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Awake and Sing!: A Thematic Analysis

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Abstract:

This article is devoted to a full analysis of Clifford Odets's play *Awake and Sing!* with a detailed discussion of the way Odets follow in forming his political vision. This article is concerned with the way this playwright has formed his political idealism in a tone characterized by being down to earth in its realism and confidence. Odets 's scheme in theme and technique is rooted much in the social atmosphere blended largely with the romantic individualistic one. His belief has been established in man as a creature endowed with the potentiality for life betterment and especially within the group familial framework.

Keywords: romanticism, capitalism, left wing, political vision

Clifford Odets is, perhaps, the playwright *par excellence* of the modern American theatre, particularly in the "golden age" of political literary discussion of the 1930s'. Responsive to the social turmoil and mutiny of the period, and involved in the circle of the young intellectuals which of the Group Theatre as an actor, Odets saw in the theatre a tool to incite change, especially that which is proposed and inspired by the overwhelming vogue of socialism predominant through the period. Such an arena kindled in his mind an aspiration, not only to display the landscape of the proletariat misery but, also, to prescribe medicine for its reform.

Odets' deep interest in the improvised working class constituted the background for his left-wing plays of the 1930s' that formed the bulk of his dramatic work. His yearning to be fused with the exploited was quite obvious to his contemporary writers and critics. The critic Harold Clurman comments on this feeling that

He wanted to belong to the largest possible group of the struggling men prepared to make a good common effort to build a better world.... He felt the need to share his destiny with the lowliest workers, with those who really stood in the midst of life.... He was driven by a powerful emotional impetus, like a lover on the threshold of elopement.(Clurman, *The Fervent Years*, 302)

Another point that manifested Odets' longing to be a member of the toiling class, sharing their intense feeling of repression of aspirations, was the familial conditions characterized by instability especially in reference to his father. In a psycho-biographical study of Odets by Margaret Brenman-Gibson, it was noted that Odets was always disappointed by the suffocating dominance of his father, whose values were exclusively built upon "dollars bills"(48). Therefore, the shade of his father's personality was standing behind instances of Capitalism, even when it was articulated through the character of a mother as it happens in his first political play *Awake and Sing!*(1935).

On another hand, the predominant personality of the playwright's father, compared to his weak mother, had its negative print over his way of discussion, as it resulted in adding a sense of uncertainty and lack or loss of confidence to his writings. (Brenman-Gibson, 303) this justified to a great extent, as critics observed, the leaping nature and excessive optimism of the ending of his plays. On one hand, such critics like Brenman-Gibson, saw that such an attribution to his work was due to the fact that Odets's need resided in finding a way out from the familial predominance over him, which in its turn symbolized the more universal social and political suffocation exercised over man. His sole inquiry, then, was for a hope in taking any step forward, no matter how this step could be planned for. Therefore, it was improbable to a youth like him, with his poverty and sensitivity to the prevailing tense atmosphere of his era, to escape the influence of the Marxian trend in rise since this trend showed itself as the sole possible weapon to protect and guarantee the establishment of individual and social rights.

In fact, Odets was mostly preoccupied with 'matters political'. (Brenman-Gibson, 300) and had a deep conviction in the possibility of reviving a new better world established ultimately on the discard of the current political regimes, exemplified fully in fascism, with its suffocating economics. Aiding his clinging to such a vision, Odets held a deep belief in the presence of a creative and pushing power in every man that is discovered and revived through rebellion against depression. As Carl Bronski in his review of *Awake and Sing!* denotes, this was the thematic drive behind Odets's political work, as he himself states:

I believe in the vast potentialities of mankind. But I see everywhere a disparity between what they can be and what they are. That is what I want to say in writing. I want to say the genius of the human race is mongrelized. (Bronski)

Therefore, Odets's main problem, like his contemporaries', was to "find out how mankind can be helped out of the animal kingdom to the clear sweet air." It was the feeling of "disquiet, the yearning for a better life" that which did "lie in the heart of heart of Odets's best work." (Krutch, 268) This was on the thematic layer of his concern.

