inventors' heads.

- Hamlet.

Tragedy of the classical matrix was toppled when Galileo projected his telescope across the sky and penetrated the tapestry of mythology with question marks. The gods of the past departed from the stage yielding their place to Fate. Man had always been a Lilliputian in the presence of Fate - irrevocable, awe-inspiring and relentless. Man has not changed; it is only man's perception of his moods, environment and manners that has changed. Nor has the concept of Fate altered. Yet Fate is no longer a Deus ex Machina. It has yielded its centre stage to socio-economic and political forces of various hues. Today, Fate is the social order, the inequality of classes, the variant economic cause of a submerged fraction. The interplay of these forces has produced social
problems whose cause is dissected by ideologically inclined diagnosticians who often come up with remedy far gruesome than the malady.

It is pertinent to understand what the term social problem means to appreciate dramatist's preoccupation in general with this facet of social reality. Social problem is a "problem in human relationships which seriously threatens society itself or impedes the important aspirations of many people." Left to them, social problems petrify and cause social ills that endanger the well-being of a society. A positive aspect of social problems is that they also provide laboratory materials for every age enabling the society to arrive at a solution. Very often the protest, and questioning that assail the dramatists come from this laboratory and the stage furnishes the platform to demonstrate the observations in terms of life situation.

A panacea that has come out of the crucible of societal laboratory is administration of justice. Society's belief and experience is that proper administration of justice reduces societal conflicts enabling individuals to realize their inner potentialities. However, the notion of justice is so plastic that it is amenable to varying interpretations. Justice concerns itself primarily with the duty of a society or a government to provide freedom, equality, and protection to all its citizens. Any factor that impinges on these fundamental rights is curbed by resorting to penal provisions, sans favour, sans discrimination. It is on this lofty principle that the modern
society functions. In practice, nevertheless, the administration of justice is abused with causes varying from ignorance of law to prejudice, ideological differences and parochialism.

Like the heroes of the classical plays who battled with gods, the protagonists of today's stage muse, "when things are like this and it isn't right but what can we do about it?" Through this gloom one can see some solutions in the yonder for, "the plays we see upon the stage today are the scientific treatises of yesterday, and the plays of tomorrow are being written in the laboratories of today." This link between theatre and societal problems focusing on justice has been a favourite tool of Anderson. His interest is not limited to legal justice but includes social justice, and often the seed of legal injustice is traced to social deprivation.

The dramatists who spotlight social problems can be categorized as those who take the individual "as the starting point for their interpretation of life's problem" and others "who consider the social organism, of which the individual is an inseparable part." Anderson rests Gods of the Lightning (1928) and Winterset (1935) on these divergent boards with the famous Sacco–Vanzetti case as the common bond. In Gods of the Lightning, the spotlight is on the social problems with several criss-crossing undercurrents. Caught in the vortex of societal problems, individuals become victims culminating in their death due to the maladministration of justice. In Winterset, the focus on the
protagonist captures his trials and tribulations both within and without. The dramatist brings to the foreground, social problems arising out of economic deprivation which has a significant bearing on the inadequacy of courts and legal system to deliver justice. By prospecting one upon another, Anderson has his characters and situations which can be perceived from these two points of view. Both coalesce into the common bond of justice or rather legal injustice thrown up by the Sacco-Vanzetti case. Through these plays, he succeeds in bringing into the active life of the theatre the elements of social tension which had characterized the Sacco-Vanzetti case.

Anderson was concerned with the problems of justice throughout his dramatic career. In First Flight (1925), he underscores that justice is one of the prime functions of government. Conscious of the injustice that accompanies power and property ownership, Rudolph in The Masque of Kings makes a scathing remark: “It was not gained justly. / The titles to possession all run back / to brigandage and murder” (MK 112). His pointed question to his father, Emperor Franz Joseph indicates Anderson’s quest: Tell me what rule / what guide, what standards, human or divine, can possibly direct a man or king / toward justice?” (MK 112).

Sheriff Gash, the representative of law and order in Key Largo, believes that the deciding factor for enjoying the protection of law is
money. He implies that justice is available only to those who can afford: “I’ve been in politics here all my life, [...] what you have to do is sell protection / to people that can pay, and then protect them the best you can” (KL 104). On the haunting refrain of the chorus in Lost in the Stars, “the wild justice is not found in the haunts of men” (LS 239), Arthur Tees comments that, “legal justice is an unreachable goal.”

Though Gods of the Lightning and Winterset deal with societal problems and legal injustice, there is variance of emphasis. In the former, Anderson is preoccupied with societal injustice which is the cause for conflicts that confront the protagonists. Perversion of legal institutions and procedures are the means adopted by the bigoted society to punish the protagonists. In the latter, the question addressed is primarily the meaning of justice, although there are undertones of social injustice as well. Anderson travels beyond the limited interest of legal injustice to the eternal problem of absolute justice in Winterset. A brief survey of the facts and the response of the then public to the Sacco–Vanzetti case will enable better appreciation of the message the playwright wants to convey in these plays.

If there was one incident of the 1920’s, which spotlighted a social event and had the entire world as it audience, it was the arrest, trial and execution of two Italian anarchists, Sacco and Vanzetti. Nicola Sacco, a shoemaker and Bartolomeo Vanzetti, a fish peddler were Italian
immigrants and political anarchists. "They were arrested on May 5, 1920 for the murders of a factory paymaster and a guard during a robbery (April 20, 1920) in South Braintree." Both were found guilty by jury verdict.

The case stirred profound interest in the United States and other countries. It stemmed from a belief that Sacco and Vanzetti were innocent and had been accused by mere accident and convicted not on evidence but largely because of unpopular political, social and religious views. The early 1920s was a time of widespread anti-alien and anti-radical hysteria. Protests were immediately made, accusing the Judge and the jury of prejudice against the defendants’ political beliefs and social status. People were genuinely perturbed that, "the awesome machinery of the state should be crushing out the lives of two innocent men. If this could happen in America, there was no refuge anywhere." In 1925, Celestino Madeiros gave evidence that the murders had actually been committed by a group known as the Morelli Gang. Because the trial could not be reopened without the approval of the trial Judge Webster Thayer, the Supreme Court of Massachusetts refused to order another trial. Sacco and Vanzetti were sentenced to death on April 9, 1927.

