

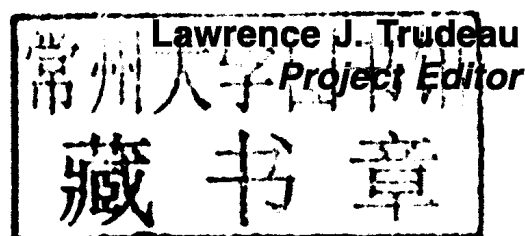
Twentieth-Century
Literary Criticism

TCLC 244

Volume 244

Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism

**Criticism of the
Works of Novelists, Poets, Playwrights,
Short Story Writers, and Other Creative Writers
Who Lived between 1900 and 1999,
from the First Published Critical
Appraisals to Current Evaluations**



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**Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism, Vol.
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Preface

Since its inception *Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism (TCLC)* has been purchased and used by some 10,000 school, public, and college or university libraries. *TCLC* has covered more than 1000 authors, representing over 60 nationalities and nearly 50,000 titles. No other reference source has surveyed the critical response to twentieth-century authors and literature as thoroughly as *TCLC*. In the words of one reviewer, “there is nothing comparable available.” *TCLC* “is a gold mine of information—dates, pseudonyms, biographical information, and criticism from books and periodicals—which many librarians would have difficulty assembling on their own.”

Scope of the Series

TCLC is designed to serve as an introduction to authors who died between 1900 and 1999 and to the most significant interpretations of these author's works. Volumes published from 1978 through 1999 included authors who died between 1900 and 1960. The great poets, novelists, short story writers, playwrights, and philosophers of the period are frequently studied in high school and college literature courses. In organizing and reprinting the vast amount of critical material written on these authors, *TCLC* helps students develop valuable insight into literary history, promotes a better understanding of the texts, and sparks ideas for papers and assignments. Each entry in *TCLC* presents a comprehensive survey on an author's career or an individual work of literature and provides the user with a multiplicity of interpretations and assessments. Such variety allows students to pursue their own interests; furthermore, it fosters an awareness that literature is dynamic and responsive to many different opinions.

Every fourth volume of *TCLC* is devoted to literary topics. These topics widen the focus of the series from the individual authors to such broader subjects as literary movements, prominent themes in twentieth-century literature, literary reaction to political and historical events, significant eras in literary history, prominent literary anniversaries, and the literatures of cultures that are often overlooked by English-speaking readers.

TCLC is designed as a companion series to Gale's *Contemporary Literary Criticism, (CLC)* which reprints commentary on authors who died after 1999. Because of the different time periods under consideration, there is no duplication of material between *CLC* and *TCLC*.

Organization of the Book

A *TCLC* entry consists of the following elements:

- The **Author Heading** cites the name under which the author most commonly wrote, followed by birth and death dates. Also located here are any name variations under which an author wrote, including transliterated forms for authors whose native languages use nonroman alphabets. If the author wrote consistently under a pseudonym, the pseudonym is listed in the author heading and the author's actual name is given in parenthesis on the first line of the biographical and critical information. Uncertain birth or death dates are indicated by question marks. Single-work entries are preceded by a heading that consists of the most common form of the title in English translation (if applicable) and the name of its author.
- The **Introduction** contains background information that introduces the reader to the author, work, or topic that is the subject of the entry.
- The list of **Principal Works** is ordered chronologically by date of first publication and lists the most important works by the author. The genre and publication date of each work is given. In the case of foreign authors whose

works have been translated into English, the English-language version of the title follows in brackets. Unless otherwise indicated, dramas are dated by first performance, not first publication. Lists of **Representative Works** by different authors appear with topic entries.

- Reprinted **Criticism** is arranged chronologically in each entry to provide a useful perspective on changes in critical evaluation over time. The critic's name and the date of composition or publication of the critical work are given at the beginning of each piece of criticism. Unsigned criticism is preceded by the title of the source in which it originally appeared. All titles by the author featured in the text are printed in boldface type. Footnotes are reprinted at the end of each essay or excerpt. In the case of excerpted criticism, only those footnotes that pertain to the excerpted texts are included. Criticism in topic entries is arranged chronologically under a variety of subheadings to facilitate the study of different aspects of the topic.
- A complete **Bibliographical Citation** of the original essay or book precedes each piece of criticism. Source citations in the Literary Criticism Series follow University of Chicago Press style, as outlined in *The Chicago Manual of Style*, 15th ed. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2003).
- Critical essays are prefaced by brief **Annotations** explicating each piece.
- An annotated bibliography of **Further Reading** appears at the end of each entry and suggests resources for additional study. In some cases, significant essays for which the editors could not obtain reprint rights are included here. Boxed material following the further reading list provides references to other biographical and critical sources on the author in series published by Gale.

Indexes

A **Cumulative Author Index** lists all of the authors that appear in a wide variety of reference sources published by Gale, including *TCLC*. A complete list of these sources is found facing the first page of the Author Index. The index also includes birth and death dates and cross references between pseudonyms and actual names.

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An alphabetical **Title Index** accompanies each volume of *TCLC*. Listings of titles by authors covered in the given volume are followed by the author's name and the corresponding page numbers where the titles are discussed. English translations of foreign titles and variations of titles are cross-referenced to the title under which a work was originally published. Titles of novels, dramas, nonfiction books, and poetry, short story, or essay collections are printed in italics, while individual poems, short stories, and essays are printed in roman type within quotation marks.

In response to numerous suggestions from librarians, Gale also produces a paperbound edition of the *TCLC* cumulative title index. This annual cumulation, which alphabetically lists all titles reviewed in the series, is available to all customers. Additional copies of this index are available upon request. Librarians and patrons will welcome this separate index; it saves shelf space, is easy to use, and is recyclable upon receipt of the next edition.