The other layer of his problem was the artistic ability to make talk change the world. It was a matter of how to interplay between the political ideas and artistic expression, i.e. , how to produce a real-life drama that expresses what is universal in the human experience through a portrayal of particular human relationships and dilemmas. This was exactly what Odets did in his political plays. he achieved through them a paradoxical combination of detachment and participation. In other words, Odets tried to express the realistic tone, which would reveal an overwhelming truth that no one could express unless he/she had ultimately witnessed it. Yet, the realistic expression that he employed could not involve him; fully personally in the "emotional formula" (Daiches, 1123) of the discussion.

It is recognizable; therefore, that none of the characters in Odets's plays could be completely considered the author's mouthpiece. A character must always be united with other group members, so that the work is done, emotionally and practically, as an integrated collective work against a common external enemy. In this way, his tendency was that of a scrutinizer into the problem, diagnosing the symptom of a diseased society and suggesting a future redemption. Yet, he tried to set his attitude as an outside observer, who is able to set down the vivid and humorous truth; habits and

manners of people, with his own peculiar perspective as an outsider, who, in his detachment, produces the intellectual and artistic flavor of what he, as an outsider, observes. But he was, nevertheless, closely involved with the people whom he describes and whose problems he understands.(Bronski)

Odets's attitude made it noticeable that, in following this paradoxical combination, he was keen on choosing the appropriate subject, an attribute that distinguishes him from fellow playwrights. All political writers of his time tended to reserve the dimension of exclusive political earnestness. This was true of John Howard Lawson, Sidney Kingsley and Lillian Hellmann, who were all fired by the new social consciousness and were brought to illuminate the poverty of the unprivileged and the growing social unrest in the United States through the era of the depression. (Spindler,37-8)

Odets, with his high sensitivity and youthful zest intermingled with poverty, differed in his way of expression. Although he was convinced of the ideals of the Communist Party, but in his conversion to communism he was not deprived from fusing social subjects within his new political vision. He managed to avoid the obvious tendency to assume almost automatically that a communist play must treat directly a problematic situation with a for granted inevitable solution, lying ultimately in the realm of this political ideology. Therefore, one finds that the action in his plays never centers on either war or strike. There is always an individual, personal or psychological impulse underlying the social ills, which stand, in their turn, as the result of a corrupt political regime. In fact, such a dramatic scheme was what gave Odets's plays the characteristic of being "the most actual and alive work in New York theatre." (Cohn & Dukore,221-2)

Like most of the bourgeois playwrights, who were brought up in a class which they looked down at, Odets often built up his plays around a family_ The Bergers in *Awake and Sing!*(1933), the Gordons in *Paradise Lost* (1935) and the Bonaperts in *Golden Boy* (1937). In this way Odets presented examples of the united collective work of the underdogs within his attempts to solve their problems. Through family life, Odets suggested the consequences of the corrupt politics underlying the American life. These two objectives were part of the Marxist basis which all his plays tried to cater to against capitalism. Also, Odets tried to be successful in selecting the proper familial expressions. He tended to preserve the private familial tone that captures the vigorous and often bitter rhythms of urban speech, like the native Yiddish, which he employed in his first play, in the form of dramatic dialogue. Furthermore, from the "hard-boiled school" (Goldstein,36) of writers, headed by Earnest Hemingway, Odets borrowed the clipped utterance and brutal and shattering irrelevancies. But he differed from these writers in sparing their despairing sadism as "he constituted in himself a specific literary illustration of the thesis of his play."(Gascoigne, 29)

It is noteworthy that Odets tended, as a radical writer, to show glimpses of resentment against the Capitalist system in a light way as it happens in *Awake and Sing!* but those glimpses were magnified and coarsened in his latter play, *Waiting for Lefty* (1935), giving in this way, the possibility of a hopeful rise of proposing a doctrine that can guarantee social refinement. Thus, the situation would necessitate a revolutionary act to give birth to the redemptive doctrine. Yet, such a birth was always predicted and aspired for. (Clurman, *The Fervent Years* ,127-8)

