Writing across the watershed year of 1929, when the American economic system seemed on the verge of collapse and Fascism and war threatened democratic ideas, Odets, Rice and Sherwood produced some of their most significant works. Portraying human beings as victims of a socio-economic malaise, they dissented against the system. Protest itself, however, was not enough for them. Having modelled their characters and protagonists on real people and real life, they were unwilling to allow these people to be permanent victims of a socially floundering milieu. Therefore, they suggested reforms in terms of political and social change to provide their characters—and audiences—some hope of a regenerated society. Even though compassion for human beings motivated their commitment, their association with liberal politics and suggestions of socialist solutions often attracted more attention than the intent of their message, diluting the public perception of their compassion. This mitigated the overall impact of their drama.

To Odets, Rice and Sherwood the highest function of drama was to present artistically satisfying plays on
social themes. There was an urgency about the problems of the thirties that was demanding and completely dominated their interest. Economic and political injustice was abominable to Odets and Rice. Fascism was political tyranny for all three and the result of a barbaric system that spawned a scrambling for power. For the early Sherwood all violence was abhorrent and all wars of aggression unjustifiable. When faced with evils even greater than war hysteria, however, Sherwood changed his views on war.

Hence, all three dramatists incorporated the idea of humanism and freedom as an organizing principle in society with their creativity without viewing the primary function of art as one of promoting insurrectionary political activity. They reflected a socialist bent, perceiving it as a moral, emotional, and intensely personal philosophy. (This, however, imposed limitations, for when they were purged of the emotional crisis, the dramatic movement spearheaded by them began to flag). Rice particularly advocated the necessity of reform to bring about the advent of a socialist society and the change that he recommended remained within the institutions and their organization in society. For example, his proposal of the creation of a just society is marked by his denunciation of the individualistic basis of capitalism; its
depersonalization and lack of community. Yet, Rice did not want to completely overthrow the already existing economic and political institutions, but demanded drastic changes within its structure. Committed to progressive reform, he joined forces in defence of democracy -- economic and political.

Similarly, Sherwood too wanted a preservation of the democratic ideals and American heritage, but demanded, at the same time, the eviction of power-hungry and profit-oriented forces from within the system which perpetuated war and unrest in the world and jeopardized peace and harmony. Therefore, neither Rice nor Sherwood considered it necessary to confront the possibility of a violent revolution as a means of radical change. Both of them held a reformist position centrally concerned with the transformation of the social order.

In Odets' case, who viewed the Marxist brand of socialism as the key to social improvement, the approach was ultimately personal, compassionate, emotional, and even romantic. His Marxism encompassed his efforts to promote social change through art, and did not demand the dictatorship of the proletariat as the political form of society. In this sense he performed less as a doctrinaire practitioner of Marxism and more as a promoter of humanist values. Constantly proclaiming his ameliorative aims
through the collective effort of the working or middle classes, Odets’ utterances and Marxist jargon in some of the plays of the 1930s were surcharged with a romantic identification with Marxist theory. Thus works such as Waiting for Lefty and Till the Day I Die were impregnated with revolutionary passion, and marked by an idealistic hope of a utopian America. Evidently, thus, Odets did not realize the full implication of the Marxist political thought.

All three dramatists’ commitment then is essentially humanistic and their suggestion of a socialist change in the economic and political structure is marked by a moral and intensely humanitarian critique of society. For this reason democratic ideals are important to both Rice and Sherwood. [This also stems from the fact that the idea of democracy was deeply ingrained in the American intellectual thought and had become an integrated part of the social intellectual process. Intellectuals could contribute a powerful critique of their society without necessarily being fundamentally committed to any dogmatic political ideology. This was to avoid any threat of totalitarianism from the Left (Communism) or the Right (Militarism or Nazism)].

Many factors contributed to the formation of Odets’, Rice’s, and Sherwood’s commitment. Their willingness to
tackle existing socio-political problems induced them to confront the drab realities of life. No amount of protest or threat of censorship or competition from the commercial theatre deterred them from their main purpose throughout the decade. Furthermore, their personal experiences, such as Odets' and Rice's early years of indigent family life and Sherwood's participation in World War I, brought them closer to these larger issues and strengthened their convictions. Their self-assumed sense of obligation to inform and awaken the public to existing injustices further motivated them. Thus, they set forth to forge a relationship with the public, through their drama, in a way that tried to bind public opinion with themes and characters that these playwrights projected on stage.