The Sacco - Vanzetti case provided the dynamics of crisis in a decade in which there were few other occasions to stir the public mind. The case shook the whole world and became a celebrated issue:
In Paris crowds gathered before the bulletin boards of the city's newspapers, waiting tensely for news from Massachusetts. Demonstrators crowded London's Hyde Park and marched past Buckingham Palace singing the "Red Flag and shouting "Sacco and Vanzetti must not die." Work came to a complete stop in Buenos Aires. Berlin mobs cheered speeches urging that American goods be boycotted if the two Italians died, and in Tokyo the United States embassy was guarded following the receipt of bombing threats.

Out of all this flurry gushed a flood of protest literature. The melodramatic potential for the revolutionary cause was soon realized. Works struck from the red-hot fires of social indignation, crowded newspapers and magazines. The most effective and most widely quoted works of literature came from Vanzetti himself before his death:

This is our career and our triumph. Never in our full life can we hope to do such work for tolerance, for justice, for man's understanding of man, as now we do by an accident. Our words—our lives—pains—nothing! The taking of our lives—lives of a good shoemaker and a poor fish peddler—all! That last moment belongs to us – that agony is our triumph.
Aroused by the gross judicial injustice, Anderson in *Gods of the Lightning* written in collaboration with Harold Hickerson, has graphically delineated his favourite theme of individual heroism in the midst of despair. "One of the most effective dramas of social protest [...]. Written out of an intense conviction, it never for a moment forgets that it has a purpose, and it hammers unceasingly at the point which it wishes to enforce," declares Joseph Wood Krutch.

The play centres around the trial and execution of Dante Capraro and James Macready for an alleged murder, the accused persons being none other than the original Vanzetti and Sacco respectively. Suvorin, the owner of a restaurant is cast after Madecios one of the actual personalities of the case. As the play opens, Capraro and Macready are busy organizing a strike for wage increase, while a robbery resulting in the death of the paymaster takes place without their knowledge. It is an unintentional murder, and the villain is Suvorin. But Capraro and Macready are arrested and charged with murder. The prosecution case is very weak and the witnesses are bullied into giving a tutored version of the incident before the court. The Judge is callous and indifferent to find whether the accused are really guilty of the charges. He believes that it is the duty of the jury. The jury is biased and swayed by the popular hatred for radical believers returns in a verdict of guilty. Suvorin's confession that he is the real perpetrator of the crime is not considered
as he has a previous criminal record. The Judge sentences Macready and Capraro to death by electrocution. Friends of the convicted persons anxiously wait for a last minute reprieve from the Governor. Belying their hope, the sentence is carried out.

The play did not fare well either with the audience or with the critics. The critics saw it as a social tract or a protest drama in journalistic tradition. For Shivers:

ideas are paramount, not characterization. Macready is not conceived along heroic lines; and the reader only feels sorry for him. Capraro fares no better. [...] The villains, with the exception of Suvorin, are so unrelievably evil as to make us doubt their basic humanity.¹⁰

Since Anderson's objective in this play is to expose injustice, both social and legal characterization has been given a back seat. Hence no internal conflict is experienced by the protagonists. The whole interest of the play is marshalled around the clash of ideas and the conflict that occurs is mainly ideological which can be analysed from the point of view of a few broad categories. Though the paramount conflict is the social injustice meted out to the protagonists by a prejudiced society, Anderson has used it as a prism to refract the components revealing three major strata: economic conflict; conflict among the proletariat; the conflict generated by the maladministration of justice.
In the economic conflict, the workers are shown as victims engaged in a grim battle with an oppressive economic system. Gilbert Seldes opines: "The enemy in the play is the capitalist system." Incidentally, religious views are criticised and traditional religion denounced for its subservient role to the capitalistic system. The conflict among the workers arises out of the divergence of approach to the question of their rights, and the methods of amelioration of their plight. Similarly, though antagonism to the capitalistic system unites the protagonists, there is ideological conflict among them. The conflict between the judicial system and the protagonists provides the dramatic intensity and dynamics to the play.

The capitalist system is based on the principle that individual freedom in all spheres of activity is sacrosanct. It operates on the premise that man should be free to pursue his business interest with least interference from government. It respects individual liberty to profess any religious belief. Anderson shows that though the capitalistic system might guarantee individual freedom, only a few enjoy it and that too at the expense of a vast majority. He censures the unethical partnership of big money and venal politicians which while producing wealth for a few, keeps others economically enslaved. He is sceptical of its achievement on economic front.
Common man is pictured as a victim of merciless economic forces. The condition of the worker is no different. They are yoked to a system that has pauperised them so much that they vote to end a strike for higher wages as "they owe a little money at the corner grocery" (GL 539). The pathos of the situation is that the workers are on the verge of winning concession from a beleaguered management, when they take this self-defeatist decision. In the conflict with the capitalistic system, man emerges as a badly mauled personality. Anderson depicts him as devoid of his dignity, subjected to merciless exploitation and reduced to the level of a slave – a picture which tallies with the one painted by the Marxists. Vincent Wall explains Anderson's views on economic conflict in a capital society: "He believes in the class struggle and he even feels that the capitalistic system is worse than the Marxists claim that it is: it is so bad that it can't be changed." By portraying the travails of the masses graphically and sympathetically, Anderson exposes capitalist system as a hideous monster.

