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The Portrayal of 'Frustration' and 'Faith' in Clifford Odets' *Awake and Sing!*

Dr. V. Sri Rama Murthy

Lecturer in English, PRR & VS Government College, Vidavalur, SPSR Nellore District,
Andhra Pradesh, India

Email: sriramvavilala@gmail.com

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Abstract

Awake and Sing!, Clifford Odets' first full-length major three-act play, portrays the struggles, rebellion, relationships, ambitions, and frustrations of a financially destitute working-class Jewish American family, the Bergers, living in the Bronx during the 1930s. This play examines the aspirations, the fortunes, and the misfortunes of a Jewish lower-middle-class family that becomes disillusioned by an oppressive economic system. This is a social drama set in New York City during the economic depression of the early 1930s. In this play, the members of the Berger family and their daughter's boyfriend are the main characters, who are working-class and their lower-middle-class aspirations have been frustrated by the economic depression. Odets originally named his play *Awake and Sing!* as *I Got the Blues*, which suggests the two dominant moods of the play (and of the Depression era) – frustration and faith. The 'frustration' is dramatized in the first two acts of the play, whereas 'faith' is depicted in the short third act. This play also dramatizes the agony, argument, and disintegration of the Berger family lives in a tiny Bronx apartment, which is volcanic. This family is caught in the grips of the Depression. This is the story of a family influenced by communist and capitalistic ideals. Odets mentions the external causes as the main antihero in the drama, and financial insecurity is a prominent one.

Keywords: Clifford Odets, depression, frustration, faith, rebellion, agony.

Awake and Sing!, Clifford Odets' first full-length major three-act play, portrays the struggles, rebellion, relationships, ambitions, and frustrations of a financially destitute working-class Jewish American family, the Bergers, living in the Bronx during the 1930s. This play examines the aspirations, fortunes and misfortunes of a Jewish lower-middle-class family that becomes disillusioned by an oppressive economic system. In this play, the Bergers are depicted struggling against the uncertainties of the 1930s economic depression. All the members of the family live together, and they suffer from 'the inevitable value confrontations which take place between people of different ages, backgrounds and outlooks.' This is a social drama set in New York City during the economic depression of the early 1930s. In this play, the members of the Berger family and their daughter's boyfriend are the main characters, who are working-class and their lower-middle-class aspirations have been frustrated by the

economic depression. Till almost the end of the play, the mood is 'frustration'; but the mood changes suddenly and unconvincingly to optimism at the very end. Odets originally named his play *Awake and Sing!* as *I Got the Blues*, which suggests the two dominant moods of the play (and of the Depression era) – frustration and faith. The 'frustration' is dramatized in the first two acts of the play, whereas 'faith' is depicted in the short third act.

John Gassner considers this play to be the real representative of early Odets' talent, and he says, "To return to *Awake and Sing!* is to return to the youthful Odets whose yet untried and unsubdued talent was compounded of anguish and rebellion, and seemed all ablaze with evangelical fervour. Although not entirely free of callow sentiment... the play showed a true artist's sensitivity.... Along with it, the author's, quasi-lyrical rebelliousness and a wry yet lively sense of humour, *Awake and Sing!* also carried the weight of true compassion, and this last- mentioned quality also produced one of the most genuine and appealing characterizations seen on the American stage – the grandfather, Jacob, played by Morris Carnovsky... It is little wonder that in 1937 he was referred to in the press as O' Neill's successor and as the white hope of American theatre." (John Gassner, (Ed), 1955:524). This play also dramatizes the agony, argument, and disintegration of the Berger family, which is volcanic. This family is caught in the grips of the Depression. There are five in the family, and money is scarce; so every day is hard for them. Odets makes a mention in his notes at the beginning of the play about the problems of the characters that all the characters "share a fundamental activity; a struggle for life amidst petty conditions." (John Gassner, 1961: 503-504). Odets also says that most of the characters do not really struggle, but they dream, and when speaking of the 'dream of life', they are most vibrant and eloquent, not in living life itself. The title of the play refers to one character's decision to affirm the value of social activism – 'change the world.' The title has been borrowed from the Prophet Isaiah, which has been prefaced as the text for his play by Odets – 'Awake and Sing, Ye that dwell in dust.' (Gerald Weales, 1971:48).

