

**Treatment of Marxism and American Depression in Clifford Odets'*****Waiting for Lefty*****IRIN SULTANA**Lecturer, Department of English  
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**Abstract:** In the world of depression, where meaning either vanishes or proliferates beyond understanding; undoubtedly, drama plays a vital role in such milieu. It is the only device, by which the characters can hope to know or control the world outside them. In 1930s, was evoking the turbulent where American Depression spread out; there was also class distinction in that time. Clifford Odets' *Waiting for Lefty* is probably one of the best-known plays where he neatly summarizes his belief in the sanctity of workers and their right to fair employment. He dealt with the disintegration of a middle class family caused by the depression. Odets' works are the outcome of American Depression. With its leftist philosophy and realistic conflicts, this play depicts the search by working class characters for a place in modern society. This article is an attempt to show how the view of Marxism influenced the play and how the characters were depressed by the capitalism day by day in that time. I will examine how they suffer from depression by their capitalist from Marxist point of view. I will also explain how the American Depression is reflected in the writings of Clifford Odets, replicating the experience of Americans in the time in which the playwright is living. This paper will also demonstrate that the working class of the world would feel an urge to rise up in order to fight for their better living step by step since Odets' plays speak to a deeper level of the audience's mind.

A number of American playwrights were growing into manhood during "bourgeois Nirvana" before the economic barrier would burst in 1929; As a result, in the 1930s many plays appear and Clifford Odets' (1906-1963) ,a film scenarist, and director, was one of the most prominent American playwrights of the that time. The one-act *Waiting for Lefty*, with its leftist philosophy and powerful, realistic conflicts, was an immediate sensation when it was produced in 1935. In this play he depicts the story of a taxi driver's union who are preparing to take a strike vote. Like many of Odets' other plays *Waiting for Lefty*, depicts the search by working class for a place in modern society, with the theme of permanent interest, and his colloquial dialogue, vital ideological protests on behalf of human dignity and feeling for the family were distinctive as well..

The play is a series of interrelated scenes depicting workers for a fictional taxi company. Several taxi drivers sit in a semicircle. To one side stands a gunman. A large man and union leader, Harry Fatt, tells the men that a strike is not a good idea. The focus alternates between the drivers' union meeting and vignettes from their difficult, oppressed lives. The climax is a rebellious call for the union to strike. Odets' work was particularly reflective of the racial diversity of lower income residents of urban people. His characters stand out in the dramatic standard for their highly political and philosophical reflections of daily struggles. And today, Odets' plays hold a historical significance for their depictions of American life after the Great Depression. Odets politicized; left-leaning writing epitomized the discontent of the masses during the height of the Great Depression and therefore I consider, the play retains a historical significance of American life after the Depression too.

As we know, the Great Depression was a worldwide economic recession starting in most places in 1929 and ending at different times in the 1930s or early 1940s for different countries. It was the largest and most severe economic depression in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and is used in the 21<sup>st</sup> century as an example of how far the world's economy can decline. It is evident that the Depression and the left wing Group Theatre were the two determining factors in Odets's career as dramatist. The play is based on a 1934 strike of unionized New York cab drivers, is a series of interrelated scenes depicting daily struggles of the workers. As political messages dominate the play explicitly one could guess that his goal was nothing less than the promotion of a communist revolution in America.

He consciously was writing to reflect contemporary American Society to present powerful dramatic representations of life that illuminate a segment of society that literally was ignored at that time. His work was particularly reflective of the racial diversity of lower income residents of urban environments with a conclusion that Marxism is the only way for the working class to find any dignity.

A one-act play in SIX/eight episodes, *Waiting for Lefty* is composed of two basic staging. The main setting is a union hall, where the members wait to take a hotly contested strike vote. While the corrupt union leader Harry Fatt arrogantly tries to discourage the members from walking out, support for a strike is high, and the workers nervously wait for the arrival of the leader of the strike party, Lefty Costello. As they wait, members of the strike committee address the workers, each telling the story of how he came to be involved in the union and convinced of the necessity for a strike. These individual stories are sketched in a series of vignettes. Each is a story of unjust victimization, mirroring Fatt's heavy-handed attempts to control the union meeting. The building tension and emotion reaches a climax when the news arrives that Lefty has been murdered, and the meeting explodes in a unanimous demand to "Strike! Strike!" As one reads the play, one becomes aware that the rules are beginning to break right before the reader's eyes and cannot but feeling the play speaks to a deeper level of the audience's mind.

