

## Analysis of Awake and Sing as a Revolutionary Play

Sonia Jaspal

Assistant Professor in English, Government College for Girls, Patiala

---

### ARTICLE DETAILS

#### Article History

Published Online: 15March2019

#### Keywords

Revolutionary, social, economic, problems, depression, rights, crisis.

---

### ABSTRACT

Each play of Odets proves that he was a committed Marxist. He wrote to propagate the message in favour of the masses and tried to pinpoint their miseries, troubles and tribulations in living their everyday existence. Odets was a man with a mission and his plays burned with furious intensity and conveyed spirit of the suppressed sufferers of the society. His characters clamour for justice and fight for their rights. In mid-Depression period, America was beginning to be a sterile country as far as literary output was concerned. It was at that time that Odets produced his powerful play Awake and Sing. It was a social play and dealt with the social and economic problems. It conveyed the message of protest against the Capitalists and portrayed the problems of abused and frustrated middle class professionals who suffer from the corruption in social institutions, business and government. Through his revolutionary plays, he structured the plays as a series of brief vignettes, each of which spotlights certain individuals and shows how their problems reflect the larger conflict which forms the framework of the plays.

---

### Introduction

The post world war years threw up a large number of talented and powerful writers. They had experienced the fame and desolation spelt by the war in their guts and had found their views about life shaken and shattered. War had a calamitous effect on the economic, social, political and familial fronts. Loves were ruined, fortunes sank, homes battered, infact everything was in a shambles.

Since every work of art is a product of its social and economic conditions, the writers inspired by the 20<sup>th</sup> century situation expressed that they saw and felt at that time. Their works reflect the social, cultural and economic changes of the times. The writers of this period wanted to make people aware of the degeneration and spiritual exploitation. They wanted people to awaken and protest and if possible to master the machines instead of becoming their slaves. Man realized to his dismay that the scientific advancement had a gripping effect on his psyche. The advancement on the scientific front shattered the success dreams, democracy dreams, revolution dreams, and all manifestation of big dreaming happy society.

**The objective of my paper is to analyse Clifford Odets' Awake and Sing as a Revolutionary play.** Awake and Sing dramatizes the plight of a working class family struggling to seize and hold into newly covered middle class position and values. This Jewish family. The Bergers, are shown struggling in the grip of the Depression not merely to keep alive but to maintain social respectability. Behind the anxieties of the older generation lies something larger and darker than the daily necessities. They are possessed by an immoderate fear that through scandal they will be forced back to the life of poverty out of which they have painfully risen. The plot revolves around the penury of an ordinary American households: The Bergers Bessie and Myron, and their children Ralph and Hennie, are people "who never had any money but who love it and live for the love of it" Odets writes. Bessie Berger, the matriarch has managed over the years by sheer force of will to put a good face to the world. Her peace of mind rests upon the well-being and unsoiled name of the family whose members are less

important to her as individuals than as props for her pride. Married to a weakling, she has long since discovered that she must be both mother and father to her children and fulfill her duties with utmost devotion. Into the bargain she must suppress her normal yearnings for an occasional change of scene, a game of card, or even the affections of the family, lest in the momentary dropping of her guard the Berger children cease to be the cleanest on the block.

At the same time, her middle class origin controls and besets her entire life, she rules over the household as a "tyrannical mother," "over powering wife," and "scornful daughter." She tries to indoctrinate her children with ideals of middle class respectability and intends for them to succeed in life even if it means perverting their own ambitions and driving them away from her. But none of the family seems to be able to live up to her expectations." Myron Berger is a hopeless dreamer who dwells on the past, Bessie's brother Morty is a successful American businessman who lords his money over his sister and brother-in-law. Her father Jacob, a retired barber wants Bessie to change her attitude toward her children. When Bessie discovers that her unmarried daughter Hennie is pregnant, she pushes her into marriage with a young immigrant who is too innocent to recognize her strategy for what it is. And when she hears that her son Ralph has taken up with a girl, she makes an effort to break up the relationship in order to keep his salary exclusively for the family.