Having produced the bulk of his work during the nineteen-thirties, this put Odets before a sheer effort to take the challenge of appropriately escorting the direct agitprop theatre of the 1920s, with a richer, more matured and more dialectical

expression of the human condition. Thus, the emphasis in his plays was on the social, economic and political backgrounds of the individual's psychological case. This is why one finds that Odets tried to extract a revolutionary solution within the deep need of remedy in the individual himself, as it happens in his first play.

Awake and Sing! is a final version of an earlier draft written in November 21, 1933, known as *I Got the Blues*. It was first produced, in its final version, on May 15, 1935, some six weeks after the first production of *Waiting for Lefty*. The reason behind its many revisions was that Odets was working on an ending that could reflect fully a "radical political stance" mounting throughout to a state of "voluntary optimism" instead of the "masochistically pessimistic" (Goldstein, 94-5) state, on the level of ideological commitment. Odets's attempts in creating an optimistic atmosphere was noted to be stemming from the fact that his play

demonstrated ... beliefs that the audience could take example from the dramatic character and follow a socially constructive course of action...[and] this, then, is embodied in a contest between [the values] of youth and age. (Brenman-Gibson, 303)

Awake and Sing! introduces the story of the Bergers, a Jewish family in the Bronx, and their struggle within the body of material and moral values in the "midst of petty conditions" (Clurman, "An Introduction", 28). The difficulties, which the family was exposed to result in efforts overworked exclusively by the mother, Bessie, to keep her family together. She wants to ensure the financial and social balance, even if it were by crushing the family's individual members in the process. Thus, she undercuts the love relationship of her son, Ralph, to an offstage orphan girl. Also, she forces her pregnant and abandoned daughter, Hennie, to marry a poor foreigner, believing that this is the only way to save the family from dispossession and disrepute. Her fearsome effort was compromised only by the presence of the prophetic figure of her father, Jacob, a Marxist who is shown in throughout the play with conviction more than determination. He finally decides to escape her predominance over him and whole the family through committing suicide.

Through the compromise between subject and technique, Odets built up a program to the play manifested in the characters of Jacob and his grandson, Ralph, and the articulator of this program is the radical spirit resurrected in him. There was an urgent need to give birth to his grandson's aspiration through his death. But, this birth was given, symbolically, to the whole "American progressive movement." (Brenman-Gibson, 256) Jacob exhorts Ralph to: "Go out and fight so life shouldn't be printed on dollar bills," and to have his life flavored with "some dignity" (48). There were grand passions of life, of death and of resurrection that led Jacob to suicide: death to himself and life to Ralph. Jacob is trying to find the right way, which he yearned to extirpate and establish fully in his own self. He was, as the critic Joseph Wood Krutch describes him,

an observer, reflective, but impotent, with no power to turn ideal to action... the old [Jew] man demonstrates the flair of an artist with living eyes in his tired face. (Krutch, 268)

Furthermore, it seems that Odets himself tried to preserve an ambivalent attitude towards Jacob, an attitude that escorted some kind of resentment for his inactive nature, although he was introduced as ideal, in his commitment to his ideology.

an old man polishing stoves.... Look on this failure and see for seventy years he talked with good ideas, but only in the head.... Not like me. A man who had golden opportunities but drank instead a glass tea. No (77)

therefore Jacob was doomed to create a radical life in his young grandson. He wished to fight materialism with the weapon of Marxian ideology. He yearned to establish a social utopia on earth. This is why he left his insurance of 3000\$ with his ancient spiritual legacy, which he thought to be the best delivered in his books trying to council his uncertain grandson against passivity, telling him;

it is enough for me I should see your happiness. This is why I tell you_ Do! Do what is in your heart and you carry in yourself a revolution!... Without a revolution life is nothing. Even Jesus Christ was a bolshevik [sic].... Look on the world, not on yourself so much.(77)