Religion is also a target of attack in the play. Though not shown in direct conflict with the protagonists, it plays an accessorial role. According to the protagonists, especially Mac who acts as the spokesman, religion is yet another cord used by the capitalist system to bind the socially deprived and keep them ever subjugated. Ike views it as other-worldly, impractical and of no utilitarian value. His distortion of a Salvation
Army song to express the other-worldliness of religion reveals the conflict between religion and the materialistic ideology:

Watch and pray, live on hay,
You'll get pie in the sky bye and bye. (GL 539)

He finds fault with the Salvation Army’s grand picture of heaven: “You’re liable to create a false impression. Heaven ain’t like that” (GL 539). To him, religious people should be concerned with oneself instead of going around preaching. Religion is no more than a handmaid of the big money and big government which conspires to make the individual subservient to the exploitive system. It is nothing but a ‘pious fraud’ (GL 539). The accent on moral values is an invisible chain that keeps the individual enslaved. Mac’s outburst captures the unintended decline of values and the antithetical effect produced by religious teaching:

Teach ‘em temperance so they’ll work steadier, teach ‘em to turn the other cheek, so they won’t make trouble when they’re robbed, teach ‘em to judge not, so we can jail ‘em and murder ‘em without a come-back. Make’em all good slaves in the name of Jesus Christ.” (GL 539)

Religion is, thus, portrayed as a tool in the hands of the capitalists and is seen as an agent perpetrating economic inequality. In the conflict between the workers and the capitalists, though it maintains a semblance of neutrality, its sympathies are shown to lie with the latter. The scathing
observation of Mac, "No wonder the Rockefellers are good Baptists!" (GL 540), makes evident the unholy alliance of religion and capitalism.

Anderson focuses on the divisive forces within the workers to demonstrate that the entire blame for their plight cannot be laid at the doors of the capitalists alone. He lays bare how divided the proletarian society is which in turn raises conflicts regarding the purpose and method of confronting capitalism. For all their claim of unity, the worker's union is not monolithic. Broadly it gets divided into two groups: workers and leaders. The vision of the workers is limited to securing a wage raise and fulfilment of their immediate needs. In Mac's assessment, they are slaves to their jobs, and their families and their first consideration is their own livelihood. The vision of the leaders is wide. They want to secure liberty, freedom – ideas which do not make much sense to the workers. This variance in the vision leads to conflict and its effect is seen in the incident when all the radicals in the union are voted out and all anarchist literature from the union room is removed fearing police raid. Baner says: "no more desk room for radicals, for any price. No more I.W.W.'s, no more anarchists, only straight union activities" (GL 536). No wonder the strike ends in failure. Mac's lament underscores the chasm separating the workers and the leaders:

That's the way it goes. You win a strike for 'em – have it all wrapped up and laid on the table like a Christmas present
- and they’re afraid to take it! You’ve got to feed ‘em higher wages like horse-medicine! (GL 537)

Rosalie’s pithy comment to Mac about the workers, “All I know is they aren’t worth it – and they don’t care how much you do for them!” (GL 540), accentuates the dichotomy between the idealism of a few and the utilitarianism of the majority. This in turn creates conflict which is prejudicial to the welfare of the workers and instrumental in keeping them shackled to an exploitive system.

Though the vision of the leaders is wider, Anderson reveals that they are not altruists. Strikes are organized not in furtherance of the welfare of workers alone, but with a personal stake, as revealed in Mac’s bragging: “Everywhere I go there’s a strike. I seem to take ‘em with me” (GL 533). His admission, “I get a hell of a lot of fun out of it” (GL 540) is a travesty of the high cause which the leaders are said to uphold. Anderson depicts the leaders as nothing more than amateurs who look upon workers ‘as flies to wanton boys’ no matter even if their livelihoods were threatened. Rosalie makes a pertinent observation that leaders personal aggrandizement and delusive greatness are the motives behind organizing strikes: “You start strikes because you like to be in a fight and you run them because you like to act like a tin Napoleon” (GL 540).

Anderson sees the leaders as bereft of skill to devise practical methods to realize their aims. Instead they “are dreamers, thinking to
make over the earth," while in reality they "are fools" (GL 542). If some one is very smart and committed to the cause of workers, he turns out to be a spy. Suvorin’s dejected confession, “All my life I listen for one rebel, and when I have thought to find him I have looked under his lapel for the badge. When I find him he is a spy – always!” (GL 542), mirrors the predicament of a committed leader. To put in a nutshell, Anderson presents the community of workers as a house divided, myopic in vision and led by persons without talents in the battle against the well-entrenched capitalist system. He appears to hold the view that given the fissures of the working class and the lack of practical wisdom on the part of their leaders, their lot will be to be whipped by their oppressors; he sees no victory for the workers in this conflict.

Yet another spectrum of the conflict is between Capraro, Mac and Suvorin with regard to their ideological perceptions. Capraro is a die-hard anarchist. Anarchism which “comes from a Greek word meaning without government, is a belief that every form of regulation or government is immoral, and that restraint of one person by another is an evil which must be destroyed.” Therefore, Capraro holds that when violence is employed even for avenging the murder of an innocent man like Bardi, it is evil. To him violence for any purpose is evil. He cautions Mac: “When you take violence into your hands, you lower yourself to the level of government, which is the origin of crime and
evil" (GL 539). Being a pure anarchist, he believes that doing away with government is equivalent to solving the evil as he considers government the fountainhead of all evil. Though an avowed anarchist, Mac is less philosophical and more practical. “The government's nothing so important. It's a police system, to protect the wealth of the wealthy” (GL 539). Suvorin is even more realistic; he believes that there is no government but a coterie of power mongers: “I tell you there is no government—there are only brigands in power who fight for more power!” (GL 542). It is a foolhardy effort to organize strike to change a nebulous entity called government when in reality no such thing exists.