The major theme of Awake and Sing is rebellion. Jacob preaches that all men should abandon their selfish ambitions. And Ralph's decision to go ahead and court his girl constitutes a rebellion against Bessie's ideas of future. Hennie also rebels, in direct defiance of Bessie's strict sense of morality. She becomes pregnant by a man she does not know and will never see again. Although Hennie's condition incenses her mother, Bessie reacts swiftly, marrying Hennie off to Sam Feinschreiber, a newly arrived immigrant with wage-earning potential. Jacob objects to the duping of Sam. His prediction of disaster is borne out when the marriage soon breaks up with Hennie leaving both her husband and baby and fleeing with

Moe Axelrod, a racketeer, who turns out to be her first love. The conflicts of the play finally come to a climax when Myron unwittingly reveals to Ralph that Sam is not the father of Hennie's baby. Ralph turns away from his family entirely. His rejection of both his mother's-Codes of conduct and his grandfather's visions drive both Bessie and Jacob over the edge. She races into the old man's room and in a burst of frustration breaks all his caruso records, his only pleasure in life. And Jacob having lost any chance of ever reaching Ralph elects to make a supreme sacrifice. He goes up to the roof flings himself off, and thereby provides his grandson with his insurance money with which to make a decent start in life. Like Willy Loman later Jacob too is keen to give his children the best even at the cost of his life.

The social message in *Awake and Sing* as Mendelsohn points out is to raise middle class consciousness so its members can learn "to tell the difference between dollar bills and life. According to Gassner the theme of this play is too close to the pulse of human life to be devoid of dramatic potentialities. And through Odets, it finds expression passionately and eagerly in nervous poetic colloquialism. "His eloquence is largely the product of his sympathies and indignations. His dramatic talent cannot be separated from his social animus, even when his thought is less than conclusive in the plays written during thirties."

Jacob an avowed Marxist, his exhortations to Ralph have no greater success than Bessie's constant preachings about hard work and repeatability. Ralph is more interested in buying "a pair of black and white shoes" and marrying a girl with whom he has fallen in love. For once Jacob and Bessie are in agreement. Both of them say that marriage for Ralph is out of question. Bessie's objections are to the girl's lack of family and money. Jacob objects because he fears marriage will deter Ralph from awakening to the need for social change.

But Jacob fails to convince Ralph or anyone else, of his socialist programmes. In this play Odets presents leftist ideas through an ineffective old man.

So you believe in God..... you get something for it? You: you worked all the capitalistic..... You got God: But the past comforts you. The present smiles on you, Yes? It promises you the future something? Did you find a piece of earth where you could live like a human being and die with the sun on your face? Tell me, yes, tell me. I would like to know myself. But to these questions on this theme - the struggle for existence- you cannot make an answer. The answer I see in your face.... the answer is your mouth can't talk. In this dark corner you sit and you die. But abolish private property (pp. 72-73).

Morty is not moved by his father's tirade. He makes fun of the old man. Later Jacob kills himself when Bessie breaks his phonograph records. This act crystallizes the corrupting force of Bessie's drive to preserve the family's reputation, for she performs it in a rage after her husband blurts out to Ralph the truth about Hennie's pregnancy.

The last minute attempt to sentimentalize Bessie is followed by a conclusion to the play. Hennie decides to escape her mother's influence by eloping with Moe while Bessie is asleep.

According to R.C.Reynolds the most frequently heard complaint about *Awake and Sing* concerns the play's ending which many critics felt offered flabby Marxism and a tepid

commitment to bourgeoisie values, two antithetical ideas in themselves.

Bessie's final speech is a plea for understanding from her son. Odet's middle class heroine is the way she is because she has no choice Ralph suddenly understands her "I'm not blaming you mom," he tells her "sink or swim I see it. But it can't stay like this." He recalls Jacob's words and shouts to her: "We don't want life printed on dollar bills, Mom: "But Bessie is unmoved by her father's rhetoric, and she leaves Ralph to ponder over his new insight.

But Brooks Atkinson sums up the general critical reaction to the play's final lines by pointing to Ralph's final speech and calling it more "elegy" than "song": "But there is no doubt," he affirms, "that the characters are awake."

He realizes that he cannot accept the insurance money, first of an because it is tainted, and Secondly because he has not earned it himself, He rushes into Jacob's room and gathers up the old man's books, vows to read them and to learn. He encourages his sister to go ahead in her adulterous flight, thereby rejecting all his mother's fake responsibility and embracing Jacob's philosophy. Fully understanding the meaning of his grandfather's death, Ralph issues his final statement fully "awake," he sings":

I'm twenty two and kickin's: I'll get along. Did Jake die for us to fight about nickels? No; "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: I swear to God, I'm one week old: I want the whole city to hear it -fresh blood, arms, We got 'em. We're glad we're living. (pp-100-101).

