



Clifford Odets' Dramatization of the Great Depression: A Study of Selected Plays

An M.A. Thesis

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Abstract

Scholars of American drama mainly concentrate in their research on few well-known names, namely Eugene O'Neill, Arthur Miller, Tennessee Williams, Edward Albee, etc. However, they pay scant attention to other dramatists although there are many lesser-known playwrights whose works speak very highly of their talents. Digging deeper underneath the surface unveils other shining diamonds such as the challenging talent of Clifford Odets.

Clifford Odets is considered one of the most talented American social protest dramatists of the 1930s and one of America's great playwrights. He is also a central figure in the American theatre and drama and almost peerless in his time as he symbolizes the merits and defects of the successful Leftist playwrights. Emerging as a leader of the American political theater, Odets' career remains an ongoing wellspring to the American theater. The fact that his plays are still hailed and performed so far is a clear evidence to that. He reached his zenith after the production of his early plays, which gave him an overnight success for their realistic portrayal of Depression-era living conditions and the ordinary man's search for a place in the modern commercial society.

This study traces and analyzes Clifford Odets' dramatization of the Great Depression of the 1930s, conducting a thematic and analytical study of three selected plays, namely, *Waiting for Lefty* (1935), *Awake and Sing* (1935) and *Golden Boy* (1937). These plays are representative of Odets' dramatic vision of the Depression era. Odets is one of the most prominent social realists of American drama. The study of these dramatic texts reveals the development of his literary career— his themes, characterization, forms and techniques. It clarifies Odets' originality and vigor in interpreting the urgent calamities of the economic crisis and the Depression aspects of his time, depicting the failure of the lower-class to find a suitable and

invulnerable place in the materialistic world of the capitalists. His outstanding dramatic vision transforms the conflicts of the daily lives of striving American lower-middle-class people from domestic situations to metaphors for the eternal struggle for human dignity and fate all over the world.

The study represents a re-evaluation of Odets' legacy as a political playwright, a re-consideration of his works as pieces of cultural ingenuity in addition to re-opening the career of a meriting playwright to more serious discussion. It illuminates the utopian nature of Odets' vision, which exists alongside a continuing ambivalence toward a consumer culture, as a means of political and social change.