The final sentencing scene brings out the ideological difference in perception of the protagonists. Mac pleads he is not guilty of murder but if he were to be found guilty of being a radical, he would accept it. He is prepared to face death: “I'm guilty of thinking like a free man and talking like a free man and acting like a free man—and the jury didn't like it and you don't like it—and so the logical thing is to put me where I can't do it any more” (GL 560). But Capraro's attitude is different. He believes that he is totally innocent and that he is guilty of no crime, not even of being an anarchist. He points out that everyone, including the Judge, will die one day and so death as such has no relevance. Killing him will only prove the truth of his anarchist ideology:
If you kill us in this one-time free city, in this one-time free country, kill us for no wrong we have done but only for passion of prejudice and greed, then there is no answer to me, no answer to the anarchist who says the power of the State is power for corruption, and in my silence I will silence you (GL 561).

This cleavage in the perception of ideologies does not, however, affect their conviction that the capitalist system is an encroacher of individual liberty and exploiter of the workers. Except that this conflict of ideology serves to highlight the fact that no single ideological system or method can bring forth the economic freedom of workers, it does not in any manner retard the protagonists' fight for the interest of the workers.

Anderson deals with the conflicts analysed so far in a subdued manner, but the conflict between the protagonists and the judiciary assumes the centre stage in the play, with the judge and the jury presented in repulsive roles. In this conflict, the courts and the police are shown as decadent institutions. They do not ensure justice to the poor; the police do not protect the weak; the nation's flag is not a symbol of liberty. All these organs and symbols of power are used, according to Mac, "to protect capital and keep the working man in his place! Whenever there's a law that might be to the working man's advantage, you forget that one!" (GL 554). Capraro is even more candid. To him the national flag
appears to ask, "How much money have you? If you have plenty of money – then I promise you paradise – I will give you more – I will give you the justice and freedom of your neighbors!" (GL 557). The hallowed principles of justice and freedom are shown to be purchasable commodities. Suvorin deduces that justice in the capitalist system is only for the rich: “I set myself to establish justice to the workers. [...] They found me guilty of sabotage and sent me to prison” (GL 559).

The judicial machinery is thoroughly corrupted, incompetent, and an eager partner of the capitalists system to put down the labour class. It is portrayed as an instrument that makes a mockery of justice: “The district attorney is presented as one heartily sick of the frauds and frame-ups by which he is compelled to win his case, the capitalist as cruel and blood thirsty monsters, the judge as a cold machine who barely fails to make clear his prejudices.”¹⁴ The play depicts how diabolically manipulative the prosecution is and how the jury are mere pawns in their hand moved by passion and prejudice. “You tell that jury a man’s a radical and the whole twelve will vote to hang him” (GL 547). The witnesses are not objective observers called upon to tell the facts or truth. In that system there is no place for truth or facts for it would be disastrous to their narrow goal of declaring the accused guilty. What is expected at the witness box is a story – yes, story and not facts: “When you start swearing to evidence there’s only one safe thing to do – and
that's tell one story and stick to it" (GL 546). This anxious advice of the prosecutor to the tutored witness makes a mockery of the trial and shows that in a capitalist system, justice is administered in a way no different from the kangaroo courts of dictators.

The protagonists' conflict with the judicial system is one-sided from the inception to the end and the victims are helpless. Even before the trial starts, Vail, the presiding Judge is convinced that the accused will be found guilty. He confesses that, “I long ago gave up trying to decide who was innocent and who was guilty” (GL 545). The abdication of his role in a cavalier fashion merely on a technical ground, “That's the jury's business” (GL 545), shows administration of justice in the capitalist system in poor light. Salter's comment about Vail is significant: “He’s been dead from the neck up for twenty-five years. And from the neck down for about forty – otherwise he's fine” (GL 545). The implication is that law is dead and the oppressed cannot find succour in courts.

Through the conflicts experienced by the protagonists, Anderson unveils the bleak fact that the major components of the society in a capitalist system – the government, the court and the religion have one and the same purpose of exploiting the masses. These are viewed as symbols of an exploitive system, each feeding on the other and supplying the substance for the subjugation of the working class. Yet Gods of the Lightning does not reveal Anderson's subscription to any social or
political ideology. Though there is an unmistaken echo of Marxist thunder when the protagonists fulminate against these icons of capitalism, Anderson was no Marxist. Vincent Wall adduces two reasons for this: “First, Anderson is too much of an individualist; and second, he is too convinced that government is and always has been exploitation.”

John Gassner’s observation that the inspiration for *Gods of the Lightning*, “comes neither from Marx nor Lenin but from Bakunin, Sorel, and Kropotkin, the philosophers of anarchism and syndicalism whom the Marxists regarded as confused idealists,” has to be understood in the proper context for if Anderson was not a Marxist, he was not an anarchist either. Unlike “Anarchists who believe, all public governments conflict with personal liberty and are unnecessary,” Anderson recognized that absence of government would result in a chaotic society where only the rule of the jungle would prevail. He believed in democracy as it encroached the liberty of the individual least. Whatever be the source of Anderson’s inspiration, the thrust of the play is against the evils spawned by the capitalist system and its subversion of courts, banks, church and police resulting in social injustice. The play has not been employed as a vehicle to preach the superiority of any ideology.

*Gods of the Lightning* is thus a protest against social injustice that culminates in legal injustice. It is a propaganda play where Anderson uses the theatre to make men see and believe facts they are not aware
of or to believe enough to fight for. However, the contemporary reaction of the public was divergent. Many felt that there was miscarriage of justice. Some said: “Too bad, but what’s done cannot be undone. They were anarchists, anyway.” Others felt, “They’re dead; to whom can it matter now?”

Winterset was Anderson’s smouldering response to that question whether injustice ended in the electrocution chair. While Gods of the Lightning expresses Anderson’s preoccupation with conflicts produced by societal forces due to the anarchist views held by the protagonists, Winterset portrays the aftermath of the conflict and its post-facto effects on some of the characters of the incident and on the next generation of the victims of injustice. Anderson hammers in the view that denial of justice leaves an unalterable emotional scar.