Ralph changes his mind about Hennie and Bessie's duping of Sam and also encourages Hennie to leave with Moe. After withstanding years of Jacob's passionate rhetorical exhortations for him to renounce his selfish ambitions and fight for a better world, he experiences a Marxist epiphany during Bessie's self-pity speech. He not only abandons his intentions to marry his girl but also dedicates himself to the very cause Jacob had pleaded for so long. Weales points out that the play's ending incorporates two stock 'romantic devices; "the traditional happy ending for the lovers beset by barners" and "the speech to which one responds not because the way has been laid dramatically not even one believes because the spiritual content..... is so commanding." Mendelsohn points out that however incredible Hennie's abandonment of her husband and child may be, Odets would have made a major error in providing such a dreary play with a happy ending.

### Conclusion

*Awake and Sing* achieved critical praise chiefly for its characterization and language. Eleanor Flexner finds the play lacking in continuity, but she admits that "such characterization and dialogue are not to be found previously in our drama. And John Howard Lawson concedes that "Odets has found the gaiety and warmth and singing beauty in American speech." Edith Isaacs writes that Odet's characters have a "double set of nerves," but not "a grain of common sense.... all have the large chips on their shoulders, moving blindly through an upset world, all suffering from different personal disharmonies but all basically alike and all bewildered."

While the naturalistic generation of writers has "demonstrated to its own satisfaction that there is nothing to admire or hope for in the nature of man". Krutch points out that Odets "comes along and does both". Odets' primary point in *Awake and Sing* is that in this play the whole family is defeated, not any single individual.

After *Awake and Sing* many critics variously commented on the social drama of the 1930's. The development of modern American theatre was according to John Gassner, "a reflection of social realities in the United States. It is true that Odets offered plays with strong leftist sentiment, and Marxist propaganda, plays which dealt with strikes, anti-fascism, and class struggle. Eric Bentley writes, "Experimentalism in the arts always reflects historical conditions, always indicates profound dissatisfaction with established modes, always is groping towards a new age." Odets used the "experimentalism" of earlier decades to open new realms of intellectual, social and philosophical inquiry, for example in *Lefty and Awake and Sing*). In both the plays his attitude is optimistic. He hopes for a new better world in which

everyone can live the way he likes. Mendelsohn has commented on *Waiting for Lefty* and *Awake and Sing* that these plays were "revolutionary". He said that Odets attempted to interpret his society in these plays. Clurman has said "Odets's work from the beginning contained" a protest that is also prophecy." The writer desires a change in society. A tendril of revolt runs through *Awake and Sing*. His work is profoundly of the lower middle class with all its vacillation: fears, groping, self-distrust, dejection, vows of conversion and prayers for release."

Goldstein writes, "Odets points out the disparity between the myth and the reality of the American middle class." And like Ralph and Hennie, Odets himself seemed to be searching through his subsequent plays and through the theme of personal rebellion for, as Mendelsohn puts it, "Something to call a family."

According to Harold Clurman, The play is not "depressing," though some of its incidents are harshly "true to life". The Play is about real people struggling humbly with their everyday problems.

### References and Notes

1. Bentley Eric, *The Playwright as Thinker: A study of Drama in Modern Times* (New York Harcourt Brace & Company 1946).
2. Clurman Harold, "Awake and Sing" *The Fervent Years : The Story of The Group Theatre And The Thirties*, (New York, Harcourt Brace Jovanoich, 1975).
3. Eleanor Flexner, *American Playwrights; 1918-1938: The Theatre Retreats From Reality*. New York Simon & Schuster, 1938.
4. Gassner John, "The American Galaxy", *Masters of the Drams* (New York: Dover Publications, I.N.C. 1954).
5. Goldstein Malcom, "The Political Stage : American Drama and Theatre of the Great Depression. New York: Oxford University Press, 1974.
6. Isaac Edith, "Clifford Odets; Theatre Arts Monthly 4 (April 1939).
7. Mendelsohn, Michael, *Clifford Odets : Humane Dramatist*, (Deland Fla: Everett Edwards, 1969).
8. Odets Clifford, *Awake and Sing* (1935) rpt. In *Six Plays of Clifford Odets* (New York: The Modern Library, 1963).
9. Reynolds R.C. "Clifford Odets, Stage Left: The Development of the American Social Drama in the Thirties (New York: The Whiteston Publishing Company, Troy, 1986).
10. Weales Gerald, *Clifford Odets; Playwright* (New York: Pegagus, 1971).