Thus, he engaged himself with writing plays that articulated the dilemma of a society frustrated by the breakdown of the economic machinery. In nearly all his plays of the thirties which include *Waiting for Lefty* (1935), *Awake and Sing* (1933), *Till the Day I Die* (1935), *Paradise lost* (1935), *Golden Boy* (1937) and *Rocket to the Moon* (1938), he dramatized the shattering experiences of middle and working classes under a failing economy, indicting the capitalist system which, he believed, was responsible for people’s suffering. Condemning the domination of the economic system by the rich, the abuse of power, and the suppression of the economically weak, he portrayed rich people as villains and the poor as innocent victims, suggesting the establishment of a socialist state in which economic wealth and political authority would be shared and class discrimination eradicated. Fascist oppression in Germany also aroused his anger which he expressed in *Till the Day I Die*.

Odets’ condemnation of the economic system and his despair at society’s deprivations did not result in any

to Margaret Brenman-Gibson, "it would take the cataclysm of the Great Depression . . . to provide his spiritual starvation. He could become a "voice" . . . for a dispossessed generation only when it appeared. His own conflicts could become creative when history opened the door." Margaret Brenman-Gibson, *Clifford Odets. American Playwright. The Years from 1906-1940* (New York: Atheneum, 1982) 101.
loss of hope on his part. On the contrary, he exuded
optimism and expressed faith in the possibility of
changing the world into one which conferred social justice
and equality upon everybody. His optimism induced him to
look for alternative solutions that would change the
present chaos into a peaceful and harmonious society.
Marxist theory seemed to him to offer immediate solutions
for alleviating society’s suffering and appeared as the
most viable solution for the country’s economic and social
problems. It bred a realization that unless the more
glaring evils associated with capitalism were removed, the
long term prospects of the survival of a humanistic
society were dim.

Wanting radical change in the system, Odets joined
the Communist Party in 1934 perceiving it as the most
progressive party. Odets affiliation to the party,
however, was not based on a commitment to world revolution
or the Stalinist system. Abhorring capitalism’s vices
from a genuine pacifist standpoint, he did not appreciate
the dogmatism of Communism. His commitment, thus emerged
from his humanistic longing for a world where equality
amongst human beings would be an essential ingredient and
where happiness would not be "printed on dollar bills."³

That this yearning for a regenerated society became the basis for his commitment is evident from his statement in front of a congressional committee in 1952, about his motivation for joining the Party:

I believe at that time there were perhaps 15 or 16 million unemployed in the United States, and I myself was living on 10 cents a day. Therefore, I was interested in any idea which might suggest how as an actor I could function as a working actor who could make a living at a craft he had chosen for his life's work... They were horrendous days that none of us would like to go through again.

On this basis there was a great deal of talk about amelioration of conditions, about how one should live, by what values one work for [sic], and in line with this there was a great deal of talk about Marxist values. One read literature and there were a lot of penny and 2-cent and 5-cent pamphlets. I read them along with a lot of other people, and finally joined the Communist Party, in the belief, in the honest and real belief, that this was some way out of the dilemma in which we found ourselves.⁴

Since all that Odets wanted was "to belong to the largest possible group of humble, struggling men prepared to make a great common effort to build a better world,"⁵

⁵Harold Clurman, The Fervent Years (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1945) 141.
the Party's attempt to pressure him into writing Party line plays and his unwillingness to put up with its demands led to his resignation from the Party in 1935—after only eight months of membership.

Adopting Marxist ideas but rejecting the Communist Party dictates, Odets continued to write plays that suggested the Marxist system as the most reasonable solution to society's ills. Even though he never stuck to the tenets of proletarian literature, the Marxist dialectic provided him with the "redemption" metaphor that became the structural basis of all his Depression plays.

Odets' humanitarian motives inspired his most overt protest in 1935 in Waiting For Lefty. Centered around a taxi-driver's strike, the play depicted misery and suffering in the lives of ordinary middle class men and women. A series of flashback scenes presented hardships of various characters. These include a young Hack Sid and his girl Florence; Joe and his wife Edna; Miller, a lab assistant; a young interne, Dr. Benjamin; and an unemployed actor. All these people tell their stories of deprivation in such crucial times as the Depression to the

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6 For a discussion of proletarian literature, see Rabkin, Drama and Commitment 35-37.
7 Gerald Rabkin, Drama and Commitment 203.
audience and reveal their reasons for favouring a strike. Through Harry Fatt, the union boss who tries to dissuade the union workers from striking against the management, Odets reveals his animosity towards the authorities. This one-act play reaches its highest point of dramatic intensity, when, after discovering the truth about their leader Lefty's death, Agate urges the cab-drivers to protest against the management, in response to which they unanimously cast their vote in favour of the strike. Having reached the stage through a playwriting contest that the leftist New Theatre League had conducted, Waiting For Lefty excited its audience and resulted in a follow-up of 32 presentations across the United States.8

Because of the play's radicalism, and its arrival at a time when Odets was at the peak of his involvement with the Communist Party, scholars and critics recognized Waiting for Lefty as a revolutionary drama—a play that advocated political propaganda. Even though this charge upon the play's temperament fitted within the circumstances of the thirties [also a reason for which the left-wing press praised it], to call Lefty a propaganda piece or a revolutionary play is an oversimplification. His use of political slogans pertaining to workers' strike

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and their militancy that he portrayed was motivated by the anger of a man who was frustrated with social injustice.

Odets' commitment to spreading the message of protest aroused his concern over the method of its effective presentation. This confronted him with the artistic problem: how to combine his message of hope for a different future with a convincing statement in dramatic terms. Keeping this in mind, he judiciously combined his Marxist ideas with realism and agitprop and injected them into the characters' lives. Thus, Lefty presented agitprop elements, such as an episodic structure, choral response of the characters at the play's finish, its political slogans, and cartoon-like characters in a realistic manner. Odets' reveals his resentment of capitalism in his portrayal and description of Harry Fatt, whom he calls the "well-fed and confident"9 leader of the union and a representative of "the capitalist system throughout the play."10 His warning that the audience "should constantly be kept aware of him, the ugly menace that hangs over the lives of all the

10 Odets, Waiting For Lefty 447.
people,"¹¹ reveals his skepticism about trusting one’s superiors. Odets' warning, however, has traces of his own bias which he imposes on the public and the reader. He reinforces this feeling of animosity through the union members' disapproval of Fatt (who are planted in the audience). When Fatt tries to dissuade them from striking against the bosses by saying that "the man in the White House . . . is looking out for our interests,"¹² they voice their disagreement from the hall. They resent his addressing them as 'reds' and his warning against those who, when given a chance, will "have your sisters and wives in the whore houses, like they done in Russia."¹³ While on the one hand Fatt's comment reveals the boss's upper-class mentality and condescending attitude, the union members' refusal to acknowledge the status that Fatt confers upon them (Reds) shows their disinclination towards Communism. What they are fighting against is injustice and lost opportunities that the existing system denies them.

Odets' delineation of the union head as corrupt is deliberate and designed to put greater emphasis on his

¹¹Odets, Waiting for Lefty 447.
¹²Odets, Waiting For Lefty 423.
¹³Odets, Waiting for Lefty 423.
feeling of outrage towards existing corruption and exploitation of workers.

With the aid of the agitprop's episodic structure, Odets presents individually the tribulations of ordinary workers like Joe and Edna, the secretary, the unemployed actor, the Jewish doctor, and the lab assistant. To delineate each episode with greater vividness, and to focus the audience's complete attention on the characters who express their grievances, Odets uses another agitprop device—the blackout that brings an end to every scene, while a spotlight immediately picks out the next one.

The episodes explore the anguish of exploitation in each character to one degree or another. Unable to endure their misery any longer, the characters reveal their reasons for their conversion to militancy. In all cases they are a result of their frustrations with the ills of the system.

The first episode—the "Young Actor Scene," shows an actor preparing to join the ranks of striking taxi-drivers. He eventually joins their strike after he reads the 'Communist Manifesto' upon the urging of a radical stenographer who tells him: "One dollar buys ten loaves of bread, Mister. Or one dollar buys nine loaves of bread and one copy of 'The Communist Manifesto'. Learn while you
eat. Read while you run. . . .”\(^1\) This conversion to a cab driver epitomizes the first step in Odets’ attempt towards achieving social reform. The tribute that the stenographer pays to 'The Communist Manifesto' is a manifestation of Odets’ appreciation for Communism as an alternative to achieve social reform.