This story is about a family which is influenced by communist and capitalistic ideals. Bessie Berger, who is the lady of the house, is forced to arrange her daughter Hennie Berger's marriage after she becomes pregnant out of wedlock. Bessie does not like Sam, the man her daughter has to marry because he is poor. However, she has no other option since the man has rented part of their house and is the closest to the family. Jacob, Bessie's father was a pure communist. He teaches Ralph Berger, his grandson the ways of communism. He hates capitalism because he feels it has ruined America – the characters are still recovering from the effects of the Great Depression. Before he commits suicide, Jacob leaves his grandson \$5,000 to start his life. In this play, the Bergers represent a microcosm of society, though they are working-classes with middle-class values. Bessie Berger, the mother of the family, is not only the mother at home but also the father. She constantly takes care of the family. She is afraid of utter poverty, but she is proper according to her own standards, which are fairly close to those of most middle-class families. She opines that if anybody lives in the jungle, he must look out for the wild life. Her husband, Myron, is a born follower and would like to be a leader. He wishes to make a million dollars. He is not sad or ever depressed at all, and 'life' is an ever-sweet event to him, but the 'old days' were sweeter yet. Hennie, the daughter of Bessie and Myron, is proud of her body. She does not ask favours, and she can travel alone. She is fatalistic about being trapped, but will escape if possible. Besides Ralph, the protagonist of the play, like her brother, she is an important character as far as the basic theme of the play is concerned. She is self-reliant, and till the day she dies, she will be faithful to a loved man. Moreover, she inherits her mother's sense of humour and energy.

Ralph, the son of the Berger couple, who is an ardent, romantic, sensitive, and naive too, is the protagonist of the play, who is trying to find why so much dirt must be cleared away before it is possible to 'get to first base.' He is a boy with a clean spirit, and he wants to know and learn. In the play, he becomes a symbol of the uncompromising new generation, ready to forego, decide on their own and to make sure that life is no more 'printed on dollar bills.' The basic theme of the play is reflected in Ralph

and Hennie. Actually, it is the unclear sense of dissatisfaction that has gradually crystallized into the belligerency on the part of the proletarian class or the lower middle class. The title itself suggests that this is the beginning of the awakening, and so it is an exhortation. For Odets, the individual was always the focal point of attention, and it is in the human mind where every revolution has to begin. Revolutions are launched only by groups or classes, and their unit is the individual. Jacob, Bessie's father, who is aware of justice and dignity, is an observer of the others. He compares their activities with his real and ideal sense of life. The remaining are - Uncle Morty, a successful American businessman with five good senses, is a shrewd judge of material values. For him, two and two make four, never five. Moe Axelrod, who has lost a leg in the world war, is very proud. He scorns the inability of others to make their way in life, but he likes people for whatever good qualities they possess. He has killed two men in extramarital activity. Life has taught him a disbelief in everything, but he fights his way through. Through this character, it is revealed that this play is masochistically pessimistic. Sam Feinschreiber is a timid fellow and unsuspecting clerk; Hennie's marriage is arranged with him when she is found to be pregnant.

In the words of Harold Cantor, about the breakout of the family trap, which is a central concern of Odets', "In *Awake and Sing!* there are three attempts to breakout: Jacob's, Hennie's and Moe's and Ralph's." (Cantor, 1978: 36). Jacob sees in Ralph 'his new life' and a means of symbolic revival; he warns Bessie that she should not mould Ralph into her image otherwise he would die. In the case of Hennie and Moe, it is more directly applicable to the family trap. Ralph has approved of Hennie's decision to leave her husband and child, which has been objected by most of the moralists. This play, dealing with the fortunes and misfortunes of the Berger family of the Bronx, has been regarded by most of the critics, as it was regarded by Burns Mantle by including it in his list of the ten best plays of 1934-35: He called it, an embittered protest against the injustices put upon the poor by the working class of the capital system." (Mantle, 1935: 236).

The major theme of the play is rebellion. The play begins with the questioning of Ralph Berger about the prospects for promotion in his job, and it is immediately answered by Myron, his father, with a platitude from the past. Then immediately his sister Hennie replies, as she has already recognised that few realistic possibilities exist for the Berger family. Thus, the entire first act is structured by Odets on the articulation and subtle deflation of the dreams by which various characters live. Herald Clurman in *The Fervent Years* says, "The first act was cluttered with some rather gross Jewish humour and kind of messy kitchen realism." (Miller, 1989: 29). In this play, according to Odets, the inner revolution with which social awakening has to begin has been presented in the words of Jacob, the grandfather, 'If this life leads to a revolution it's a good life. Otherwise, it's for nothing.' As every revolution has to begin in the human mind, for Odets, the individual is always the focal point of attention. Each member of this family is under great stress, and their inter-reactions could lead only to unpleasant developments.

Ralph, being a rebel and a boy of individuality, complains that he does not have a separate room, and so he is sleeping on 'a daybed in the front room.' His displeasure was pacified by his mother, telling him that he would be provided with a separate room when Hennie, his sister, gets married. As it was a period of the Depression, all of them were in financial problems, and they were unable to fulfil their desires. Ralph, who is working as a clerk, has meagre wages out of which his desires were not satiated. In the words of Ralph, "five dollars a week for expenses and the rest in the house. I cannot save even for shoelaces." (Six Plays of Odets, 1939: 507). At that juncture, Myron, the father of the family, says that a man has purchased a lottery ticket and has won eighty thousand dollars. Then Bessie exclaimed and told Myron to buy a ticket in Hennie's name.