Winterset is “significant for its several ‘firsts’: it was the first time that anyone had seriously tried on the professional stage a poetic tragedy with a contemporary setting; and it won for its author the first Drama Critics Circle Award ever given.” Eugene O’Neill praised the group for honouring Anderson’s “splendid contribution. Mr. Anderson’s work was made to what is finest in the American Theatre.” Anderson’s most felicitous use of poetic dialogue echoes Shakespeare. “He intended his figures to be realistic in life, but poetic in thought and speech.” The play depicts the thoughtful treatment of the universal theme of a lone individual’s search for justice. Anderson himself wrote on the problem of using verse in contemporary drama:
Winterset is largely in verse, and treats a contemporary tragic theme, which makes it more of an experiment than I could wish, [...] Whether or not I have solved the problem in Winterset is probably of little moment. But it must be solved if we are to have a great theatre in America.  

The play marks Anderson's second use of the Sacco-Vanzetti case. Judge Gaunt is the chief connecting link between the two plays. He is Judge Vail, older, careworn, and broken over the murder trial. Romagna whose electrocution sets his son on an Oedipus-like quest is none other than a fusion of Macready and Capraro. Garth is a reincarnation of Suvorin. If Gods of the Lightning offers a contemporary true story, Winterset romanticizes a possible aftermath of reconciliation. The crux of the plot is a meeting between the son of a man wrongly executed for murder and the Judge who sentenced him, the son hunting for evidence to clear his father's name and the judge wandering all over to jabber about the case to any one who will listen. A broader understanding of the story would throw light on Anderson's handling of conflicts generated by the encounter.

Romagna, an Italian - American radical was electrocuted for a murder he did not commit thirteen years before the story begins. Trock Estrella, the real murderer and gangster goes to prison on a different charge. Mio Romagna, the son of the victim suffers from the prejudice
of the society and wanders about determined to vindicate the innocence of his father. Thirteen years later, a professor exhumes the Romagna case, and comes out with a finding that an important witness was not produced during the trial. When the play begins, Mio accompanied by his friend Carr visits a tenement under the Manhattan bridge to track Garth Esdras, the eyewitness of the murder for which his father was executed. He meets Miriamne, the fifteen-year old daughter of a kind and philosophical rabbi Esdras. He falls in love with her not knowing that she is the sister of Garth Esdras, the very man he is seeking. Trock now out of prison learns that the new evidence unearthed by the professor might re-open the case and threatens Garth into silence.

Judge Gaunt driven to insanity by the conflict of the uncertainties which has been turbulent in his mind since Romagna's case, converges to this place in search of Garth to prove his verdict was flawless. Fearing Gaunt, Trock orders his cohort Shadow to kill him and when Shadow refuses, he has the latter killed and thrown into the river. An altercation ensues among the leading characters regarding the innocence of Romagna. While Garth denies any knowledge of the real culprit, Judge Gaunt argues and almost convinces Mio that his father was guilty. The turning point takes place when the dying Shadow staggers in. Trock now frightened blurts out the truth that Romagna was innocent. Having learnt the truth of his father's innocence and captured by Miriamne's
love, Mio loses the desire for revenge. He pleads: "But teach me how to live / and forget to hate!" (WS 125). In the end, as the lovers know the identity of the real murderers, they are killed by Trock’s henchmen.

The conflict in the play can be approached from several layers. Anderson has knit several strands to form an organic whole which converge mainly on the philosophical connotation of justice. If *Gods of the Lightning* has several sub-currents of social conflicts arising out of economic inequality culminating in legal injustice, *Winterset* focuses almost exclusively on conflicts involving the meaning of justice.

Sequel to this preoccupation, Anderson has assigned paramount importance to the interpretation of what justice is. The conflict in the play which has debilitating effect on the personal lives of the individuals concerned centres around this issue. The perception of the protagonist and the other two leading characters, Justice Gaunt and Esdras produces external conflict and stirs internal conflict as well which modulate their action. Apart from this, there are several tributaries of external and internal conflict originating from other characters which confluence in the basic issue of justice.

The internal and external conflicts in the play increase the depth in characterization:
Mio between his wish to clear his father's name and his love of Miriamne; Miriamne between her love of Mio and her loyalty to her brother; Esdras between his sense of righteousness and his love for his son; Judge Gaunt between his desire to justify his judicial record and a haunting fear that he has been guilty of perversion of justice. Even Trock, bent as he is on wiping out all record of his connection with the Romagna case is haunted by the knowledge that he has only six months to live.²³

Upon these inner conflicts are built the external contentions. The external forces pitted against Mio focalise on Trock who committed the murder for which Romagna was electrocuted; on Judge Gaunt who presided over the trial and sentenced Romagna to death; on Garth who witnessed the murder but who is silenced by threats; on Garth's younger sister Miriamne with whom Mio falls in love, and their father Esdras, a gentle and wise old man, whose function in the play is similar to that of a Greek chorus.

The exposition of the intricate conflicting motives which animate Trock, Mio, Judge Gaunt, and the Esdras family is brilliantly accomplished in the masterly first act which also sets the tone for Anderson's familiar thesis that corruption is incidental to the holding of power and the class nature of justice, which he first attacked in Gods of the Lightning. In
the background of the clash of these individuals is the conflict between justice that is prejudicial and injustice that is the common lot of the lower classes. The external and internal conflicts experienced by these diverse characters have been subordinated to the conflict regarding justice as perceived by the three characters: Mio, Justice Gaunt and Esdras.