In the "Interne Episode," Odets arranges Dr. Benjamin’s conversion to a protesting taxi-driver after his employer fires him from his job for being a Jew. Odets deliberately introduces the question of ethnicity here. Anti-semitism is "[a]n old disease, malignant, tumescent,"\(^2\) deeply rooted in the social system. By raising the racial issue Odets refers to the creation of an underclass minority. This racial discrimination results in the death of a poor patient because the incompetent nephew of an influential senator operates on the sick person. When Benjamin expresses sympathy for the latter, Dr. Barnes, the senior doctor, insinuates that he is a radical and advises him to refrain from using words like "class distinction" which "some day like in Germany, . . . might cost you your head."\(^3\) Dr. Barnes’

\(^1\)Odets, Waiting for Lefty 441.
\(^2\)Odets, Waiting For Lefty 443.
\(^3\)Odets, Waiting for Lefty 443.
attitude reflects the Nazi-mentality of the employers. Benjamin yearns to go to Russia as he thinks of "the wonderful opportunities to do good work in their socialized medicine." This reveals Odets' faith in the Soviet system as one that grants equality of health care to all human beings.

Edna's complaints about their poverty in the "Joe and Edna" episode makes Joe understand the necessity of a strike. Her belief that Joe should shed his restraint and fight all injustice, inspires him to raise his voice in its favour. Once again, the economic deprivation of the family—the starvation and hunger of Joe and Edna's children—rather than a predisposition to militancy is what Odets uses to impel Joe to protest their case:

Edna: . . . I see it in the papers, how good orange juice is for kids. But dammit our kids get colds one on top of the other. They look like little ghosts. Betty never saw a grapefruit. I took her to the store last week and she pointed to a stack of grapefruits. "What's that!" she said.

Unable to endure the threat that a failing economy imposes upon him and his family, he feels compelled to

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1Odets, Waiting for Lefty 444.
2Odets, Waiting For Lefty 426-427.
take action against his boss, who according to Edna "is making suckers outa you boys every minute."19 With great vehemence he tells the rest of the committeemen that they "gotta walk out!"20

In the "Lab Assistant Episode", Miller, an incorruptible lab assistant, quits his job to become a taxi driver. He does this after an industrialist tries to corrupt him by offering to raise his salary in exchange for his agreement to spy on a chemist who is working on a new type of poison gas for the next war. Believing that war is meant to benefit the rich, he spurns the offer and chooses to become a cab driver instead.

In "The Young hack and his Girl" episode, Odets presents a picture of the sorry plight of young love that has to be sacrificed due to economic pressure. Sid and Florence realize that they may have to sacrifice their relationship because Sid does not have a job, and it is difficult to find one during the depression. Feeling a sense of dejection and anger at the circumstances which might lead to their separation, he makes up his mind to fight the system. Realizing that the system is designed against the working classes, he joins the strike.

19Odets, Waiting For Lefty 426.
20Odets, Waiting for Lefty 429.
All these episodes, according to Gerald Rabkin, present "the road to commitment of each of the several characters against the backdrop of various capitalist evils: labor spying, informing, anti-semitism, economic aggression, etc." They present their commitment and final conversion to militancy and adoption of cab-driving as a profession reflect their denunciation of the upper elite. Yet in all the episodes, Odets provides valid causes for their conversion—personal exploitation, suffering and humiliation, arising out of economic dispossession. In this way, the characters' conviction about the necessity to protest against the management does not seem incongruous with the circumstances in which they have been living. For instance, it seems natural for a gifted intern who is dismissed from service primarily because he is a Jew, and can find no job other than that of a taxi driver, to protest against the management. The Stenographer's distribution of 'The Communist Manifesto' seems justified at a time when her services to the company are not being adequately rewarded. Joe's poverty justifies his remonstrances. Likewise, Sid's sacrifice of his relationship with his girl validates his objection to the system.

21Rabkin, Drama and Commitment 174.
In an attempt to urge the workers to act quickly against the system, Odets metaphorically expresses the futility of waiting. Lefty's failure to arrive on time forces them to act on their own. The implication is that waiting simply leads to inaction. Therefore Odets urges direct action to replace inaction in order to expedite the task of social reform.

The characters' transformation to extreme aggressiveness in Waiting For Lefty, according to John Gassner, represents a fulfillment of Odets' "diagnostic philosophy." This philosophy "consisted of two main principles: the increasing proletarianization or awakening of the middle class and the growing insurgency of the working classes." Waiting for Lefty satisfies both these principles through its characters. Dr. Benjamin's, the actor's, and the lab assistant's metamorphoses from professional men to taxi drivers (and their awakening to the problems of a competitive system) represent the growing awareness of the middle class. Likewise, Joe and Sid's disaffection represents the increasing disaffection of the working class to a point where they ally together to defy the existing system.

Finally, each character's decision to renounce the

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system, in hope of resuscitating humanity, culminates in Agate’s final oration. His cry for alliance with the workers: "It’s war! Working class, unite and fight! Tear down the slaughterhouse of our old lives!"23 Interestingly, the workers succeed in drawing a positive strike vote in the end. Agate cries:

Hear it, boys, hear it? Hell, listen to me! Coast to coast! HELLO AMERICA! HELLO. WE’RE STORMBIRDS OF THE WORKING CLASS. WORKERS OF THE WORLD . . . OUR BONES AND BLOOD! And when we die they’ll know what we did to make a new world! Christ, cut us up to little pieces. We’ll die for what is right! put fruit trees where our ashes are!"

The audience’s unanimous response to his question, "Well, what’s the answer?" is "STRIKE, STRIKE, STRIKE!!"25 With this Lefty’s mission is successful, for, even though he has to give up his life for a purpose, he emerges triumphant in the end.

This triumphant ending with which Odets brings Lefty to a close reflects Odets’ optimism about the alleviation of prevailing social and economic conditions through adequate effort to change the existing order of society.

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2Odets, Waiting For Lefty 446.
2Odets, Waiting For Lefty 446.
2Odets, Waiting for Lefty 446.
104
Furthermore, it constitutes Odets' final effort to awaken his audience to see the necessity and power of collective protest.

Odets' wish was fulfilled when the play's first performance in 1935 drew an uproarious applause from the audience. Agate's direct address to them and the choral response from the workers on stage (another agitprop device in the tradition of Art Smith and Elia Kazan's Dimitroff) evoked a similar response from the audience in the hall. According to Harold Clurman, who was present at the time of Lefty's first performance:

The first scene of Lefty had not played two minutes when a shock of delighted recognition struck the audience like a tidal wave. Deep laughter, hot assent, a kind of joyous fervour seemed to sweep the audience towards the stage. The actors no longer performed; they were being carried along as if by an exultancy of communication such as I had never witnessed before. Audience and actors had become one. Line after line brought applause, whistles, bravos, and heartful shouts of kinship . . . . When the audience at the end of the play responded to the militant question from the stage: "Well, what's the answer?" with a spontaneous roar of "Strike, Strike!" it was something more than a tribute to the play's effectiveness . . . . It was the birth cry of the Thirties. Our youth had found its voice.26

So powerful was the play's impact that Odets himself

26Harold Clurman, The Fervent Years 47-48.

105
got carried away with the uproar of audience that greeted Lefty's performance. Odets recalls:

. . . the audience became the actors on the stage and the actors on the stage became the audience, the identification was so at one that you saw for the first time theatre as a cultural force, as perhaps in the history of the American theatre it has not been seen . . . in fact I was part of the audience. I forgot I wrote the play, forgot I was in the play and many actors forgot. The proscenium arch disappeared.²⁷

Evidently, it was the thrust of Agate's direct address to the audience that created an immediate integration of actors and audience. In addition, Odets' use of realism, which created the illusion of a strike meeting in a union hall, further facilitated this integration. This visual fusion of illusion and reality corresponded with the assumption of the illusionist dramatists like Luigi Pirandello who believed that drama can be most effective if the audience forgets it is in a theatre and believes it is viewing not a play, but life. In Waiting for Lefty the audience and the actors merge so completely that it becomes difficult to draw a line between them. In a manner similar to that shown in

²⁷Quoted in Margaret Brenman Gibson, Clifford Odets. American Playwright 315-316.
Pirandello' Six characters in search of an Author\(^{28}\) in which the characters enter the stage and merge with the actors, Lefty presented a blending of theatre and life.