When their conversation shifted to Hennie's marriage-related matter, Myron said that Sam Feinschreiber, a lonely foreigner and a timid and unsuspecting clerk, had sent a gift to Hennie. Then Bessie said that he would marry Hennie. But Hennie expresses her dislike, saying that 'too bad about him.' When Bessie asks Hennie to think about the matter, she laughs, and then Bessie says, 'Never

mind laughing. It's time you had already had a serious thought. A girl twenty-six does not grow younger. When I was your age, it was already a big family with responsibilities.' Ralph and Hennie represent the younger generation in the Berger family. As told by Miss Block, this is "... the struggle of the younger generation to get away from the sordid realities created by their parents, which bind them hand and foot." (Shuman, 1991:166).

This play highlights the personal growth of Ralph Berger and of Hennie, his sister. Ralph is a daring person and he can express any of his feelings to fulfil his needs. Moe Axelrod is a financially successful figure in the play. He loses one of his legs in the war and so he has the security of the government pension. He discusses with Jacob enquiring after Hennie. When her mother wants to call a doctor in, Hennie declines. After a close observation, her mother comes to know about her pregnancy. Hennie does not reveal the person responsible for her pregnancy, and so she wants to arrange her marriage with Sam Feinschreiber. Jacob also opposes this marriage because of his granddaughter's lack of interest in it. But, Bessie does not care and says that they should have respect towards her as she is a mother, and she has raised a family. Then Jacob says that she may do as she likes in Hennie's case, but in the case of Ralph, it is impossible; thus Jacob does not hesitate to threaten her to see that the grandchildren are not hurt.

The only real point of communication between various members of the family of the Berger's is that each member wants something desperately; moreover, each member is thwarted in his 'quest'. This family that is dominated by Bessie has become an instrument of unjust coercion. That coercion leads to boredom, in the case of Hennie, to have an affair, which resulted in her pregnancy. Bessie arranges a marriage, as she is more vitally concerned with respectability than with the ultimate good of her daughter. Her efforts in arranging her daughter's marriage cannot succeed in doing anything more than giving legitimacy to an unborn child. She is so sensitive to the pressures of public opinion, and so she does all this. She is weighed down by what Odets considers a set of obsolete social values. In the words of Baird Shuman, "The effect of this marriage is far-reaching: Not only is Hennie to find herself in a situation which she cannot endure, but Jake and Ralph are completely nonplussed by the basic immortality of what Bessie has done to Hennie and to the likeable, naive Sam Feinschreiber." (Shuman, 1991:171).

Odets mentions the external causes as the main antihero in the drama, and financial insecurity is a prominent one. Bessie wanted to maintain decency by sacrificing the interests of her children. Hennie, Ralph and Jacob are victimised, proving beyond doubt that even respectability must have a sound financial foundation. Moreover, she will not be of any substantial financial advantage to them. In fact, she doesn't hesitate to threaten to become a liability, an additional one the family can ill afford. Odets does not give evidence that Ralph is a man of action, but rather suggests the contrary; he has shown some signs of rebelliousness. Ralph because of his minor job is unable to fulfil his desires, and feels that in America everything is wrong. Hennie, his sister, has become a pawn in his mother's marital machinations. He was in love; his mother would not allow that affair, and so, he wanted to change the world. At that time, it was his grandfather who inspired him to 'awake and sing - to act and change.' Ralph is a kind of man who thinks life should be meaningful. Here Odets accentuates Ralph's nature. Bessie's father, Jacob, who is also a dreamer, dreams of a Marxist society. He is an ineffectual man, who lives with his daughter's family and who is not working.

The money from the insurance policy has been written in Ralph's name after Jacob's death. Actually, Ralph doesn't know that his grandfather has arranged it, but he comes to know through Morty, Bessie and Myron. But their decision has been obstructed by Moe Axelrod, a one-legged cynical veteran, telling that he has found a suicide note under Jacob's pillow. He threatens them to reveal that the death is not accidental. Then it becomes difficult for them to receive the money. Ralph also wants money, but he decides to leave it to his mother. He encourages his sister to go on her adulterous flight, rejecting his mother's fake respectability. Ralph fully understands the meaning of his grandfather's death and issues

his final statement; fully 'awake', he 'sings': "I am twenty-two and kickin'! I'll get along. Did Jake die for us to fight about nickles? No! 'Awake and sing!" he said. (*Six Plays of Odets*, 1939: 532). Just like Ralph and Hennie, Odets himself too seemed to be in search of his subsequent plays, and the theme of personal rebellion for, as Mendelssohn calls it, "something to call a family." (Mendelssohn, 1969: 117).

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