But Jacob's full conviction in the revolutionary fervor, more than in the prophetic aspect of Jesus Christ, as he proclaims: "In my days the propaganda was for God. Now, it's for success"(71), was followed by the practical belief that self sacrifice can issue resurrection. This implied the suggestion that religious belief has become absurd, and instead a new way out should be founded. This is why prior to his suicide, Jacob delivers his quoted words of the Hebrew Prophet, Isaiah: "Awake and sing, ye that dwell in dust and the earth shall cast out the dead. [Resuming] It's cold out."(83). This 'cold' foretold his own death as he is now resolved to end his life to revive another in his grandson.

Ralph, the proposed holder of the revolutionary spirit, starts in the play as an ordinary worker and ends up as an "ought-to-be revolutionist. He aspires to possess the kind of life which Jacob has been always predicting for him:

It says in the Bible how the Red Sea opened and the Egyptians went in and the sea rolled over them.[quotes two lines of Hebrew]In this boy's life a Red Sea will happen again. I see it.(72)

The things that distinguish Ralph to be the most suitable person to withhold Jacob's incitation towards revolution was not his full recognition of the mission required of him as a revolutionist, or of the means of doing it. Rather, his predisposition was psychological more than being driven by a social or political impulse. On one hand, Ralph has got the enthusiasm of youth although it was overwhelmed by a painful intensity of the feeling of inability to have a chance in processing anything in his life even if it were through having "a pair of black and white shoes"(42).(Brenman-Gibson,257)

On the other hand, and on the family level, Ralph feels bullied by the weakness of his father and the predominance of his mother. She made the world agonizing for him; his feeling of being belittled has blown in him an urgent need for rebellion, some kind of a matter that he is completely ignorant of. Therefore, when his grandfather opens before him the fore of revolution, he is fully incited and determined to subdue "the passion of his desires"(Goldstein," The Playwrights", 36). Furthermore, Ralph's yearning for changing the whole world was relative to the strength of his passion to become independent of his mother. It is true that he announces at the end of the play:

Right here in the house! My days won't be for nothing. Let Mom have the dough. I'm twenty-two and kickin'! I'll get along. Did Jake die for us to fight about nickels? No! 'Awake and sing,' he said.... The night he died, I saw it like a thunder-bolt! I saw he was dead and I was born... (100-1)

But still, it is doubtful that he is really capable, with Jacob's spiritual legacy, to resurrect power sufficient to his agonized society. The sudden announcement of his strength remains less credible than the predominance of the materialistic Bessie. But, there is a hope also aroused, though not substantiated, in the possibility of handling the mission successfully. Such a possibility is enhanced by Ralph's discard of the materialistic legacy and embracing his grandfather's books as a weapon in his new battle with his fellow workers. Odets suggestion to this possibility originates in his belief that

the young had that special vision to see, all at a glance, the heart of a problem and its solution. Yet, the solution, as his characters phrase it, is vague. Plan! organize! be active!_ these are the recommendations of his young people; but the means of doing all this and the reason for doing it they only partly understand[they are] more memorable as curious, engaging human beings than as prophets of the better life. (Krutch, 270-1)

Furthermore, Krutch comments on Odets's method of characterization, noting that through his choice of the characters, as "ignorant and often crude," he was aiming to elicit some kind of hope that the young *could* do it. He suggests that people like this are to go right on, demanding of life more than it gives them. (Brenman-Gibson, 300)

Another point was aimed at through Odets's choice; that is the ignorance of characters makes no villains in the play. For instance, Uncle Morty, a relative to the family and an embodiment of the capitalist system and its values, was presented as no real villain. Conversely, his character was made less harsh than that of Bessie's who stood in full embodiment of the materialistic values. Even though, Odets might show through Bessie his resentment against the materialistic values of capitalism, especially in her cruel remarks and acts against her father. He never tried to justify her way of living, whether positively or negatively. He was keen to explain it only. Therefore, she was suggested as being subjected involuntarily to the materialistic life of America. Then, he left to Ralph the opportunity to comment in opposition: "I'm not blaming you, Mom. Sink or swim__ I see it. But it can't stay like this." (95)