Odets' achievement in adapting agitprop for the purpose of conveying his social message proved far greater than that of previous playwrights. Gerald Weales observes:

Lefty's Strike, Strike, Strike!!! . . . [was] obviously one with the cries that brought other agit-props to a close . . . . Ideally the manipulation in agit-props is both artistic and political. The final cry is the inevitable result of the play itself, but it, in turn, is a new beginning. [The impact of lefty was such that] [o]ne not only shouted "VOTE COMMUNIST!," one presumably went out and did so.\(^{29}\)

The intensity of the play's attack, the newness of its presentation, and the effectiveness of the dialogue stimulated audiences at labour centers, at left-wing political rallies, and at various theatres all over the country. The play made Odets the primary topic of discussion amongst literary circles, journals, and committed intellectuals. Its impact was also felt in non-leftist journals, as well as such publications as Time and Theatre Arts. The Literary Digest heaped great praise upon


\(^{29}\) Gerald Weales, Clifford Odets. Playwright (New York: Pegasus, 1971) 49.
Odets by calling him "the most exciting spokesman the world of workers yet has produced, and, . . . the most articulate dramatist available in the theatre." Odets by calling him "the most exciting spokesman the world of workers yet has produced, and, . . . the most articulate dramatist available in the theatre."30 Pleased with his effort to disseminate Marxist principles, the Marxist press commended Odets for the skill with which he expressed his commitment to the cause of the working class. Evidently, the Marxist press forgot that its political content was not a dogmatic propagation of Marxist ideology—that the strike [illustrating the political thesis] did not present a lesson in political polemics but was a means to achieve an end—the end here being the welfare of those who were victims of social circumstances. The strike was an act of rebellion against their environment. Thus Joe shouts to Fatt: "Don't tell me red! You know what we are? The black and blue boys! We been kicked around so long we're black and blue from head to toes!"31 Regarding the message of Lefty, John Gassner observes:

[I]f the ideological content of . . . Waiting For Lefty was based on Marxist prescript that labor strikes should be viewed as "dress rehearsals" for the revolution, it was certainly no such idea but the over-all dramatic rhythm and imaginative dramaturgy of the play and the vibrancy of life in its individual episodes that

31Odets, Waiting For Lefty 424.
distinguished this one-actor from the routine propaganda pieces of the political left. It was not the author's fleeting membership in a Communist cell tucked away in the Group Theatre but personal associations, attachments, and rejections that gave life to the work."

Because of its apparent propagandist character, however, a storm of witchhunt and censorship accompanied the play. In Boston the actors of the play were evicted from the Long Wharf theatre as "Communists." In Newark, police dismantled a production. According to Anita Block "all censorship is rooted in one purpose: the determination of those controlling the machinery of government to prevent from seeing or reading of any matter of which they disapprove." The banning of Waiting for Lefty in certain places not only reflected the misconceptions about the play being a propaganda assault of the Left on the government but was also an expression of the social conflict of the period. It reflected the government's deliberate effort to resist, what it perceived as, the propagation of an ideology opposed to

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its own.

Odets' personal associations and concern with the suffering of human beings had resulted in *Awake and Sing* in 1933, a play which he wrote two years before the production of *Waiting For Lefty*. The theme of the play centered around the "struggle for life" of a lower middle-class Jewish family "among petty conditions."\(^{35}\) Initially entitled *I Got the Blues*, the Group Theatre later produced it under the present title.

Through the family drama of the Bergers, Odets records the bewilderment and frustration of lower middle-class life under exigencies of economic breakdown. At the same time he shows the effect of an economic crisis on personal relationships. The Berger family consists of Bessie—a shrewd mother, Myron—a docile father, uncle Morty—a rich businessman, Grandfather Jacob with his Marxist dreams, and two discontented children, Ralph and Hennie. Ralph, who is unable to marry his girl because of the Depression, feels inspired to fulfil his Grandfather's dreams of changing the world into one that doesn't measure life in terms of dollars and cents. Hennie deserts her illegitimate child and her uncared for husband to escape

\(^{35}\)Odets, *Awake and Sing* 37.
with her lover, Moe Axelrod. Just as it dawns on Ralph to change the world, so Odets hoped that the Berger family and the rest of humanity might become aware that they have to make an effort to reform the social structure.

Odets reveals his Utopian faith through Jacob, who is his chief spokesman in the play. Jacob expresses a fervent faith in the revolutionary ideal and dreams of achieving social justice through a Marxist order. This is obvious in his efforts to awaken the rest of the household to the drawbacks of a system that he believes only a Marxist course of action can eliminate. But it is mainly through Ralph that he strives to destroy those elements that have made their lives miserable, urging him to go out in the world and fight.

Boychick, wake up! Make your life something good. For the love of an old man who sees in your young days his new life, for such love take the world in your two hands and make it like new.36

According to Gerald Weales, when Jacob says: "Marx said it—abolish such families,"37 he is not only showing disgust for Bessie’s materialistic values but at the same time expressing his belief in the condemnation of the

3Odets, Awake and Sing 48.
37Odets, Awake and Sing 55.
"bourgeois family" that "The Communist Manifesto" posits: "The bourgeoisie . . . has reduced the family relation to a mere money relation." Jacob's longing for equality builds resentment for his own son Morty, a clothing manufacturer, for his success. This is because Jacob perceives him as representing the class that exploits the weaker sections of society. Behind Jacob's condemnation, however, lies an overwhelming anxiety about the loss of community feeling in a money-oriented world. Insinuating that the next war will be another design for the capitalists to get rich, Jacob vehemently denounces it: "The new imperialist war will send millions to their death, will bring prosperity to the pockets of the capitalist," he tells Morty, insisting that it "will bring only greater hunger and misery to the masses of the workers and the farmers." Morty confirms Jacob's innuendo about the purpose of war when he states later that "every body knows war is necessary."

Like Dr. Benjamin in Waiting for Lefty, Jacob also expresses Odets' appreciation of Communist Russia by saying that "in Russia an old man don't take charity so

38Quoted by Weales, Clifford Odets. Playwright 69.
39Odets, Awake and Sing 76.
40Odets, Awake and Sing 62.
his eyes turn black in his head. In Russia they got Marx.”41 Jacob’s Marxist dreams, nonetheless, like Benjamin’s in Waiting for Lefty, thus emerge from his yearning for a happy world.

Although Ralph’s aspirations for changing the world result from his Marxist grandfather’s teachings, Odets does not specify a Marxist course of action for overthrowing the system. Nor does he suggest a Communist revolution. Ralph, on the contrary, is inspired by moral ideals to change life which inflicts misery upon people. If Odets showed a penchant for a Marxist system through Jacob, then he did it in the belief that Marxist egalitarian principles might improve the condition of lower middle-class life in America. With regard to Odets’ commitment Himelstein observes:

Ralph does not join the party to hasten the Red revolution. The playwright had the grandfather express Marxist sentiments throughout the drama, but Odets was more intent on creating a group of vivid characters and on depicting the comic and pathetic episodes in their lives than on propagandizing the revolution.”42

As in Lefty, in Awake and Sing, too, an underlying attitude of economic determinism suggests that the fault

41Odets, Awake and Sing 73.
42Himelstein, Drama Was a Weapon 166.
is not in the people but within the system. The characters’ economic dislocation causes their psychological maladjustment within the family. Paucity of work during the depression, and the paltry pay that accompanies odd jobs that are available, makes normal subsistence level hard to attain. This creates an unsurmountable disturbance in the psyche and economic functioning of the Berger household. Dejected with his life, Ralph complains: "Where’s advancement down the place? Work like crazy! Think they see it? You’d drop dead first."

Others wrestling for survival include Moe Axelrod, a disabled war veteran, who constantly strives to win the affection of his girl, Hennie. Financial constraints, however, render his attempts futile. Dispirited because of his injury in World War I, he feels that "there are no prizes" that life will offer and finds everything around him fraudulent. He despises a system that believes in war’s necessity to boost the nation’s economy. Consequently, he believes in the existence of only two classes of people--the exploiters and the exploited. Determined, however, not to fall in the latter category, Moe fights his way through his difficulties, becoming a further source of inspiration for the already

*Odet, Awake and Sing* 41.

114
inspired Ralph. Out of practical necessity, Bessie 
protests her son Ralph’s marriage to Blanche, a penniless 
orphan. She is afraid of the loss of weekly money that he 
is contributing to the household. Though she intends to 
preserve the family’s resources, Ralph fails to understand 
his motive and perceives it as a heartless gesture. 
Consequently, instead of appreciating, he only accuses 
er: "You never in your life bought me a pair of skates 
even—things I died for when I was a kid." 

She pleads to 
him to understand.

Ralphie, I worked too hard all my years to be 
treated like dirt .... Summer shoes you 
didn’t have, skates you never had, but I bought 
a new dress every week .... If I didn’t worry 
about the family then who would? On the calendar 
it’s a different place, but here without a 
dollar you don’t look the world in the eye." 

