INTRODUCTION

The decade of the 1930s was one of economic, political, social, and intellectual ferment for America. Economic depression at home, the rise of Fascism in Europe and fear of another war occupied the nation’s consciousness throughout the decade. It is significant that the characteristic intellectual and artistic response at the time was one of 'protest,' --- whatever diverse responses may be hidden under that rather nebulous term. Many artists and intellectuals defined their attitudes as socialist and yearned for alternatives to alleviate the nation’s economic and political problems. Among writers who responded to these events were a number of playwrights who addressed contemporary issues through the medium of theatre.

Clifford Odets, Elmer Rice and Robert E. Sherwood were among those committed playwrights who devoted themselves to producing a socio-political drama. Their response to existing social problems intensified their desire to write plays that were directly related to emotional crisis in the lives of ordinary people arising from economic and political emergency. This resulted in
an outpouring of plays that examined the growing conflicts
of the decade and their impact upon the common man through
themes relating to the Depression, the beleaguered
economic system, war and Fascism. Odets, Rice and
Sherwood visualized a society devoid of class distinctions
and one in which equality and human dignity were essential
ingredients. In an attempt to re-establish peace and
harmony in society, they protested against the existing
system's ills, suggesting alternative political solutions
for their rectification. Observing the involvement of the
socially committed playwrights of the thirties, Howard
Taubman wrote that the decade "was an exhilarating epoch
in the American theatre -- the most provocative and
exciting, in my judgement, that this country has ever
known . . . never were there so much passion and
commitment in the theatre."

As this thesis deals with the subject of commitment,
it is necessary to discuss this concept. The literal
meaning of the term "commitment" applies to the artist's
conscious engagement with a particular issue. The question
of commitment, however has been a topic of much discussion
among intellectuals in the twentieth century. Critical
interest in the term has led scholars to express their

1Howard Taubman. Making of the American Theatre (New York:
Coward McCann, 1965) 211.
opinions regarding its meaning and application to literature or to an artist's work. Most critics have viewed commitment in terms of its conscious social and political implications. According to Raymond Williams, "[c]ommitment . . . is surely conscious, active, and open: a choice of position." Going back to the tradition of nineteenth-century Russian 'revolutionary democratic' critics such as Belinsky, Chernyshevsky and Dobrolyubov, Terry Eagleton discusses the role of literature as these men viewed it. They, claims Eagleton, "saw literature as social criticism and analysis, and the artist as a social enlightener." Thus "literature should disdain elaborate aesthetic techniques and become an instrument of social development." Dobrolyubov in particular believed that art should serve as "an expression of the natural aspirations of a given people or epoch." Eagleton himself maintained that "any art sealed from the significant movements of its epoch, divorced from some sense of the historically central, relegates itself to

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4Eagleton. Marxism and Literary Criticism, 43.

minor status."  Evidently, these writers believed that any literature which is devoid of a conscious commitment to the social and political questions of the world around the artist "is a shrinking flower that conspires at its own death by ignoring the soil in which it grows."

There are others, who, in defense of "commitment" adopted a more dogmatic stance about the question of necessity. George Lukacs in Meaning of Contemporary Realism emphasized the writers' conscious alignment with socialism. He expressed the need for artists who, if not directly aligned with socialism, should at least "take (socialism) into account and . . . not reject it out of hand."

Presenting a more partisan view, Walter Benjamin observed:

'Commitment' is more than just a matter of presenting correct political opinions in one's art; it reveals in how far the artist reconstructs the artistic forms at his disposal, turning authors, readers and spectators into collaborators.'

'Eagleton, Marxism and Literary Criticism, 57.


'Quoted in Eagleton, Marxism and Literary Criticism 52-53.