Initiated with this tone of enthusiasm for change, Ralph declares that he will start with the workers in the warehouse where he works to alter the course of American life__ to use his words:

I see every house lousy with lies and hate.... But boys and girls can get ahead like that, Mom. We don't want life printed on dollar bills, Mom....'Cause life is different in my head. Gimme the earth in two hands.... That's us and it's no time to die. (95)

These suggested paradoxical attributes to Bessie and other characters flavor the atmosphere with a scent of decency. There is noted a feeling of an all-pervading worry of a lower middle-class family of poverty that justifies some of its members' vulgarity and tenderness, energy and humor, all with a "head-long

idealism"(Krutch,71). Furthermore, Odets imparted the nature of his characters as decent through their simple improvised language enhancing, thus, the idea that it was society that was responsible for molding them in this way or that. This may appear obviously in the tough talks of Moe Axelrod, the cynical hardened racketeer, who is in love with Hennie, and through the disguise of his tender feelings towards her, he makes fun of her and all women;

Don't make me laugh__ when I get married! What I think of women. Take 'em all, cut 'em in little pieces like a herring in Greek salad. A guy in France had the right idea __dropped his wife in a bathtub fulla acid.[whistles] Sss, down the pipe Pfft_ not even a corset button left! (56)

Also, Odets tried to make his characters appear convincing through his allowance of grim humor in their speeches. This added much to the sense that these people are innately humane. In this way, the play was seen by some critics, like Alfred Kazin, as lyrically uplifting in its quite realistic tone as it was articulated with its

blunt Jewish speech, boiling over and explosive, that did more to arouse the audience than the political catchwords.... Everybody on the stage furious, kicking, alive__ the words always real but never flat, brilliantly authentic... aroused the audience to such delight that one could feel it bounding back and uniting itself with the mind of the writer.(Kazin,81)

Kazin ends up his comment by a testimony of Odets's ability to escort the audience's feeling towards a commitment to the play's note of conviction, that made of the play's success:

Odets pulled us out of self pity, and the screams of protest__ 'I never in my life had a birthday party, every time I went and cried in the toilet when my birthday came'__ and now in the open, at last, and we laughed.... Odets convinced me.(Kazin,82)

The prevailing atmosphere of the play was also convincing in its conveyance of the sense of "claustrophobia" which was the constricting tone of the depression era. Nina Metz, in a recent review of the play, emphasizes the important role of scenery in reflecting the political flavors on this basis. She noted that it was not "stridence" that brought the political message of the play; rather, it was the fact that "the personal hell of each character was reflected in a sensitive drawing of attention to the details". The whole family suffers from having little freedom in movement and behavior. The sense of being trapped to the passiveness of a father and the intolerable predominance of a mother, and the mother's overbearing the disillusionment of a daughter and a son, were all escorted simply by the fact that there was not enough room for all. "The crammed family-life," was a frame to the portrait of the economic and political corruption.(Metz)

It is important to add that due to this sense of " claustrophobia", each of the characters has been striving to build up his own simple utopia on earth, away from this " crammed ... life"; even if it were through the symbolic possession of "a pair of black and white shoes"(42), standing for a vision of life in which man's position is drawn clearly within a "white-and-black" formula. Such a utopian symbol was supposed to save each member from continuous disappointment. Jacob, the prophetic

figure, for instance, has always been in a continuous quest for establishing a Marxian utopian world, which he failed to establish in his youth. He tried to build it upon the basis of abandoning such a family ruled by materialistic laws other than the laws of love, quoting Marx's words to "abolish such families ... where everybody hates." (A.&S., 55) But, though a believer in Marxism, Odets maintained that the abolition of the family insures no paradise. So that, Jacob was left retaining his aspiration by passing the hours of the day in reading Marx and Engel and, symbolically, by his continuous listening to the classical music, especially of Enrico Caruso's song, "O Paradiso", in an attempt to found such a paradise in America. This is why he turns in full disappointment in accomplishing his dream and, thus, commits suicide when his records, that symbolized the rhythm of his own Marxian prophecy, were smashed by Bessie.