To this, without making an effort to understand, Ralph 
replies: "It don’t make sense. If life made you this way, 
then it’s wrong." On the other hand, the same Bessie who 
desperately strives to preserve the family, fails to 
understand Jacob’s passion for music and smashes his 

"Odets, Awake and Sing 66.
"Odets, Awake and Sing 95.
"Odets, Awake and Sing 95.
records in a moment of agitation. She also fails to understand her daughter Hennie’s desire for something more than a safe marriage and forces her to follow her practical suggestion of deceitfully making Sam, a lonely foreigner, accept her unborn child. Odets is contending here that these characters may have been different in happier times. His message is that "the Bergers and their friends would not be so wretched if it were not for the crushing tyranny of the capitalist system."47

All the characters constantly struggle to keep the family together. Bessie works hard to make ends meet while her husband Myron tries to endure the present by thinking about the good old days. Grandfather Jacob constantly endeavours to fulfil his Marxist dream of making the world a perfect place.

Yet the Berger family’s efforts are not devoid of optimism. Just as Odets expresses hope in the birth of a new leadership after Lefty’s death in Waiting for Lefty, in Awake and Sing too, he sees the emergence of a new life from Jacob’s demise. Unable to fulfil his dreams on his own, Jacob kills himself, leaving his hopes behind as a legacy for Ralph. Grandfather Jacob’s death motivates Ralph to go out and fight the world’s social injustice.

41Rev. of Awake and Sing by Clifford Odets, Time, 4 March 1935: 39.
Ralph's determination to carry on the task that his grandfather entrusted to him is an image of resurrection—When one generation dies a new one is born from its ashes to carry on its message. Ralph himself senses this feeling and tells everyone about Jacob's message: "... 'Awake and Sing,' he said. Right here he stood and said it. The night he died, I saw it like a thunderbolt! I saw he was dead and I was born." 48 Such buoyant confidence that Odets instills in Ralph is an attempt to inspire in the public a belief that a new world can be created out of the existing chaos. Thus, despite the deathly conditions in which the Berger family lives, optimism prevails because some of the characters are not willing to accept defeat. Odets, however, exudes optimism through Ralph's generation, who defiantly tells Bessie: "... it can't stay like this ... We don't want life printed on dollar bills." 49 Furthermore, when his mother, Bessie, tries to give a justification of life in America by telling him to "go out and change the world if you don't like it," 50 Ralph retorts: "I will! And why? Cause life's different in my

48Odets, Awake and Sing 100-101.
49Odets, Awake and Sing 95.
50Odets, Awake and Sing 95.

117
head . . . I am strong." Odets' final attempt to capture the audience's attention: "I want the whole city to hear it-- fresh blood, arms. We got 'em. We're glad we're living." Ralph's enthusiasm reflects Odets faith in the possibility of establishing a system in which money wouldn't be the determining factor.

Myron and Bessie, who are ostensibly tired of trying to escape from the realities of the depression, convey Odets' doubts about the older generation's ability to fight. Myron wants to escape into his childhood again to avoid confronting the present. Thirty years of clerkdom have been insufficient to provide a comfortable living for his family. Thus a sense of failure oppresses him. For this reason, he constantly regresses into the past and recalls the days of Teddy Roosevelt -- "a world in which it was still possible to believe the Horatio-Alger platitudes ("Never mind, son, merit never goes unrewarded"). Unable to cope with the present, he is always entering into sweepstakes and money-earning contests with the hope that someone has to win. Although

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51 Odets, Awake and Sing 95.
52 Odets, Awake and Sing 101.
53 Weales, Clifford Odets. Playwright 62.
his determination to win five thousand dollars in the Irish Sweepstakes, by naming the marvel cosmetic girl of Hollywood evokes laughter, yet a painful realization underlies this hope of achieving a better and more comfortable future.

Jacob simply retreats to his room, his books and his music to escape from household squabbles. Furthermore, Bessie who smashes his records completely wipes out this resort of escape and comfort. Realizing that he can no longer turn to them for salvation, and fully aware that he has procrastinated the fulfillment of his Marxist dreams to change the world, he kills himself. Jacob’s suicide is Odets’ oblique hint to the increase in the suicide rate that a sense of failure had induced among the older generation of middle-class people during the Depression.

Bessie escapes from the drudgery of life by going to the movies. Her deep involvement in the family situation is also a way to keep herself busy. It prevents her from thinking too often about the trouble that the depression has given her.

Odets ends the play dramatically by having Hennie run off with Moe. Hennie’s elopement with Moe signifies a fulfillment of her love and shows that when people who despair can find something to cherish in troubling times. At the same time her rebellion also is an example to the
audience, that they have to oppose existing convention to achieve what they want from life.

Given Odets' message, it is not surprising that the Marxist press did not appreciate the play. Critic Nathaniel Buchwald stated that despite "its sincerity and social implications," *Awake and Sing* was not a good Marxist play because its characters were not revolutionary enough. He contended that Jacob was too involved with his books, while Ralph was mainly preoccupied with his love affair.54 Michael Blankfort complained about serious flaws in the play; he attributed Ralph's conversion to mysticism instead of Marxism, found the dialogue unrealistic and the play lacking in propaganda.55 But evidently, agitation and propaganda were not Odets' primary concerns. He was mainly anguished by the impact of an economic crisis on ordinary middle-class people, and therefore portrayed the same in his play.

Though initially dismissed as no more than a family play, *Awake and Sing* certainly has a social theme. According to the *Literary Digest*, beneath the veneer of a family drama "beat a new rhythm, a new voice was being heard, and it spoke eloquently, persuasively, and with

54Quoted in Himelstein, *Drama Was a Weapon* 167.

55Himelstein in *Drama Was a Weapon* 167.
The vividness with which Odets delineates his characters' problems, their struggle for survival and the disturbance that it causes, reveals that only a writer who knew the lives of such families closely could write about their despair with such spontaneity and understanding. Odets' working-class roots had infused him with an unsurmountable sense of empathy with his characters. And so the feeling with which he wrote the play is evidently one of a compulsive concern for people rather than a calculation of commercial purpose or for spreading a political doctrine.

Odets' yearning to see the happiness of all human beings inspired him to look at the plight of man on a global basis. Rising Fascism in Europe caused him great anguish, and became manifest in his 1935 anti-Nazi play Till the Day I Die. Written as a companion piece to Waiting for Lefty, the play is about a young Communist musician in Hitler's Germany. Odets presented the struggle of this young man caught in the toils of Nazi storm troopers' harassment and torture.

The source of the story was a letter from a German writer that had been published (in translation) in The New

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56"An Exciting Dramatist Rises in the Theatre," The Literary Digest 18.
Masses. According to the letter, a German Communist had been arrested while working in an underground movement and was released after weeks of torture, only to be arrested a second time. Upon his second arrest, the Nazis tortured him physically and psychologically through verbal abuse. They also made him appear as a traitor to his comrades who consequently lost faith in him. Exhausted by the whole affair and fearing the temptation to compromise his cause by revealing all secrets to the Germans under pressure of torture, he tried to end his life by asking his own brother to kill him. When the brother refused, he shot himself. Although it appears that Odets was glorifying the Communists in Germany through Ernst’s self-sacrifice, it was the brutal nature of the Nazis that had motivated this drama. Odets’ chief intent was to attack their atrocities and sexual perversions that victimized innocent people.

The letter came into print at a time when intellectuals had developed a deep resentment towards German tyranny, resulting in a number of anti-Nazi plays such as Elmer Rice’s Judgement Day and Leslie Reed’s The Shattered Lamp. The letter immediately sparked off Odets’ anger against the Nazis, as well, and he attacked them in Till the Day I Die.

Based on the same theatrical device of using brief
scenes, as in *Waiting for Lefty*, Odets depicts the terror that Nazis inflicted on Communists and the latter’s inexorable effort to continue defending their cause. In the first scene they arrest Comrade Ernst Taussig. The second scene focuses on the cruel manner in which they smash his violin-playing hand. Each successive scene leads him deeper into the pit that his enemies have dug for him. The terror of the situation culminates in Ernst’s death in the last scene.

Scenes two, three, and four mainly exhibit the brutal and horrifying methods of torture that Nazis used. Scene five, in which the tender exchange of words between Ernst and his girlfriend Tilly takes place, exposes the trap that they set for Ernst. While the latter gives the play an aura of chill and gloom, the dialogue between them lends it momentary warmth. In scene six, a meeting of the comrades takes place during which they blacklist Ernst. These comrades include his brother, Carl, who is convinced that Ernst has become a Nazi informer. Despite the suspicions of his comrades, however, and the torture that the Nazis inflict on him, Ernst relentlessly continues to resist them. As the play progresses, the drama reveals the suffering that Ernst is prepared to undertake in order to fulfil his commitment to the Communist cause, so that workers can unite and establish a society free from
fascist oppression. Ready to sacrifice himself for his comrades who, he believes, are "with . . . [him] in the same pain and chaos," he once again survives their brutality. His determination to alleviate the suffering of the working class instills immense faith in him to inspire the belief that "till the day I die there is no peace for an honest worker in the whole world." What he yearns for is the creation of a world that will offer wonderful opportunities for mankind.