Mio’s comprehension of justice is coloured by the cruel death of his father. It impels him to a state of internal strife which has no parallels. Unlike revenge tragedies, his professed mission is not to extract an eye for an eye. Contrarily he appears to be motivated by a nobler purpose of vindicating his father’s innocence by exposing the real culprit behind the murder. This is the mission statement at the beginning of his quest. The ostensible purpose stands contradicted on a closer examination of his actions and words which reveals that the motivating factor is crude revenge as seen in revenge tragedies. His confession to Miriamne, “I’ve lost my taste love for revenge” (WS 125), speaks for the inherent darker side of his character. The thirst for revenge lurks within the innermost recess of his mind and is in war with his better self. The result of the internal strife is that he is like a pugnacious bull looking around to charge the matador who is elusive and invisible. The internal conflict regarding the goal of his life – whether to clear his father’s name or to settle score with the perpetrators of crime is caused directly by his perception of justice.
In reality, Mio is ignorant of what justice is as he has known only injustice and consequent economic and social privation. His comprehension of justice is limited to vindicating his father's innocence and this inability to perceive the true nature of justice is the principal factor behind the revenge motive. He equates justice with retribution and erroneously concludes that justice can be accomplished when the real culprits are exposed from whence he expects law to take over.

Since revenge motif runs high in the play, it is imperative to have a closer view of Mio's character to understand his internal conflicts. Mio's battles are with the forces that afflict him equally from within and without. From without, he is battered socially and economically that leaves him spiteful towards all humanity and towards God. His mental trauma emerges from personal history that alienates him from the society:

When the State executes your father, and your mother dies of grief, and you know damn well he was innocent, and the authorities of your home town politely inform you they'd consider it a favor if you lived somewhere else – 'hat cuts you off from the world – with a meat-axe. (WS 26)

The execution of his father for a murder he did not commit makes him an outcast. He had to leave high school because he had no permanent address; he tells Miriamne, “the hearths of Brooklyn, and [...] the love-nests of Manhattan—they turn their points / like knives
against me – outcast of the world, / snake in the streets” (WS 45). Bereft of love and socially alienated, Mio embarks on the quest to prove his father innocent. The seeds of revenge are sown by the society itself.

The revenge motif holds a subtle conflict within. What does Mio aspire at the end of his quest? Does he seek to expose falsehood and prove his father innocent or does he seek retaliation for the wounds inflicted by the society? He admits to Miriamne, “there’s too much black / whirling inside me – for any girl to know” (WS 44). The recollections of the humiliating suffering of the past torture him. He recalls with intense agony the death of his mother and her quick cheap burial. He painfully remembers how people taunted him asking why the Romagna spawn – Mio would not die with his mother and clamoured: “ease him out of town, / ease him out, boys, and see you’re not too gentle” (WS 30). The economic angle to the injustice meted out to Romangna is highlighted by Anderson. Shunned by the society, Mio had to live homeless, finding food and shelter wherever he could – a condition that would obliterate notions of right and wrong. The economic deprivation is also a strong motivation for his intense desire to unearth the truth:

I’ve got to find out who did it
and make them see it till it scalds their eyes
and make them admit it till their tongues are blistered
with saying how black they lied! (WS 30)
The second is the psychological delusion from the shock which Mio suffers. Asserting that his father's voice rises to him from the quicklime where he was buried after electrocution and evisceration, he gives a graphic description of the vice-like grip it has on him:

It won't let me alone. I've tried to live
and forget it – but I was birthmarked with hot iron
into the entrails. (WS 30)

The cumulative effect of the conflict on the protagonist is that he is in a Hamlet-like situation. Critics take *Winterset* to be a revenge tragedy per se and strike a comparison between Mio and Hamlet. Nonetheless, it should be realized that Mio is driven to seek revenge not as much for his father's honour as for his own treatment by the society as the foregoing analysis reveals. This dual purpose invests his personality with an enigma and keeps the revenge motive within wraps till alienation grooms him bitter and recriminatory and sharpens his revenge. From Mio's point of view justice is retribution in which evil is punished. An eye for eye and tooth for tooth is the guiding motive behind his quest. The root cause of the conflict is to be laid at the door of societal forces.

Dramatic parallels and questions of justice and evil are juxtaposed in the play. If the object of Oedipus was to find the culprit, the motive of Mio's in *Winterset* is to prove that his father was not a culprit. Oedipus is in pursuit of truth, whereas Mio feels sure he knows the truth and
strives to investigate the proof for revenge. Each hero stands alone and each makes a discovery which ironically enough ends his search, but brings in misery.

Seen from Judge Gaunt's view, justice is a mere mechanical exercise of weighing the evidence and complying with the procedural formalities. He does not seem to believe in any abstract thing as justice. Though mentally disoriented, the Judge takes the stand that "justice, in the main, is governed by opinion" (WS 99). Unconsciously he echoes Carr's view that justice in a capitalistic system is a purchasable commodity. To him there is nothing as absolute justice that would require dispassionate enforcement. Portrayed as a senile and deranged old man recalling the character of King Lear, Judge Gaunt is convinced of the fairness of his role in sentencing Romagna to death:

Certain laws

seem cruel in their operation; it's necessary

that we be cruel to uphold them. This cruelty

is kindness to those I serve. (WS 73)

It must be said to the credit of Gaunt that his conviction of judicial correctness is so intense that even Mio after being subjected to series of hard questioning begins to harbour doubts about the innocence of his father for the first time. "The complexity of his character makes him 'a
Shakespearean victim of conscience' rather than a victim of enraged public opinion.”

Anderson does not forcefully portray the internal conflict produced by guilt, but nevertheless delineates Gaunt as a victim of guilt arising out of the execution of Romagna. His assertion that in the Anglo-Saxon law it is only the jury that finds guilt or innocence itself proves that his remorse born out of guilt is profound. Despite his protestation that “The judge is powerless in that matter” (WS 76), his conscience is not free of burden and it recalls the scene of Pilate washing his hands after sentencing Christ under duress from a bigoted mob. Though he knows very well that Romagna was sentenced for reasons not entirely connected with murder, like Pilate he tries to take shelter under the pretext that “Romagna was found guilty / by all due process of law” (WS 71), and after offering him, “chance to prove his innocence” (WS 71).