That their motives were primarily humanitarian is also obvious from Odets' and Rice's inclusion of subjects pertaining to social injustices endured by American minorities like Jews and Blacks in plays such as Odets' "Waiting for Lefty", and Rice's "We, the People" and "Between Two Worlds". Committed to a broader version of human happiness, Odets and Rice presumed that these problems would see their demise and tried to hasten that by inspiring people to work towards a more harmonious society. Odets' and Sherwood's raising of international issues in plays such as "Till the Day I Die", "Waterloo"
Bridge, Idiot’s Delight, and There Shall Be No Night shows, as well, their benevolent interest in society. Rice’s and Sherwood’s reference to a non-violent revolution in We, the People, The Petrified Forest and Idiot’s Delight, respectively reveals their yearning for reform, albeit rapid reform!

Artistically and intellectually too their efforts were admirable. Odets’ integration of realism and agitprop with his message, added a new dimension to the theatre. Rice’s panoramic method helped survey a fair glimpse of the larger world. All three playwrights’ delineation of realistic themes through characters that are alive conveyed a sense of actuality to the audience. The characters in their plays defined their political attitudes, conveyed societal conflicts, and expressed their despair and hopes. Eventually, they illustrated the reasons for the necessity of social change and suggested various means for achieving it. Hence, their dramas of social protest mirrored the problems of society accurately and minutely.

An important aspect of life that emerges from the humanitarian concerns of all three playwrights is the effect of economic and warlike environment on young love. Except for Sherwood’s Abe Lincoln in Illinois, the theme recurred in most of the plays of the three playwrights,
revealing their sensitivity to human emotions.

By bringing contemporary issues to their works, Odets, Rice and Sherwood sought to enliven the dialogue between themselves and their audience. This created a new relationship between artists and audiences of ordinary people. The intensity, with which the three playwrights presented a picture of the world as it co-existed with their personal visions, put an end to alienation of art from contemporary events and brought art and life closer in a time of crisis.

Because of their straightforward portrayal of life, the feelings of common people, and everyday happenings, the plays of Odets, Rice and Sherwood are easily comprehensible. None of them is so esoteric or learned as to appear to be any different from the naive world with which the ordinary person was familiar. Nor did the comprehension of their drama require any special training from the audience. They used mass psychology to get mass appeal. Optimism and faith in the amelioration of conditions pervaded the plays of all three playwrights. The influence of Marx and Russia fed Odets' enthusiasm. Likewise, Rice's trips to Russia inspired his faith in a planned economy based on a socialist pattern. His fundamental confidence in humanity strengthened his teachings. Sherwood's basic faith in the goodness of man
and of mankind’s own efforts to build a better world were elements that sustained his faith.

However, the commitment of Odets, Rice and Sherwood was not without its weaknesses. Though genuine, their optimism was to a certain extent naive. It was innocent and marked by idealism. Their naivete is reflected in their belief that their pursuit of the truth about the American experience through legitimate drama could actually motivate the masses to act against the Establishment. For, barring a few plays that include Waiting For Lefty and Abe Lincoln in Illinois, the viewership of these plays was always elitist and never reached massive proportions.¹ It turned out that the works touched the imaginations of only a small part of a small section of society. The audiences whom they sought to attract were far more interested in watching movies. Already familiar with existing problems, the public was little interested in being reminded of them. The masses sought escape, not involvement. Himelstein observes:

The American woman preferred to identify herself with the Celluloid Cindarella, and not with a Bolshevik matriarch; the American man wanted to be Prince Charming, not a union organizer. Clark

¹According to Himelstein in Drama Was a Weapon 41, 143, Lefty, after achieving great success in New York, was performed in fifty American cities by June 1935. Abe Lincoln in Illinois which opened on Oct 15, 1938, in New York was followed by a run of 472 performances.
Gable, Jean Harlow and Shirley Temple had box-office appeal, but the actors at the Theatre Union did not. The American spectator hoped to have a little of Hollywood gold and glamour rub off on him.2