... I ask for happy laughing people everywhere. I ask for hope in eyes: for wonderful baby boys and girls . . . growing up strong and prepared for a new world."

Evidently, the influence of Moscow inspired such a vision in Ernst.

I won't ever forget the first time we visited the nursery in Moscow. Such faces on those children! Future engineers, doctors; when I saw them I understood most deeply what the revolution meant."

Ernst's dreams reflect Odets' personal hopefulness and

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58Odets, *Till the Day I Die* 139.  
59Odets, *Till the Day I Die* 112.  
60Odets, *Till the Day I Die* 112.  
124
faith in the Soviet system. Although Ernst talks about the revolution, it is the progress of humanity and the happiness of its children that motivate Ernst to carry on with his cause. Like Ralph, Ernst too desires a world devoid of any form of oppression. Therefore, he sees the fulfillment of his mission when he learns that "in France they have joined to make a solid front against the fascists."61

In portraying the sadistic nature of the Nazis, Odets throws light on the stinging reality that in a world full of hatred and violence there is no place for sentiments. After learning that Ernst is fond of playing the violin, the fiendish Nazi officer Schlegel, ruthlessly smashes his fingers with a rifle butt. Such a world, in Odets view, prevents the creation of new life and expedites the process of destruction. When Tilly tells Ernst that she wants to have a baby, he replies that they will have to wait till "the day comes that we don’t have to live like rats in sewers."62 Furthermore, Fascism destroys the existing love between brothers. By forcing Ernst to sit beside them in a car and identify his comrades, the Nazis create a sense of suspicion in his brother Carl, who

61Odets, Till The Day I Die 140.
62Odets, Till the Day I Die 112.
starts believing that Ernst has turned traitor. Once convinced, Carl declares: "... it is brother against brother" implying that the traitor should be exposed because "[w]hosoever looks in his face is to point the finger. Children will jeer him in the darkest streets of his life! Yes, the brother, the erstwhile comrade cast out!"63

Carl’s motive, in casting his brother aside, is projected as heroic because it arises out of a commitment to the party: "There is no brother, no family, no deeper mother than the working class [for a comrade]."64 Carl’s commitment, however, is extremely dogmatic and imparts a secondary place to personal relationships. Carried away by his hatred for Fascism, Odets apparently failed to draw a distinction between reform and revolution. Dogmatism presents the dangers of blind dedication. Carl’s fervent devotion to the cause, thus, results in his unjustifiable mistrust of his brother, which leads to the latter’s disastrous demise. On the other hand, Carl’s mistrust also arises from a growing sense of insecurity in a period veering towards uncertainty. In this sense, the play reveals the negative impact of Nazism on society—

"Odets, Till the Day I Die 146.
"Odets, Till the Day I Die 146.
126
psychological dislocation that it causes. Tilly’s reluctant vote in favour of ostracizing Ernst from the Party, on the pretext that the brotherhood of comradeship stands above her emotional relationship with him, reveals her vacillating decision that emerges from a wavering dedication to the party. Likewise, it is Carl’s own lack of confidence that prevents a revival of his faith in his brother. This leads to a pathetic situation in which Ernst begs Carl to believe him.

My tongue is thick, my eyes won’t open .... I must have someone believing me. I’m not a traitor. I’m so far gone I don’t understand the position I’m in. I see what you must do to me. Warn all Party members against me. You can’t know the truth. Yes, what is one person like me against the whole enslaved German working class? I know I must be cast away. But you two can believe me.

Finally, it is not so much the torture of the Nazis as the pain of knowing that his comrades consider him a traitor that shatters him. Despairing of such an accusation, he requests Carl to kill him. Ernst’s devotion is so deep that even as he dies he yearns for the advent of a new social order: "... soon all the desolate places of the world must flourish with human genius ... Yes, a world

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65 Odets, Till the Day I Die 152.
of security and freedom is waiting for all mankind."\textsuperscript{66} As he is fading out he calls upon other comrades to continue with their work. Ernst's dedication to his cause and his stoic endurance of Nazi atrocities impart an elevation to his character. This portrayal of Ernst's heroic countenance is Odets' attempt to evoke the audience's admiration for Ernst and infuse viewers with a new confidence in this working class representative, who not only lives with the hope of a new social system but even dies with it. Moreover, by making Ernst a hero on stage, Odets attempts to stimulate a similar commitment in the viewers' hearts. Such a hope reinforces the optimism that Odets introjects in \textit{Waiting for Lefty} and \textit{Awake and Sing}.

Ernst's conviction as he dies, that, "[b]rothers will live in the Soviets of the world,"\textsuperscript{67} reveal Odets' aspirations for a similar system in the hope that it will do away with social disparity and injustice. The grotesqueness of Nazi torture, that Ernst's letter to Tilly describes, is Odets' reminder to the audience of the need to protest fascist tyranny:

They are taking my life by the inch. Day and night they press me for an answer-- identify

\textsuperscript{66}Odets, \textit{Till the Day I Die} 154.

\textsuperscript{67}Odets, \textit{Till the Day I Die} 154.
prisoners or be killed. I cannot last much longer. The terrible truth is they do not kill me. I am enclosing money which they handed over to me yesterday after forcing me to sit beside the chauffeur when they made a street raid. You must be sure that I kept my mouth shut."

Though the political overtones (dedication to Communism) in the play and the violence of the Nazis illustrates its political intent, Odets clarifies the reasons for this premise, which clearly involve the tyranny of mankind and the unjust suffering of innocent people. In showing the violence of the Nazis, Odets did not intend to terrorize the public. It was meant, instead, to awaken people to the effects of Fascism in the hope that they may raise their voice against it. Contrary to Odets' intentions, however, Ernst's commitment to the workers' cause and Carl's dedication to the party imparts a propagandist slant to the play.

Because of its seemingly propagandist nature, Till the Day I Die, like Lefty, had its share of trouble as well from censors. Authorities did not permit the New Theatre to stage it in Philadelphia. In Los Angeles it suffered a most dramatic fate where "Friends of Nazi Germany" kidnapped and severely beat its director William Gheer, objecting to a scene in which "Hitler's

"Odets, Till the Day I Die 144.

129
picture is torn from the wall." Needless to say, such incidents themselves reflect the period’s political upheaval.

In his next play, *Paradise Lost*, written in 1935, Odets portrayed the "profound dislocation" of the middle class and its bewilderment after finding itself in a state of disintegration. The plot recounts the downfall of the Gordon family after Mr. Gordon’s business partner deceives him through embezzlement of business funds. Yet the Gordons’ dislocation after their financial calamity does not affect Odets’ optimistic hope that conditions would soon improve. Thus, in spite of the family’s eviction from their home, the suffering of an ailing son, the death of another in a robbery encounter with the authorities, and a realization of their lost "paradise," Mr. Gordon expresses a regenerated hope in the development of a world imbued with love and caring.

In an introduction to the play, Harold Clurman elucidated the meaning of middle-class "decay":

The two most striking facets of the middle class situation today are: first, the economic insecurity that deprives it of its former prestige as the bulwark of civilization, and inspires it with a fear of becoming reduced to a social class to which it has always considered
itself superior; second, an awareness has grown upon the middle class that most of the ideas by which it has lived no longer correspond to the reality around it.

All characters in the Gordon family suffer from the dilemma that Clurman describes. Disease or economic pressure has affected them in some way or another. Leo Gordon, a middle-class manufacturer of ladies purses or pocket-books, faces a financial crisis because of his partner's deception as well as a declining demand for pocketbooks during the Depression. Personal problems heighten his misfortune. One of his sons, a victim of encephalitis, is slowly dying. The other son, Ben, who was once a champion runner cannot pursue his athletic dreams because he has developed a weak heart. Ben lives a dejected life. Having nurtured the illusion of his return to competitive sport for so long, he is completely shattered upon realizing that can never become a reality. He collapses when the doctor informs him of his inability to be a runner again. The doctor's verdict symbolizes the general failure of the 1930s generation—a weakness to accomplish any meaningful task because of the illness that the system has inflicted upon it. Unable to find a job

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in a time of economic crisis, and married to a dishonest wife, Ben gets frustrated and attempts to steal money. When he is caught, he lets himself be shot so that he can escape the degradation that faces him. The final scene reveals his frustration with life when he questions "'. . . are we living?' The world is flat, like a table—Columbus was wrong -- We are being pushed over the edge." Ben’s aspirations, according to Block, "symbolize the pursuit of middle-class youth of the treacherous values of headlong worship, of seeing life in terms of personal exhibition." This, combined with his personal suffering, leads to his "decay."