Always the idealist rather than dogmatic leftist, Odets's *Waiting for Lefty*, demonstrates several instances of social injustice, some relating to the condition of the taxi drivers and others not (a chemist is asked by an industrialist to work on a poison gas project; an internist is fired from his job at a hospital when it is discovered that he is Jewish). The more activist members of the drivers' union finally convince the rest of the drivers to strike for fairer wages, undermining the authority of the union leaders. Although ostensibly about a taxi drivers strike, the play through its freestanding episodes argues for job actions in protest of the injustices exhibited by the owners, the union leadership and the government. As the union leadership paints the more extreme activists as "red boys", Joe, a representative of oppressed workers says,

*"I ain't a red boy one bit! Here I'm carryin' shrapnel that big I picked up in the war. And may be I don't know it when it rains! Don't tell me red! You know what we are? The black and blue boys!" (Waiting for Lefty, Episode III)*

Odets's depiction of Harry Fatt, Joe and Lefty Costello becomes significant in understanding the underlying differences between two classes of people; - rich and poor that have not particularly aged well. Hence becomes timeless and have the universal appeal. The 1930's message and power can also be applied to matters that affect America even today. Themes are shared between the play and American culture like xenophobia and racism; the play exhibited the hatred and fear of citizens, especially government, of Communism and this is similar to the feelings of Americans even today toward Muslims and Arabs. When Joe claims he "ain't a red boy one bit," fearful of the very accusation, it is as if one could replace "red boy" with so called and imagined "terrorist" and it would fit in American dialogue today. Also, finding Lefty "behind the car barns with a bullet in his head" depicts censorship, which many Americans feel exists in the country's media and elsewhere.

We can see the spirit of Socialism when a man named Agate talks to the taxi drivers, first insulting their lack as strength, and then insulting Fatt. Fatt and the gunman try to detain him, but he gets away with the help of the committeemen. Agate proclaims that if "we're reds because we wanna strike, then we take over their salute too!" (*Waiting for Lefty*, Episode III). He makes a Communist salute. While the committeemen join in or take over part of his speech. Agate incites the taxi drivers with burning expression about the rich killing them off. He tells them to "unite and fight!" He says the "reds" have helped him in the past. He tells them not to wait for Lefty, who may never arrive. Then a man runs into the house and declares that they just found Lefty, shot dead. Agate yells to his fellow union men,

*"Hello America! Hello. We're storm birds of the working class. Workers of the world... our Bones and Blood!" and urges them to die to "make a new world" (Waiting for Lefty, Episode IV)*

The most striking aspect of *Waiting for Lefty* is Odets's dramatic creation of the working class family throughout the play; a doctor caught in the mechanisms of the American health care system says,

*"I wanted to go to Russia. Last week I was thinking about it - the wonderful opportunity to do good work in their socialized medicine". (Waiting for Lefty, Interne Episode, VI)*

The oppressed worker Joe said,

*"What can I do?"*

And Joe's wife Edna, taunts him with a variety of insults –

*"Who's the man in the family, you or me?" (Waiting for Lefty, Joe and Edna Episode, --)*

So, these are the vibrant true pictures of American depressed people and help us to visualize what is happening in the working class families and their struggle to survive against the hostility of capitalist world.

As we know, the aim of Marxism is to bring about class less society, based on the common ownership of the means of production, distribution and exchange. Marxism is a materialist philosophy and it is evident that Odets is influenced by this philosophy; that is, he tries to explain things without assuming the existence of a world or of forces beyond the natural world around us, and the society we live in. Marxism sees progress as coming about through the struggle for power between different social classes. This view of history as class struggle regards it as 'motored' by the competition for economic, social and political advantage.