Gaunt regards justice as an expendable commodity meant to subserve the needs of society. He equates justice with law and considers that the burden of a judge is to judge “with clarity, / with truth, with what mercy is found consonant / with order and law” (WS 74). He notes that “Without law men are beasts” (WS 74), and it is the duty of a judge to uphold them, lest “a gap is made / in the dykes that hold back anarchy and chaos” (WS 75). Yet for all his attempts to win approbation for his action, the Judge is gnawed from within. His confession to Mio when
Trock is revealed as the culprit is a manifestation of the latent internal conflict experienced:

The man you defend

was unfortunate – and his misfortune bore

almost as heavily on me. – I'm broken –

broken across. (WS 99)

Despite this confession, Judge Gaunt does not harbour even a faint notion that there is a concept like absolute justice. This stands proved by his cynical statement: “Only the young love truth and justice” (WS 93). He is a victim of his society's conviction and remains a person who unsuccessfully stifles his conscience, with terrible side-effects. Anderson presents him as a symbol of conservative and traditional forces of the society.

Rabbi Esdra's attitude to justice is tainted by his anxiety to save his son Garth. This makes him a relativist with a perception of justice that changes like a kaleidoscope. After fifty years of studying Talmud and twenty more years of reading which ended with Ecclesiastes, he learns that “words shift their meaning” (WS 59). He finds no amount of searching and probing will reveal the true nature of things. Truth and justice are abstract things having their existence in the esoteric world of ideas:

We ask for truth

and justice. But this truth's a thing unknown
in the lightest, smallest matter – and as for justice, who has once seen it done? (WS 71)

He believes that all human achievement is built on injustice: “the ground we walk on is impacted down / and hard with blood and bones of those who died unjustly” (WS 70). Being guided entirely by practical utility, he finds Mio’s quest to clear his father’s name a dangerous attempt harbouring within a potential for spilling more blood without achieving its purpose. His pointed question and answer to Mio sums up his attitude to justice as something mythical and untenable in the realm of reality:

What will be changed
if it comes to trial again? More blood poured out
to a mythical justice, but your father lying still
where he lies now. (WS 109)

The reason for this attitude is the fear that Mio’s mission might endanger his son’s life. When Mio threatens him that the unfolding events may implicate his son, he pleads pathetically: “He’s my only son. Let him live” (WS 118).

Anderson has approached the meaning of justice from the point of view of three categories of persons: Mio the victim of injustice, Judge Gaunt the perpetrator of injustice, and Esdras an interested party who does not want the truth to prevail lest his son’s life is in jeopardy. There
is a class conflict in their perception. For Mio, justice is an abstract thing beyond his comprehension. Strangely, the same view is entertained by the other two persons. For Judge Gaunt, a vendor of fish seems not worthy enough to receive justice. Esdras is cynical to the extent of declaring, "there is no truth" (WS 117). In the point of view of the three leading characters analysed, there is a well-marked meeting ground in that all of them do not appear to believe in absolute justice: Justice that is not susceptible to personal prejudice and socio-economic forces; justice which exists beyond the letter of law and courtroom; justice that is not awed by the rich, and indifferent to the poor. This raises the question whether Anderson has no belief in absolute justice.

According to Bailey, "Justice is not the whole truth, the whole good." She sees in Mio's admission, "I came here seeking / light in darkness, running from the dawn, / and stumbled on a morning" (WS 127), not an attainment of, "theoretical absolute good." However, a satisfactory answer can be found in the response of the leading characters in Winterset. Though these characters seek to vindicate their stand, they suffer from the impact of injustice. In other words, though they are divided on what constitutes justice, the impact of the antithetical element of injustice brings about a unity of response. In the case of Judge Gaunt and Rabbi Esdras, it takes the form of guilt-ridden conscience. Esdras, despite his initial declaration: "There's no guilt under
heaven, / just as there's no heaven, till men believe it” (WS 19), confesses towards the end: “They're guilty hands” (WS 118). Though Judge Gaunt pompously proclaims, “My record’s clean. I've kept it so” (WS 74), he admits that he was haunted by one spectre like Mio, “pleading and holding out its hands / to be delivered from shame?” (WS 79). By portraying the judge as a deranged person, Anderson has shown the pathological effect of guilt.

One may deny the existence of absolute justice, yet its presence stands proved by the existence of its antithesis. If injustice and guilt are a reality, then the positive corollary of absolute justice is a fact, though this may not be apparently visible in the world. Man's effort is to uphold this truth and strive on. Though there may be 'no clue', and only a 'masterless night' one should aim for something higher than one self even if it is “dim in distance” so that it makes one an “emperor of the endless dark even in seeking!” (WS 133).

Another level in which conflict operates in Winterset is between justice and evil and is manifest both as external and internal forces. Anderson has translated a crime play and has endowed it with a general attitude to life in which the questions of justice and evil are juxtaposed. Joseph Wood Kruch comments:

while the time is the present and the plot one which might serve for a tragic melodrama, the whole emphasis of the
treatment is such as to stress the eternal rather than the local aspects of the passions involved and to lay the emphasis less upon the action itself than upon its reverberations in the souls. 26

The fervour that possessed Anderson at the time of Sacco-Vanzetti case is now turned into a probe for the resolution of the fundamental forces of justice and evil over the related problem of social injustice. In Winterset he assimilates and reorients himself in relation to the heedless depravity of the world and aims to strike a concord. Though there are political and social implications in Winterset, they are not those of a pamphleteer but of Hamlet who curses fate because the world is out of joint. Brooks Atkinson observes: “Winterset lives on a plane of high thinking deep emotion and eloquent writing. It is packed with terror. It is a courageous poem to justice and integrity.” 27