'Quoted in Eagleton, Marxism and Literary Criticism 62.
In terms of the existentialist position, Jean Paul Sartre in *What is Literature?* affirms the necessity of commitment. He poses certain questions to prose writers: What is the writer’s aim in writing? What particular undertaking is he engaged in, and what are the reasons for his recourse to writing? At the core of Sartre’s questions lies the answer that certainly "pure contemplation" as an end is not the aim of a committed writer. It is the writer’s objective to disclose something.\(^\text{10}\) Hence, the committed writer, according to Sartre, "has chosen to reveal the world and particularly to reveal man to other man so that the latter may assume full responsibility before the object which has been thus laid bare."\(^\text{11}\) Quoting Sartre, David Laing further elucidated Sartre’s position on the writer’s duty to commit himself as an artist:

> If literature is not everything, it is worth nothing. This is what I mean by ‘commitment’. It wilts if it is reduced to innocence, or to songs. If a written sentence does not reverberate at every level of man and society, then it makes no sense. What is the literature of an epoch but the epoch appropriated by its literature?\(^\text{12}\)


\(^{11}\)Sartre, *What is Literature?* 14.

\(^{12}\)Quoted in David Laing, *The Marxist Theory of Art* 82-83.
There is, however, room for argument about the precise nature of such points of view. For, to counter these contentions, one can ask: Does not the artist reflect the environment in which he is living, and in that sense is not all art committed? One answer to this question lies in Lukacs' argument that any art that merely mirrors or reflects society is not truly committed. On the contrary, it only introduces into itself the "very distortions which characterize modern bourgeois consciousness."\(^{13}\) To show true commitment, therefore, "writers should do more than merely reflect and despair and ennui of ... society; they should try to take up a critical perspective on this futility, revealing positive possibilities beyond it."\(^{14}\) Raymond Williams further clarifies this premise in his statement that unlike all literature, "committed art" "variously expresses, explicitly or implicitly, specifically selected experience from a specific point of view."\(^{15}\)

Evidently, not all art can be committed as it is contingent upon a specific period of historical milieu

\(^{13}\)Eagleton, *Marxism and Literary Criticism* 52.
\(^{14}\)Eagleton, *Marxism and Literary Criticism* 52.
\(^{15}\)Williams, *Marxism and Literature* 199.
that demands the projection of specific social experiences through art. This view finds corroboration in Eagleton when he says that all art cannot be committed art because there are "periods and societies where conscious, 'progressive' political commitment need not be a necessary condition for producing major art; there are other periods -- fascism, for example, when to . . . produce as an artist at all involves the kind of questioning which is likely to result in explicit commitment."  

It is reasonably clear from the preceding analysis that critics conceive "commitment" as a specific social and political activity. For this reason, observes Rabkin, it is not possible to speak of the act of commitment without explicitly applying it in the context of a defined objective. For, usage of the term instantly leaves one wondering about the artist's objective -- What is he committing himself to? The artist, according to Rabkin, commits himself to his social environment. Thus Rabkin too affirms that social and political implications go along with commitment in art. In his discussion of "commitment," he observes:

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16Eagleton, Marxism and Literary Criticism 57-58.

... commitment [in art] arises when the artist is committed to values or actions extrinsic to the immediate concerns of his art, when the moral urgency of outside imperative forces him as artist into nonesthetic areas of consideration. This ... is most clearly defined in terms of social and political commitment.18

Commitment, however, should not be carried to the extreme -- for then it can, at times, be accompanied by "a too-strenuous dedication to political action."19 This can create an imbalance in the artist's work and lead him to lean more towards propaganda. Dorris Lessing, who emphasizes the importance of commitment, outlines such dangers, which, she claims, can arise when in an attempt to project the social reality around him, the writer's art can be taken over by "the little tracts about progress, the false optimism, the dreadful lifeless products of socialist realism."20 Rabkin sums up Lessing's conception of "commitment," which should be to "the efficacy of