Julie Gordon represents the death of ideals in a world dominated by selfish motives. He always dreams of making fabulous fortunes in Wall Street. The Gordons’ daughter Pearl, who is a pianist, cannot marry her lover Felix because in the midst of a depression, he cannot get a job. Pearl knows that without one it is not wise to marry. Gus Michaels, a friend of the Gordons, is a frustrated businessman who has been reduced to a small shopkeeper because of stiff competition from


industrialists. He dwells in nostalgic memories of the paradise that he and the entire middle class has lost and talks about them to Mr. Gordon:

I can’t explain it to you, Mr. G., how I am forever hungering for the past. It’s like a disease in me, eatin’ away . . . some nights I have cried myself to sleep--for the old Ashbury Park days; the shore dinners at old Sheepshead Bay . . . . In those days every house had its little dog . . . it was a common sight to see them out walkin’ of a summer night, big ones and little ones. How beautiful the summer nights before the Big war! We would sit out there . . . and the streets fulla laughin’ playing children . . . . Oh, it was so beautiful in those days!”

Odets’ capitalist representative is Leo’s partner Sam Katz, who not only cheats him in their business but tries to preserve it by terrorizing his workers. Katz’ aggressiveness is a mask behind which he hides his impotence. Odets deliberately deigns him sexually impotent to symbolize the sterility of the economic system that his infertility connotes. The system, according to Odets, is responsible for the "general fraud" and causes immense despair and alienation, of the economically weaker class, from society. As a result, says Clurman, "middle class life gradually becomes a ‘remote’ life, for even while it exists in the present and is oppressed by it, its

73Odets, Paradise Lost 207.
consciousness is not altogether attuned to it."74

Pike, the Gordons' furnace man who voices Odets' indictment, becomes his chief spokesman in the play. His transfiguration to the working class provides him with "an economic understanding and a social philosophy".75 He bitterly condemns the materialistic values of society in which a "person starves to death . . . every other day" and where "[h]unger and degradation" exist "eighty-twenty."76 He feels that the people "ought to take the government in . . . [their] own hands and make it something different,"77 So that it doesn't cause another war that has previously blown his sons to hell and put an end to all his happiness. For this reason he despises the system, which, he claims, "[b]reeds wars like a bitch breeds pups! Breeds poverty, degrades men to sentimental gibbering' idiots . . . ."78 This sharp criticism of the capitalist system represents Odets' own disillusionment with the system. Though Pike's indictment of the system is not an open call to the workers to take up arms, as in

74Clurman, "Three Introductions" 424.
76Odets, Paradise Lost 168.
77Odets, Paradise Lost 168.
78Odets, Paradise Lost 206.
Waiting For Lefty, it is nonetheless a mute form of protest—a calling for the creation of a poverty-free, economically stable setup which can provide monetary and psychological security to society.

Lack of pecuniary resources finally leaves the Gordon family homeless. In the last scene, authorities evict the family from their home, where they lived for seventeen years. They are "took like a bulldog takes a pussy cat." The "bulldog" symbolizes the administration that exerts pressure on financially deprived people.

Yet, once again, as in his other plays of the 1930s, Odets expresses confidence in a happy future. Leo’s last speech reveals that a new social awareness has dawned upon him which imbues him with immense faith in a more desirable economic, social and political order.

No! There is more to life than this! . . . [T]here is a future. Now we know. We dare to understand . . . . I tell you the whole world is for men to possess. Heartbreak and terror are not the heritage of mankind! . . . No fruit tree wears a lock and key . . . . [T]he world is in its morning . . . and no man fights alone.

Leo’s declaration that "no man fights alone" is an indirect call to people to participate in the struggle for

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79Odets, **Paradise Lost** 229.
80Odets, **Paradise Lost** 229-30.
a new future, and is reminiscent of Agate's call for collective protest at the end of *Lefty*. However, since the enemy that he intends to fight is the "heartbreak and terror" that the economic crisis has caused, Leo does not call for a political revolution but for participation in an effort to rehabilitate the socio-economic structure.

To some critics the Gordon family did not seem as convincing as the Berger family of *Awake and Sing*. Robert Garland wrote: "They aren't American, they aren't middle class, they aren't alive."\(^8\) The play, nonetheless, is undeniably an account of a decaying middle-class family that suffers from relentless economic and social pressure. Since Odets' engagement with the plight of the middle-class had driven him to write this play, Odets harangued those who found the play unconvincing. He remarked:

Some of us are inclined to think today that we are surrounded on all sides by normal, well-juiced people . . . . We are apt to forget that day by day millions of intellectuals, professionals, and white collar workers are gently being eased out of comforts they knew once, surely being declassed and depossessed. Perhaps many of us live in comfort, well-cushioned away from reality, know little of what is going on. Little or nothing.

Perhaps these comfortable, well-cushioned ones . . . are not aware that twenty eight

million people are living on relief of various kinds. Perhaps we have not seen the delicate psychological manifestations of their degradation. 82

Moreover, Odets had himself experienced a milieu of social struggle and, thus, searched for a way of life "that might bring some sort of constructive order into the chaos of . . . artistic and social life." 83 He stated that the play was based on his experiences as a boy in the Bronx, that he knew the characters well. Given Odets' personal association with social struggle and his infuriation at the ills of the system and at those who paid little heed to the problems of humanity, it is obvious that these factors were crucial in formulating his commitment.

Odets' awareness of the problems of the middle-class and his own difficult childhood that left him in poverty for a number of years taught him to struggle but not to sacrifice one's ideals to gain material success. This became the theme of his next play, Golden Boy. In this play, Odets presented the decadence of one's ideals and loss of identity in a competitive society. Through Joe Bonaparte, the protagonist, he portrayed the insecurity

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82Cited in Mersand, The American Drama since 1930 84-85.
83Clurman, "Three Introductions" 424.
and helplessness of a person in a society preoccupied with individualism and the pursuit of material gratification. By dramatizing Joe’s anxieties and confusion, he conveyed that the impact of such a society can be shattering.

Joe Bonaparte, a talented young violinist of Italian descent, lives in a competitive world where "[f]ive hundred fiddlers stand on Broadway and 48th street, on the corner everyday, rain or shine, hot or cold."\(^8\) Realizing the futility of trying to find a job as a musician, he gives up the strings of his violin to find fame and material success. Soon he becomes a successful prizefighter and unintentionally kills his adversary in a fight. Consequently, he realizes that he made the wrong choice. In trying to achieve worldly success, he sold away his artistic integrity and committed manslaughter. Tormented by a self-inflicted guilt of having murdered his opponent, he tries to escape from it by driving in a high speed car. He meets with an accident and dies. His pursuit of the American dream completely destroys him. Clurman’s introduction to the play clearly describes Joe’s dilemma:

What the golden boy of this allegory is fighting for is a place in the world as an individual; what he wants is to free his ego from the scorn that attaches to "nobodies" in a society in which every activity is weighed in the light of

a competition. He wants success not simply for the soft line—automobiles, etc—which he talks about, but because the acclaim that goes with it promises him acceptance by the world, peace with it, safety from becoming the victim that it makes of the poor, the alien, the unnoticed minorities. To achieve this success, he must exploit an accidental attribute of his make-up, a mere skill, and abandon the development of the real self.85

This success based upon false values cannot survive for long. Therefore, according to Odets, Joe is doomed to fail. Joe's dilemma about the choice of his profession reveals the predicament of youth during the 1930s. While on the one hand, their conscience urges them to follow their own objectives in life, the necessity of survival in a money-oriented world, on the other, forces them to give up their dreams. The need to survive, and hunger for recognition by a materialistic society, in Odets' mind, transforms his spirit into that of a killer. "If music shot bullets I'd like it better,"86 says Joe. Ironically, this spirit becomes a reality when he takes up fighting as a career. In the course of the match in which he tries to give his opponent the fury of a lifetime, Joe inadvertently knocks him dead.

Thus, all that Joe receives ultimately is spiritual

85Clurman "Three Introductions" 430.
86Odets, Golden Boy 264.