Mio’s external conflict with Trock, the gangster highlights the universal force of evil and power which the individual has to externally battle with to establish justice. “Though allied with the evil of political injustice and corruption, Trock and his obsession go beyond the limited symbolism of the political protest plays”. 28. He is the malicious force of evil that must be routed if Mio is to find truth and justice that will restore meaning to his life. In portraying Mio’s struggle, Anderson “seems to protest personally against what he regards as the inevitable defeat of
the honest person by the lawless and ruthless elements of society."\textsuperscript{29} Mio's mission is half-won when he learns the truth he was searching that Trock is the murderer of the paymaster which fortifies his conviction in the nobility and innocence of his father:

\begin{quote}
All my life long

I've wanted only one thing, to say to the world

and prove it: the man you killed was clean and true

[...] I can say that now

and give my proofs. (\textbf{WS 110})
\end{quote}

In the external battle with evil, Mio becomes a victim. But his death along with his beloved in the hands of Trock's henchmen is not a triumph of the evil. Before he meets his tragic end, he is a changed man. Earlier, because of the great burden of bitterness over his father's judicial murder he loses all belief in traditional virtues. Belief, he tells Miriamne:

\begin{quote}
It's, easy if you're a fool. You see the words

in books. Honor, it says there, chivalry, freedom,

heroism, enduring love – and these

are words on paper. It's something to have them there

You'll get them nowhere else. (\textbf{WS 45})
\end{quote}

Having been judicially orphaned as a child and being exposed to harsh realities of life ever since, he faults the modern scientific age for
vitiating the traditional value of love. "This men called love / in happier times, before the Freudians taught us / to blame it on the glands" (WS 47). Like many other moderns, Mio had once wondered if the devils had not won in that old celestial war with the angels. Only at the end, when he sees that old Esdras who has no illusions and no romantic belief in truth and justice, can still do an unselfish deed of risking his life to save Mio and when he sees the depth of Miriamne's love can he believe that perhaps the angels won. Under Miriamne's tutelage of love he even loses his hate and his longing for revenge.

It is the sweetness and simple womanliness of Miramne that draws Mio from his vision of hate and revenge. It is Miriamne's love for him and his for her which impel the lad to put aside his desire to proclaim his father's innocence that would implicate her brother Garth. It is a heroic sacrifice motivated by love which purges all hatred, all passion for injustice, all contempt for the vicious world about him. He begs Miriamne:

    teach me a treason to what I am, and have been,
    [...] I think I'm waking
    from a long trauma of hate and fear and death
    that's hemmed me from my birth -
    [...] But teach me how to live
    and forget to hate! (WS 125)
Mio achieves a nobler code of life through the love which she awakens in him. Miriamne comes to represent warmth and in this connection religious figures are abruptly introduced evidently to suggest conflict between this love and Mio's hate and how a concord could be achieved:

Why, girl, the transfiguration on the mount was nothing to your face. It lights from within –
a white chalice holding fire, a flower in flame, this is your face. (WS 49)

The reference to the transfiguration scene is an indication that love is the true regenerating agent of a broken society. The appearance of Moses, the law-giver on the Mount of Transfiguration typifies the emphasis on the old dictum of an eye for an eye and tooth for a tooth. The presence of Jesus counter poses this stern requirement with the message of all encompassing love. The burning love of Miriamne extinguishes the flames of hatred and revenge in the heart of Mio. The white chalice stands for personal sacrifice and ennoblement in the face of injustice, in the manner of Christ's acceptance of his death. Mio becomes a changed person, cured of the cynicism about the eternal values of heroism, chivalry, freedom and love.

Edith Isaacs records: "It mattered so much to Maxwell Anderson that for years the 'why' and 'upon whom' social injustice wreaks its final
vengeance has burned in the crucible of his imagination." The answer comes in the form of this poetic play, this exciting story of how such wrong festers in the society until it destroys the mind of the Judge who fears that he may have made an error in convicting an innocent man; wrecks the victim's son who wanders through his whole life in search of evidence to prove his father's innocence, alone except for a great hate of society, adds the last measure of brutality to the leader of a gang who ordered the murder and to the henchman who fired the gun, involves a boy who was a witness to the shooting but kept his mouth shut to save his skin. The boy's old father who has no place in any world that is newer than the Talmud, and the boy's younger sister who by an accident of fate is the final link in the chain between innocence and crime, love and hate, life and death.

When the lovers face death, the old father sees their determination not to yield to despair. It is in the rediscovery in modern life of such values as love, generosity and faith that the significance of the play lies.

*Winterset* remains a real contribution to the theatre, not only in itself, but in the spirit it introduces. In it Maxwell Anderson proves himself first and foremost a prophet of the things of the spirit. [...] We can call him a moralist. Tired of the paeans of praise of the things of the flesh, he has turned to the mind and soul of man.
Though Anderson has given his voice for the oppressed in his plays *Gods of the Lightning* and *Winterset*, there is no propensity to broadcast any socio-political ideology. With Fate yielding the central place to socio-political forces in the modern times, the protagonists’ battle become centralized around these forces and solution is sought in external mitigation of these forces. However, with Anderson, the emphasis is laid on the protagonists’ response rather than solution, for he believed, “that men are better than they think they are, and this message needs to be said over and over again in every tongue lest the race lose faith in itself entirely.” This enables him stay clear of the ideological trappings and keep the interest centred on the individual will.

These two plays are an exaltation of the indomitable power of the individual will which cannot be subdued by any force. The spectacle of two individuals courageously facing the might of an entire social system when their will has been sparked by the belief in an ideology makes a memorable effect in the *Gods of the Lightning*. The struggle portrayed goes beyond their physical annihilation. It is an attempt by a prejudiced society to overpower individual will and deny it the freedom to pursue its ideals. Even in the society’s apparent success in silencing them, the protagonists emerge victorious in their death which they face with dignity. Anderson has invested them with a hallow worthy of a martyr. Despite
the overtones of class conflict heard in the play, it is the celebration of
the individual will that captures attention.

Similarly in *Winterset*, Anderson posits that though social order
and economic forces tend to pervert justice, the will of the individual
need not remain shackled and accept injustice. Mere striving is enough
and will reap its own reward in any form – regenerating love as in the
case of Mio – even if it gropes to find justice in this world. Given the
multitudinous forces in operation, the society is like a labyrinth. Only a
strong will can cut through the maze of conflicts which it produces and
achieve dignity for man.