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18 Rabkin, Drama and Commitment, 11.
19 Rabkin, Drama and Commitment, 4.
20 Quoted in Rabkin, Drama and Commitment 4. The doctrine of "socialist realism" was propounded by Stalin and Gorky and adopted officially at the 1934 Congress of Soviet Writers. According to the doctrine, the writer's duty was "to provide a truthful, historico-concrete portrayal of reality in its revolutionary development" keeping in view "the problem of ideological transformation and the education of the workers in the spirit of socialism." From Eagleton, Marxism and Literary Criticism 37-38.
political action, to the humanistic gesture."21 Agreeing with Lessing’s argument, K.W. Grandsen contends that commitment is "a necessary reassertion of humanistic values . . . ."22 If the humanistic ideals are projected appropriately through an art structure which both enlightens and pleases, then the work is, in its essence, committed.

The drama of Odets, Rice and Sherwood can be aptly placed within the confines of committed drama which emerged from the humanistic concern that Lessing and Grandsen consider as the key elements for an artist’s social commitment. For, as the subsequent chapters will reveal, the commitment of these playwrights, during the nineteen-thirties, encompassed their conscious involvement with urgent socio-political problems and their effort to present through drama solutions to the real problems of human beings. Expressing a passionate interest in the well-being of humanity, they sought to become the voice of the generation to which they belonged and fulfill the role that Sartre assigns to writers: "The writer is a speaker; he designates, demonstrates . . . interpolates . . .

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21Rabkin, Drama and Commitment 4.
22Rabkin, Drama and Commitment 5.
persuades, insinuates."

The means to realize their commitment to projecting the reality around them were political. As Rabkin says, "if an individual is committed to certain social objectives, he is necessarily involved with considerations of means to realize them." Odets suggested Marxist socialist solutions and shouted his message across the stage through overt protests against the existing social system. With an approach more liberal than that of Odets, Rice suggested a democratic socialist pattern of society, lucidly conveying his thoughts about the need for a serious overhauling of the economic and political system. Sherwood, whose works were chiefly motivated by his indignation at the savagery of war, suggested liberal democratic solutions for the evolution of a pacifist society.

Their claims to have diverse political solutions, however, were not limited to political and economic spheres which ignore the human order. Their political solutions were only manifestations of their political

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2Sartre, What is Literature? 10.
3Rabkin, Drama and Commitment 11.

2For more reference to these terms, see Raymond Williams, Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society (Great Britain: Fontana Paperbacks, 1976. Also see D.J. Manning, Liberalism (Toronto: J.M. Dent & Sons Ltd., 1976).
visions for attaining a peaceful society and their commitment was a result of their immediate emotional response to the political and economic crisis of the decade with visions of a regenerated humanity at its core. It did not emerge from a dogmatic belief in communist ideology or the Communist Party line. Hence, it was devoid of any propagandist element. Thus, while these playwrights advocated political alternatives, they were not bound by doctrinaire orthodoxy.

Though humanitarian reasons motivated their commitment, their advocacy of political alternatives created a tension between their humanitarian intentions and political solutions. They had not become political dramatists as a result of any overriding engagement with radicalism or preconceived political decisions. Their political decisions, thus, were chiefly tools to preserve in the public mind the principles of equality and human dignity rather than lessons in political polemics.

Nonetheless, their attacks on censorship, concern about hunger marches, unemployment, Hoovervilles, farm bankruptcies, and indictment of Nazism and Fascism were activities that communists and socialists also participated in during the decade. This resulted in critics identifying these playwrights with political activism. For this reason, in the drama of the three
playwrights under consideration, some scholars have ignored the tension between fervent polemicism and humanism. Odets' plays have been frequently identified as propaganda pieces of the Left. Rice's and Sherwood's predisposition towards liberal political solutions as alternative solutions to problems plaguing humanity has confused those who view them chiefly as using the theatre as a vehicle for spreading political ideologies.24 At the same time the playwrights' raising of subjects pertaining to the most prominent economic and political issues of the


Elmer Rice was accused of adopting "the revolutionary attitude of Marx and Lenin" in his plays of the early thirties. In a review of American Landscape, in which Rice stresses the importance of preserving American tradition, a relieved Grenville Vernon comments that in "American Landscape'... (Rice) no longer genuflects before the altar of the Kremlin." See Commonweal 29(30 December 1938) 273.