139
destruction and death. Overcome by feelings of guilt and remorse, he tells Lorna: "What will my father say when he hears I murdered a man? Lorna, see what I did. I murdered myself, too! I've been running around in circles. Now I'm smashed!" He realizes that he has erred by following the course of a system that does not value one's integrity. Had he not craved material success so desperately, he may have been a "boy who might have said, 'I have myself; I am what I want to be!'" But it is too late, for he has made his choice. According to Anita Block "[Joe] can neither fight nor make music — neither function in the competitive world nor in the world of self-expression." The only course left open to him is to escape from this sordid reality. This is the path that he adopts. In a last attempt to save his last loved possession—his love for Lorna, he runs away in a high powered car that he had purchased with his prize money. But he is ruined— they're both killed in a crash.

This ruination of Joe is reminiscent of the destruction of Christopher Marlowe's Dr. Faustus. Joe, like Faustus becomes an overreacher and destroys himself

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140
in the end. Yet, while Faustus, by selling his soul to the devil becomes a victim of his *hubris*, which fails to elicit one’s sympathy, Joe is a victim of pressures that a materialistic society imposes and thus becomes a sympathetic figure. His fatal flaw is his pursuit of material success.90

Odets reinforces the play’s central thesis by juxtaposing the artist’s world of contentment and harmony with the hysterical, exploitative, and selfish world of business. The latter is the world of boxing that Moody and Eddie Fuseli control. Moody and Fuseli represent, in Odets’ mind, the capitalistic spirit. They push Joe into the boxing ring and manipulate him for personal gains, calling his profession nothing more than a business. Therefore, upon hearing about Joe’s death, their only regret is that they lost a good fighter--their interest lies not in Joe--the human being but in him as a commodity who brought them profits. The congregation at Joe’s death, of Moody and Fuseli on the one hand, and Joe’s family on the other, constitutes, according to Weales, a union of the two worlds--"the one to mourn the loss of a property and the other to mourn the loss of a man."91

91Weales, Clifford Odets. Playwright 129.
Joe’s death is Odets’ warning to his audience to learn from his mistake. To present the other side of the coin Odets prevents Frank from falling into the same trap as Joe. When Eddie makes him an offer to join the boxing ring, Frank replies that if he were to fight it would be for a "lotta things" in which he believes. He tells Eddie, that this is because "I’m not fooled by a lotta things Joe’s fooled by. I don’t get autos and custom-made suits. But I get what Joe don’t." When Eddie uncomprehendingly asks him "what don’t he get?" Frank modestly replies that Joe does not get the most important thing in life—"[t]he pleasure of acting as you think! The satisfaction of staying where you belong, being what you are . . . at harmony with millions of others!"

Through Frank’s commitment to a world in which he will not allow other people to use him, Odets shows the road to happiness and certainty to those whom the illusion of material success has misled. Clearly, Odets’ message is directed towards putting an end to a system that attaches great importance to materialistic wealth, and reduces human beings to articles of commerce. Odets indicts the trading of one’s dignity for material success.

In Rocket to the Moon, which followed Golden Boy, Odets once again focuses on the "psychological dislocation" of the middle class during the thirties. Through an expose of the personal difficulties arising out of unstable social and economic conditions, Odets tacitly expresses his commitment to the rehabilitation of an economically stable system.

Odets proposes that the "psychological dislocations result from a clash of temperaments, a lack of drive." This "clash of temperaments" that occurs between the characters in the play, and "lack of drive" to work, results from their maladjustment in a materialistic society. Odets thus relates the perplexities of these characters to their social environment, which, with its attendant misery and economic suffering, has reduced them to a pitiful condition.

The play presents the frustrations of Dr. Starke, a middle-class dentist, and his futile love affair with his young secretary Cleo. The first scene, which takes place in Starke's waiting room at the hospital manifests an aura of spiritual and economic gloom. The characters seem to be wanting to escape these oppressive surroundings. The


143
atmosphere also establishes the likelihood of an affair between Starke and Cleo. The second scene launches the affair. The last scene shows Ben Starke returning to his wife after realizing that his relationship with Cleo cannot materialize. Their unfulfilled relationships reveal the characters' lack of adjustment and insecurity.

Ben; his father-in-law, Prince; his wife Belle; and his secretary, Cleo, all victims of the Depression malaise, grope for a way out of their disillusionment. They not only have conflicts with each other but are disoriented with the rest of society. Ben thinks that it is futile to love in an atmosphere of depression-inflicted discomfort. Phil Cooper does nothing but mope all the time: "Why can't I make a living? I'm falling apart by inches . . . . Where will it end if they can't use millions of Coopers?" And Willy Wax, who, as opposed to Phil, is a financially successful man, complains that he has become "a mechanical man in a mechanical era!" Cleo dwells in a world of make-believe to find a temporary respite from the drudgery of her life. She finds her utopia in imaginary modelling and dancing careers and

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"Odets, Rocket to the Moon 410.

144
dreams of having a family. Prince hides his loneliness behind a mask of humorous disposition. And Ben and Belle’s marriage becomes one of convenience between two mismatched people, which a society dominated by the pursuit of wealth has arranged.

As in *Awake and Sing*, Odets in *Rocket to the Moon* shows the effect of the environment on society. Odets’ characters would have been different people in a more orderly atmosphere. It is the social situation that reduces Belle to an uncompromising superior who insists that her husband sell his blood in order to pay off his debts. As in *Golden Boy*, Odets indicts the yearning for fame and prosperity, elements which at the cost of human sentiments, become issues of primary importance. Love becomes a secondary issue in Ben and Belle’s marriage. Cleo realizes the pragmatic necessity of not aligning herself with Prince or Ben. "None of you can give me what I’m looking for: a whole full world, with all the trimmings," she tells them. So she rejects both men and goes off on her own. Cleo represents the archetype of the lost youth of this generation. Society has made her lonely and she searches for a love that will provide her a sense of security.

"Odets, *Rocket To the Moon* 417.
Yet, in Cleo’s rejection Odets sees hope for a reformation of society. This is because he views her rejection of the two men as an instinctive knowledge of "what is good and progressive in life around her." Like Odets, she finds herself in a world which rejects her values, and almost immediately she opposes her environment to do what she thinks is the best thing for her. Though Odets does not project her as an intellectual, he admires her because, she "fight[s] or becomes stubborn and more determined in . . . [her] convictions and feelings, when . . . [she] and . . . [her] aspirations are blocked."

Therefore, Cleo, according to him, represents "the hope of American life, the most typical hope." Since Cleo is an exemplar of the lost youth of the 1930s, her portrayal represents Odets’ attempt to arouse the same feelings of rebellion among the younger generation.

As in other plays of the thirties, in Rocket to the Moon too Odets’ commitment leads to the creation of characters who are "recognizable fragments of reality" inflicted with acutely painful lives under the circumstances. Ben, Prince, Cleo and Belle are

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9Odets, The Time is Ripe 95.
99Odets, The Time is Ripe 95-96.
100Odets, The Time is Ripe 95.
146
manifestations of real middle-class people grappling with real problems that society poses. Yet Odets' optimism gives these characters the power to participate in the struggle for existence. Ben strives to keep his broken marriage alive and accepts his lack of success as a dentist. Prince tries, with desperate courage, to accept the inanity of his existence, and Belle tries to accept the excruciating reality that she will remain childless. The courage with which these defeated people fight such ugly realities makes them champions of a struggling world striving for something that will make life worthwhile and engender hope.

It is, however, through Frenchy that Odets explicitly conveys the fear of losing values such as love in the contemporary world:

Love is a beginning, a jumping-off place . . . . Who's got time and place for "love and the grace to use it"? . . . You have to bring a whole balanced normal life if you want it to go! . . . In this day of stresses I don't see much normal life . . . . [T]he free exercise of love, I figure, gets harder everyday.\footnote{Odets, Rocket to the Moon 404.}

Odets' contention that love has lost its place in society is what motivated him to write the play. He stated in the World Telegram that the play intended "to depict
the difficulty or near-imposibility of the full and natural love between man and woman in a society where each of us is reduced to a high tension of loneliness by the competitive set-up and the passion for personal triumph."

His concern with the emotional and psychological displacement of his characters in a society preoccupied with the pursuit of materialistic values affirms Odets' commitment to humanity.

"Odets' plays of the 1930s reveal that his engagement with social problems resulted from genuine feelings for "civilization"—one, which, Odets felt, "is groaning in its sleep . . . ." "I am very much interested in civilization," he stated, "that means being against war, against fascism." Despite his disillusionment with the existing economic and social realities, which, to him, were responsible for mankind's distress, Odets expressed hope in the possibility of a Marxist-based system which would provide equality and justice to all human beings and develop a respect for an individual's integrity.

In all six plays, Odets addressed the central issues of the period that caused immense anxiety to society. Waiting for Lefty attacks capitalism; Awake and Sing shows

102Quoted in Weales, Clifford Odets. Playwright 132.

a lower-middle class family’s struggle for survival amidst the Depression; Till the Day I Die denounces Fascism; Paradise Lost portrays the decay of middle-class families under economic breakdown; Golden Boy delineates the dilemma of youth and the loss of one’s ideals in a competitive system; Rocket to the Moon attacks the environment for causing psychological maladjustments in society.