*Waiting for Lefty* also more directly relates to contemporary America as the nation still struggles with class and labour issues, though not necessarily to the same extent. Many would agree that big business in America is corrupt as it was in the play; for instance, Fayette's statement: "If big business went sentimental over human life," says industrialist Fayette in *Waiting for Lefty* as he attempts to convince lab assistant Miller to spy on a fellow chemist as the company gears up to produce nerve gas for the U.S. military,

*"there wouldn't be big business of any sort!"*  
*"That's job for foreigners," replies Fayette.*  
*"Sneaking - and making poison gas - that's for Americans"?* Miller asks.  
 (Waiting for Lefty, Lab Assistant episode II, P.430)

This episode shows extreme immorality like that of government-run Halliburton, which overcharged meals for U.S. troops in Iraq after 9/11. There are still clear divisions in class, as evidenced in both the play and American society by differences in language between members' of different classes; for instance, in hearing the voice of Tom Clayton saying, "I gotta right. I gotta right. Looka him, he don't say boo," then Dr. Barnes noting, "They're doing splendid work in brain surgery these days," one can determine the social separations between the men as also one could see today between professionals and common labourers.

Odets tries to see life through a Marxist lens, but his play isn't ideological. With its notes of hurt and hope, "Lefty" depicts effectively onstage, for the first time, the brokenhearted world that Odets knows so well, where, as he says, "there is only shame and regret, resignation and anxiety." In the Interne Episode Agate, informs the workers:

*"Well, may be I don't know a thing; may be I fell outa the cradle when I was a kid and ain't been right since ... May be I got a glass eye, but it come from working in a factory at the age of eleven. They hooked it out because they didn't have a shield on the works but I wear it like a medal 'cause it tells the world where I belong - deep down in the working class!"* (Waiting for Lefty, Interne Episode, VI)

This is the real picture of working class people and also reflects the Great Depression, we learn through the comment of Agate to the workers:

*“This is your life and mine! It’s skull and bones every incha the road! Christ, we’re dyin’ by inches! For what? For the debutant-ees to have their sweet comin’ out parties in the Ritz! Poppa’s got a daughter she’s gotta get her picture in the papers. Christ, they make’em with our blood ... Slow death or fight. It’s war!”* (Waiting for Lefty, Interne Episode VI)

Though each of the character sketch displays one form or another of social injustice, the victims themselves inevitably decide to fight the injustice. For sure, here we find the zeal of Marxism. Odets focuses on the economic conflict among social classes based on Marxist theory. Hence, it is perhaps inevitable that this is an extremely ‘class-conscious play. Here characters are clearly identified by class, and these classes are presented in vivid opposition: on the one hand, virtuous and long-suffering members of the working class; on the other, the greedy, inhuman capitalist who exploit them at every turn. That’s why clash between classes is unavoidable. Joe decides to “look up Lefty Castello”, who had apparently been organizing a strike; the chemist punches the industrialist in the mouth; the internist decides to “study and work and learn my place” - while earning his living as a taxi driver. And the play itself ends with the union membership triumphantly prevail its leadership. We are informed by a character named Agate, representative of working class, who declares not only by borrowing language from "The Communist Manifesto", but also saluting like a Communist and tells the men that "reds" have helped him more than anyone else, and proclaims :

*“Hear it, boys, hear it? Hell, listen to me! Coast to coast! HELLO AMERICA! 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 it to make a new world!”* (Waiting for Lefty, Interne Episode VI)

No doubt it is a call for a revolt against the inhuman exploitation of the capitalist in micro level in the play but it could mirror an urge for a revolution throughout the world “to make a new world.” Here we find, the play depicts how the working class people are depressed day by day and finally how and why they become comrade and rebel to change the corrupted world. This urge has a universal appeal because we all want a change inwardly but cannot able to do that. Yet, people never stop dreaming to make free themselves from the chain of world. Odets has depicted our inner desire in this play and shows step by step, the working class of the world would rise up, and fight for their bones and blood. They sacrificed their lives just to make a new world. I believe, the same circumstances will happen again and again until an equal world established and oppressed people will sacrifice their lives to establish their rights till making the world a new one.