Morgan Himelstien identifies Odets' Waiting for Lefty as a play in which Odets favoured the communist party, and made his propaganda very clear. He also called the play "a useful political weapon." See Morgan Himelstien, Drama Was a Weapon. The Left-Wing Theatre in New York, 1929-1941 (New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1963) 42.

Not recognizing Sherwood's moral position, Edwin Seaver, who viewed Sherwood as a radical, was disappointed with the latter's play Idiot's Delight simply because he thought that Sherwood did not "link the Munitions Maker and the patriotism with the declining capitalist system." Drama Was a Weapon, 139.
period has led critics to categorize them as "Depression Playwrights" and their works as "period pieces."

This study focuses on the commitment of these playwrights in view of the tension that their humanist aims and political visions created for them. The dialectical structure of their plays stemmed directly from this tension. Without disturbing the artistic framework of their plays, the three playwrights showed their concern with important socio-political problems not only with urgency but also with an intensity that sought to stir the conscience of a public that was less aware of these issues. This study also explores the extent of the three playwrights' commitment with which they created a theatrical genre that balanced their creative genius and the aesthetics of the plays with their sensitivity to the contemporary situation that strove to impart a socially useful message to the audience. Hence, it assesses the literary and dramatic change that Odets, Rice and Sherwood represent in terms of the artists' response to socio-economic problems in American society during the nineteen-thirties.

Furthermore, this study explicates that though these playwrights were engaged with issues that were central to the period, in the ultimate analysis, the problems that they dealt with were not purely topical but were
fundamental to society. Odets, Rice and Sherwood were concerned with the emancipation of the individual from the oppressive socio-political system and the restoration of human dignity. Motivated by a desire to seek answers for improving the conditions of a universal human entity, their humanitarian interests transcended national boundaries to include not only the plight of Americans but also problems that deprived mankind of justice in general. Thus, they created a drama which included characters and, at times, even certain locales outside the United States. Sherwood showed the impact of war on people throughout the world. For example, he made London the setting for the play Waterloo Bridge, set Idiot’s Delight in Europe, and located his theme on the plight of the Finnish people, after Russia attacked them, in There Shall Be No Night. Similarly, Rice too placed the setting of Between Two Worlds and Judgement Day outside his own country. Odets, in Till the Day I Die, dealt with Nazi atrocities which had as their victim a protagonist who was fighting for the cause of freedom. Given these attempts to focus on global issues and the fact that a number of their plays were revived after the 1930s on both stage and screen, it may be unfair to label the works of these playwrights as "period pieces." In fact, their resolve to fight for the universal human cause imparts a unique fascination to
their drama even today. Their plays are significant examples of art's direct comment on life which reflects a concern for "the whole man."\(^2\)

It is, however true that the element of protest in their plays was less prominent after 1939. This is because the economic problems became less pressing towards the end of the decade as the economy started to improve and the fear of war became more intense. The Nazi-Soviet Pact of 1939 caused disillusionment with the Soviet Union which led to a retreat from Marxist and socialist commitment in their plays.

On account of diversity of the playwrights' approach to socially relevant subject matter, which essentially conveys the theme of human welfare, the selection of Clifford Odets, Elmer Rice and Robert E. Sherwood ensures the representation of a fair sample of socially committed drama during the decade. It provides the reader with a historically balanced account of the intellectual response during the 1930s. A close analysis of their plays exposes a multi-dimensional character of the various social, political and economic issues which writers concerned themselves with during the decade.

To study the commitment of the three playwrights in

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the context of a critical historical period also helps explore the relationship between art, commitment, and politics. Such an association is of interest not only to a student of literature but also to those amongst us who seek ourselves as far removed from the artist’s world. Such a connection draws a crucial connection between art and life.