With these plays Odets attempted to reach out to a large segment of the population. He intended to make them aware of existing problems, through a process of identification, of the audience, with the characters on stage. Therefore most of his characters are intended to be impersonations of his viewers, belonging to the middle or lower middle-class, and victims of their environment, class-distinction, and the socio-economic system. In Waiting For Lefty, Joe, the doctor, the actor, and the lab assistant, all suffer the lack of opportunity because their class remains an obstacle to it. They symbolize the state of mind of the frustrated and the depressed who feel betrayed by the failure of the economic system, social injustices and class discrimination. Odets’ inclusion of characters from both classes constitutes a wide spectrum of the population’s problems. The various incidents that reveal their reasons for discontent touch on their
immediate concerns and experiences. Likewise, the Bergers in *Awake and Sing*, the Gordons in *Paradise Lost*, the Starkes in *Rocket to the Moon*, and Joe Bonaparte in *Golden Boy* are middle-class people. Their psychological maladjustments, and misery upon seeing their well-integrated families crumble under economic pressure, represent the dismay of many middle-class Americans whose lives the Depression had adversely affected. Although *Till the Day I Die* addresses a foreign problem, it also seeks to make the audience aware of the possibility of the spread of fascist tyranny to America.

Odets' raising of a foreign issue, however, also shows that he decried nationalism. Geographical boundaries do not restrict his universal concern with humanity.

Odets also believed that the means for reaching the audience depended upon the theatre's power to arouse the audience's emotion, and thereby evoke a favourable response. Indeed, all these plays, with their unflinching exposure of economic and psychological suffering, attempt to stimulate the audience's emotions. *Waiting for Lefty*, especially, stresses agitation alongside a realistic delineation of the character's difficulties. The synthesis of anger and sense of urgency for action reveals Odets' artistic achievement. Most successful of Odets' socially committed dramas, *Lefty*, thus, becomes a functional means
of teaching the audience, what Odets believed were the misconceptions about free enterprise. In *Awake and Sing* and *Rocket to the Moon* the attempt to stir the audiences’ reaction springs from within the framework of family life and attitudes of the characters.

Odets’ attempts to reach an audience leads to the creation of a dialogue that essentially incorporates their idiom, and his realistic detail belongs with this class. Even his most inarticulate character is, by means of the most apt expression, able to render the essence of a situation. When Ralph says that “it’s crazy— all my life I wanted to buy a pair of black and white shoes and can’t have them,” that is an intense outburst of feeling that belongs not to Ralph alone but to the entire generation of boys of his age who have not, in all their lives, been able to afford a pair of fancy shoes. Likewise, Edna’s tribulations in *Waiting for Lefty* reveal her anguish and represents the misery of lower middle-class:

You got two blondie kids sleeping in the next room. They need food and clothes. I’m not mentioning anything else— But we’re stalled like a flivver in the snow... For God’s sake, do something, Joe. . . . Maybe get your buddies together, maybe go on strike for better money. . . . Your boss is making suckers outa you boys every minute . . . and suckers out of all the wives and the poor innocent kids who’ll grow up

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104 Odets, *Awake and Sing* 42.

151
But while the blatant attack and anger of the dialogue lends force to his plays, the expressions of protest and attacks on the capitalist system that run through all the plays get repetitive.

The realistic details of the dialogue also result from Odets' awareness of the theatrical demand of the audience. Thus, the excessively emotional speech at the end of *Waiting For Lefty*, and the spontaneous response that it evokes from the audience shows the impact of such language upon the audience. When audiences at the theatre heard the slogan "WORKERS OF THE WORLD UNITE", they were delighted by its eagerness and identified it with their own voices.

Odets' indictment of the economic system obviously entails an attack on business leaders. As evident from his plays, Odets believed that the richer classes manipulated the socio-economic system entirely to their advantage, and to the detriment of the lower classes. Thus, the materially privileged classes become the enemy on a number of occasions in his plays. In *Waiting for Lefty*, Fatt becomes the target of assault. In *Paradise Lost* the

characters isolate themselves from uncle Morty because of his apathy, hypocrisy and insensitivity towards other fellow humans. In *Golden Boy* Moody and Fuseli become the villains.

To alleviate the suffering of human beings, Odets implicates the necessity of personal sacrifice and expresses his belief that people were ready to die for good causes in the 1930s. Thus, the new world that he hopes for nearly always emerges from the death of a character. Lefty’s death in *Waiting for Lefty* brings about the birth of a new faith with which the workers resolve to unite and fight all injustice. In *Awake and Sing*, Jacob’s death gives a new birth to Ralph who promises to carry out the revolution. In *Till the day I Die* Ernst dies leaving behind a legacy for the next generation to take up arms, and the death of Joe Bonaparte in *Golden Boy* promotes an awareness of the futility of material success.

The suffering of these characters in a system of free enterprise inspires Odets to push his characters to resort to action arising from Marxist stimulation. In a March 25 entry of his 1940 *Journal*, he wrote:

> There is Marx and an open but difficult road to socialism, in my personal world the only thing which keeps me writing as a creative dramatist. This world must be changed! And there is today a way to change it! No matter what the detractors of Russia say, it is the new Russia which will
Evidently, he believed that Marx and a socialist society would lead the way out of the oppression of the working class, the corruption of the materially rich and the struggle of the middle class and Nazi terrorism--issues which were a significant part of American consciousness during the thirties.

However, Odets' commitment to Marxism is ambivalent. It presents a dichotomy in his thinking. For example, his intentions of advocating a Marxist society for the purpose of achieving social and economic equality does not fall in tune with his dogmatic promotion of communism and a "Soviet America" in *Till the Day I Die*. This dualism represents a naive idealism which resulted from a romantic and emotional reaction rather than an intellectual explanation. Furthermore, his indictment of capitalism on the one hand, and his defection to Hollywood in 1936, which eventually became his abode till his death in 1963, shows a two-fold path in his committed career. While the former reveals his determination to treat problems that caused distress to humanity, the latter shows an inclination towards a pragmatic pursuit of a comfortable living for himself.

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106 Odets, *The Time is Ripe* 84.
One can attribute Odets' continuing concern with social issues throughout the decade, his political affiliation with the Communist Party, and development as a social dramatist, to his poor origins and harsh experiences of life. Having lived in a crowded, and pinched, if not indigent environment, as a child, he became acutely aware of the pain of lower middle-class existence. Odets explained before the House Un-American Activities Committee that personal experience governed his outlook. He said that his "mother worked in a stocking factory in Philadelphia at the age of 11 and died a broken woman and an old woman at the age of 48."\(^{107}\) He had also stated many years earlier that he "was a worker's son until the age of 12."\(^{108}\) Furthermore, the Depression had revealed to him the ugly face of American reality and sensitized him to the inadequacies of the social system and the harshness of plutocracy. In that threatening decade, Odets witnessed jobless men walking the streets in search of work, workers being discharged every week, factories closing down indefinitely, hungry men in long queues at the charity 'soup kitchens', and human beings

\(^{107}\)Quoted in Weales, Clifford Odets. Playwright 18.  
groping for rotten food in trash bins and dumpsters. He not only saw the workers and factory hands suffering but also the middle-class people whose integrity the capitalist system had stolen.

Evidently, Odets derived material for his plays directly from a milieu of war, walkouts, evictions, unemployment, labour strikes and exploitation of individuals. His personal hardship and social environment were significant factors that pushed him toward Marxist theory. His emotional reaction to them stimulated his commitment towards social change. Gabriel Miller observes:

His wider impetus derived from the Depression itself which dispossessed millions of Americans of their homes and their psychological roots. Odets responded emotionally to their plight because he identified with their loss and he recognized their pain. . . . [H]e persisted . . . in their desire to be a champion of the dispossessed and disinherited not only because of a personal sympathy, but because of a deep-seated need to combat actively the suffering he saw in the social upheaval of his time.109

Therefore, to help relieve people of their suffering, Odets suggested that the working class, like the taxi-drivers in Waiting For Lefty, must strike and resort to militant action if it sees no other course in its struggle

156
for justice. The middle class must, like Ralph in *Awake and Sing*, go out in the world to find the difference between life and dollar bills. As in *Paradise Lost* it must not cling to delusions. It should resist tyranny as Ernst does in *Till the Day I Die* and guard itself against becoming an instrument of capitalist exploitation so that it does not have to go through the same trauma as Joe Bonaparte in *Golden Boy*. 