In a broader sense or on macro level *Waiting for Lefty* can be understood and appreciated by readers even today in the apparent authenticity of the characters as representatives of human beings of all ages.

The plays of Odets’ and other major Group Theatre plays of the 1930s are harsh criticisms of the capitalist class in the Great Depression. Odets asserted that all of his plays deal with the human spirit persistent in the face of all opponents, whether they are the capitalist class or not. Odets’ dramatic style is distinguished by a kind of poetic, by his socialist politics, and by his way of

dropping the audience right into the conflict with little or no introduction. Often character is more important than plot, which Odets attributed to the influence of Anton Chekhov. In general, Odets' political statements give us an idea about Marxism in order to highlight a universal humanism. This is the ultimate reason why he retains a strong hope for the triumph of humanistic ideals despite acknowledging the presence of inhuman power games and social classes.

Odets strongly declares, "When I mention the word 'America', it is myself I mean," here we find that Odets echoing Walt Whitman:

*"I celebrate myself, and sing myself,  
And what I assume you shall assume,  
For every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you."  
(Song of Myself, L.1-3 Section I)*

Though it is a study of the poet himself, indirectly it is a study of all humankind. His 'self' is comprehensive, a universal one. While singing of himself he is singing the glory of all humanity. Whereas Whitman sang the body electric, Odets sang the body politic. Odets internal landscape - "the homeless thing" - exactly paralleled the nation's sense of lack. And, in his analysis of the American disease, he brought against the stage a whole range of hitherto 'undramatized' souls.

The above mentioned openness and the experience of Depression-era show a clear message that the "American Dream" should be a dream of a better life for all, not just for the privileged few, and we should band together to get it. But however questionable the opening, the closing is even more rousing dead-on. Labor leader Lefty has been found with a bullet in his head. Symbolically a bullet in the head of oppressed people - to all the underprivileged people of the world. Capitalism can eat its own every bit as well as communism - and the assembled "storm birds of the working class" finally band together in a general call for a strike. The manner in which they do so is full of anger, determination and power, and we can't help but glimpse the possibility of change.

Certainly "*Waiting for Lefty*" was written with the intention of highlighting the problems of big business and capitalism, the power of the "little man," and other issues prove relevant to American life today and rise above the setting of the 1930's. Still, a lot of the play is in those problems of the times, such as the 'Great Depression'. While there are undercurrents in American society similar to Marxism, it is important to recognize the movement itself as a significant part of America at that time that affected the way people acted and thought, seen as a threat to government and capitalism. Clifford Odets was actually a member of the American Communist Party since 1934 and so wrote the play with a simultaneous voice. In spite of the historical qualities that give the play additional power, most of the strength in *Waiting for Lefty* is in the universality of its themes and basic issues between people.

The situation presented in *Waiting for Lefty* hasn't changed yet. At present, so-called strike is increasing day by day. Especially in the third world it becomes a common scenario, as if there is no escape from the system established by the capitalist. This play still remains a salient work on

the ill effects of capitalism, and on the ways the common man can combat them. Odets' subject was always the struggle of the heartbroken American soul under capitalism. His plays and his life, full of unique lament and liveliness, eloquently fulfill his prophecy: "I will reveal America to itself by revealing myself to myself." And Arthur Miller was right when he wrote in his journal "*Time Bends*"

*"An Odets play was awaited like news hot off the presses, as though through him we would know what to think of ourselves, ... Marxism was magic, and Odets had the wand."* Odets himself felt the magic and inspire us "*to make a new world.*"

Though he never appears in the play, Lefty remains an important symbol. His name marks him as a symbol for a left-wing radical, and the men seem reluctant to act until he arrives. When they learn he has been murdered, it is the last straw, and then they decide to strike. We do not whether it will be a change for the better or not, whether a new world comes into existence or not after that expected revolutionary change. Yet, we expect and wait. Actually we don't know who or what is coming but still we are waiting for. Waiting does matter. Like Godot in Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*, Lefty might be an empty promise in our meaningless life. Yet his arrival is expected to change the situation and to make a new world for the ordinary people like us to fight against oppression and odds against humanity. *Waiting for Lefty* shows us the ways how the common men can fight against repression.

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