As far as these authors’ political optimism was concerned, it was still embryonic. Odets and Rice in particular were politically naive when the Great Depression occurred. [The only insight for them was that the future had to improve.] Thus it was not a matter of action but also one of following the right sort of leadership and political system—in their case Marxism or socialism. Indulging in wishful thinking they consistently hoped for a socialist order that they assumed would ameliorate conditions. This in fact hampered their social message. Critics viewed them as venturing too often into political and social issues, and their plays were often seen as merely exercises in polemics. Odets’ utopian concept of a Marxist society, for instance, which stemmed from romantic visions of a system that would uproot the destructive economic forces and establish perfect harmony, obscured his compassionate ties with his fellow men. The integration of politics with art was a new departure for American dramatic art in the 1930s. Coming as a revolt against the existing order, Odets’ message of social

2Himelstein, Drama Was a Weapon 231.
reconstruction along Marxist lines forced the attention of critics before the theatrical aspects. Because of his bitter protest against capitalist exploitation during the Depression, and a leftist call to the "workers of the world" to wrest justice from an oppressive system as in *Lefty*, his plays evoked a political interpretation. Hence, Odets’ Marxist analysis conveyed his humanitarian intentions only partially.

Likewise, the overt use of political jargon in plays such as *Awake and Sing* and *Till the Day I Die* was sometimes misleading. The jargon drew attention away from the basic theme of human well-being. Also, Odets’ brief membership in the Communist Party, despite his claim that goodwill for the human race motivated it, distracted attention from the basic message of his plays and linked him with political conspiracy.

Rice’s praise for Russia, and his vehement criticism of capitalism in *Street Scene* and *We, the People* overshadowed his humanitarian intentions.

Their idealism, nonetheless, deserves admiration and respect, for it resulted in a commitment that was spontaneous, erupting as a reactive force to the events of the decade. They courageously delineated the bewildering problems of contemporary life with the artistic tools available to them.
However, neither their optimism nor their commitment was enough to make their socially committed drama a permanent movement in American theatre. Economic recovery in the latter part of the decade engendered their faith in the American system again. Disillusionment with the Soviet Union after the Stalinist purges and Nazi-Soviet pact, caused them to reexamine their own system. The Russian attack on Finland particularly shattered Sherwood's faith in the Soviet Union. Moreover, since their themes were derived from the Depression, political events and fear of another war, they had little choice but to move on when these events passed. As the Depression eased, it masked the bad side of the capitalist system that had inspired Rice and Odets at the beginning of the decade.

The dichotomy that both Rice and Odets presented between their theatrical themes and the choice of their careers imparted a dubiety to their intentions. Odets' protests against the capitalist system and departure for Hollywood at the same time represented a strange mix of idealism and pragmatism. The latter act seemed incongruent with his commitment. Rice's protests against the economic system in *We, the People*, *Between Two Worlds* and then writing of a number of commercial plays and acceptance of a 2-year assignment with Hollywood also represented an ambivalent aspect in commitment. Though
Sherwood's feelings against war emerged from his own participation in World War I, his empathy for the middle-classes seemed out of step with his elitist, rich and comfortable family connections, and his growing advocacy for a defensive World War II.

Nonetheless, Odets', Rice's and Sherwood's engagement with the central issues of the period united them in a special bond that catered to the brotherhood of their fellow humans. Despite varied methods of projecting their themes, and diversity in political approaches, the similarity of their purpose held them together. Their optimism and universal concern primarily for humanity consolidated their aims. The passion of their response and their determination to recreate through drama the tragedies and triumphs of the people who struggled to cope with everyday life in the 1930s, united them further.

Their engagement primarily with social commentary [at the core of which lay concern with the human condition] rather than theatrical technique and literary considerations imparted a unique trend to the dramatic genre. The socially committed drama of Clifford Odets, Elmer Rice and Robert E. Sherwood, thus, considerably altered the course of the American theatre.