Bessie, on the other hand, marks a controversial sample of paradise-in-quest to Jacob's. hers lies much in material satisfaction. It is "built on dollar bills". The critic Malcolm Goldstein comments, in *The Political Stage* (1974), on the difference between Bessie and her father, stating that

Both see, and deplore, the materialism that determines the tenor of American life, but whereas Jacob wishes to fight it with communism, Bessie has long since she made peace with it.(Goldstein, *The Political*,96)

Also, this image of paradise was recurrent in Axelrod's talks to Hennie, calling her as "Paradise", in his quest for sexual as well as spiritual fulfillment. He is attracted to her and he finds in her a source of salvation. After a torturing scheme of life, Hennie stood as the gates of paradise to him;

Moe: *What the hell do you want, my head on a plate?! Was my life so happy? Chris', my old man was a bum. I supported the whole damn family.... I went to the war; got clapped down like a bedbug; woke up in a room without a leg. What the hell do you think; anyone's got it better than you? I never had a home either. I'm lookin' too!*

Hennie: *so what?*

Moe: *so you are it__ you're home for me, a place to live! That's the whole parade, sickness, eating out your heart! Sometimes you meet a girl__ she stops it__ that's love.... So take a chance! Be with me, Paradise. (97-8)*

In juxtaposition with this image of paradise, there have been regularly presented images reflecting the period of depression, which were quite simply and realistically introduced in food deprivation and food intakes. Axelrod's closing words of the first act, "What the hell kind of a house is this that ain't got an orange!!" (49), is the quite opposite image of a house aspired as a familial paradise that ought not to be deprived of anything.

However, Odets excelled his contemporary revolutionary writers in his vivid reservation of his characters' personality in the course of his political discussion. His concern was in the prints of the surrounding economic and social pressures upon man. This is why *Awake and Sing!* was considered by the left-wing critics as the most romantic and sentimental among all left-wing plays of the time, especially in its

romantic ending of Moe and Hennie 's elopement. Accordingly, it happened to be seen as

Unmotivating ...irrational, and totally lacking in economic or political logic, considering it a commercial drama and a step in the wrong direction ... [witnessing] grievous ideological faults.(Brenman–Gibson,258)

Yet, though a quite rationalistic in his viewpoint, the leftist playwright and critic, John Howard Lawson, did not entirely side with the onslaught against the play, as he stated that it was sufficient, nevertheless, for Odets to present a talent in escorting the social implications of his message so as to suggest the most convenient political doctrine in a more convincing and realistic form than that of political sloganeering. This, as Lawson suggested, was the most important thing that critics should have been concerned of.(Vogel)

In fact, Lawson was not the only critic who praised the successful interplay of political and theatrical expression of the play. It was hailed by others, like Brooks Atkinson, who noted in a Sunday piece that followed the opening of the play, that

The theatre of the Left is becoming increasingly dynamic and is no longer a skirmish on the fringe of the theatre, for it has a coherent program which the Broadway Theatre has always lacked, and it is informed [now] with a crusader's zeal.... [knowing] where it intends to go, and it does not doubt its ability to get there. (Brenman–Gibson, 255)

But, it is probable that the criticism directed against the play was mostly due to its production latter to his well known leftist play *Waiting for Lefty*, which with its explosive obvious statement for workers' strike, made of *Awake and Sing!* sound an inferior work. Nevertheless, none can deny that the "seed themes and techniques"(Clurman, "An Introduction", 30) were all initiated in *Awake and Sing!* and later watered in *Waiting for Lefty* and his subsequent political plays.

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