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When citing criticism reprinted in the Literary Criticism Series, students should provide complete bibliographic information so that the cited essay can be located in the original print or electronic source. Students who quote directly from reprinted criticism may use any accepted bibliographic format, such as University of Chicago Press style or Modern Language Association (MLA) style. Both the MLA and the University of Chicago formats are acceptable and recognized as being the current standards for citations. It is important, however, to choose one format for all citations; do not mix the two formats within a list of citations.

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Clifford Odets

1906-1963

American playwright and screenwriter.

The following entry provides an overview of Odets's life and works. For additional information on his career, see *CLC*, Volumes 2, 28, and 98.

INTRODUCTION

Clifford Odets is remembered as one of the foremost American playwrights of the 1930s. With the production of his best-known dramatic works, including *Awake and Sing!* (1935), *Till the Day I Die* (1935), and *Waiting for Lefty* (1935), Odets established a reputation as an advocate of the proletariat and a champion of leftist political ideals. In these early plays the author depicted the plight of working-class Americans, particularly Jewish-Americans, as they struggled against corruption and materialism within Depression-era society. Critics have also praised Odets for his innovative staging techniques and for introducing a ground-breaking dramatic style that combined grand aesthetic ideals with the raw vernacular of American street culture. In later works Odets drifted away from the social and political activism that characterized his early successes, focusing instead on psychological and personal themes, including familial and marital discord, sexual relations, guilt, and redemption. He also moved in and out of Hollywood throughout his career and devoted much of his time to writing screenplays. As a result, his reputation as an idealist and activist playwright waned during the final decades of his life, and he never recaptured the critical acclaim he enjoyed during the 1930s. Nevertheless, Odets remains a figure of historical significance in American theater, who is generally recognized as a stylistic innovator and a keen spokesman of his times.

BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

Odets was born July 18, 1906, in Philadelphia, to Louis and Pearl Geisinger Odets, who were recent Jewish immigrants from Eastern Europe. The family moved several times to facilitate Louis Odets's various business ventures in advertising and printing. As a result, the author's childhood years were spent alternately between Philadelphia and the fledgling middle-class Jewish neighborhoods in New York's Bronx region. In his youth Odets read avidly, particularly the novels of Vic-

tor Hugo, and became interested in acting and performing, participating in school theater and local amateur productions. His grades were poor, however, and at the age of seventeen he dropped out of high school. He found small acting jobs during this time and wrote his first dramatic works, two one-act plays, one of which was broadcast on WFBH in New York in 1926.

Odets continued to pursue an acting career in New York, and by the time the stock market crashed in 1929, he had landed several small roles on Broadway. He performed frequently with the Theatre Guild, an elite organization that featured the work of important playwrights, including Eugene O'Neill, and he later joined the Group Theatre, founded by former Guild members Harold Clurman, Cheryl Crawford, and Lee Strasberg. During the early 1930s Odets began writing longer and more ambitious plays, and in 1933 he completed his first full-length drama, initially titled "I Got the Blues," but later renamed *Awake and Sing!* when it was produced on Broadway in 1935. In 1934 Odets joined the Communist Party, which he left a few months later, and completed his next play, *Waiting for Lefty*, which reflected his growing leftist sentiments. The drama won the New League Theatre-New Masses playwriting contest in 1934 and premiered on Broadway a year later, on a double-bill with *Till the Day I Die*.

In 1936 Odets accepted an offer to write screenplays in Hollywood and was paid twenty-five hundred dollars a week for his adaptation of Charles G. Booth's novel *The General Died at Dawn*, which starred Gary Cooper. Odets continued to write for the Group Theatre in New York and moved back to the city to work on the Group's production of his next play, *The Silent Partner*. But in January 1937 the company temporarily disbanded and *The Silent Partner* remained unrealized. Odets returned to Hollywood shortly thereafter to work on the screenplay for a Civil War movie, called *Gettysburg*, which was never filmed.

Severely criticized by the New York press for abandoning the theater and selling out to Hollywood, Odets was determined to produce another successful play. In the summer of 1937 he returned to New York to revive the Group Theatre and produce *Golden Boy*, a work he had partially completed in Hollywood. Eventually staged in November of that year, the play enjoyed a successful run on Broadway and later toured the United States and Europe. During the next year Odets divided his time

between Hollywood and New York, and in November of 1938 produced his next major play, *Rocket to the Moon*. He followed this success with his first comedy, *Night Music* (1940), which failed to win audiences and ultimately marked the decline of the Group Theatre.

During the 1940s Odets's affiliation with the Group Theatre dwindled, and in 1942 he made a permanent move to Los Angeles. In Hollywood he contributed to several successful films, including Frank Capra's *It's a Wonderful Life*, and wrote and directed *None but the Lonely Heart* (1944), based on the novel by Richard Llewellyn and featuring Cary Grant and Ethel Barrymore, who won an Oscar for her performance. During the late 1940s Odets was placed on a list of suspected communists and sympathizers working in Hollywood. Increasingly disillusioned with the commercialism of the movie industry, he began writing a new play for the stage and contemplated a move back to New York. He returned to Broadway in 1949, with the production of *The Big Knife*, which he followed with *The Country Girl* in 1950.

In 1951 Odets was once again targeted for his previous affiliation with the Communist Party and finally cooperated with the House Un-American Activities Committee by naming communist members in the Group Theatre. The decision brought scorn and ridicule from both his colleagues and the media, and his literary reputation suffered significantly. In 1954 he produced his last completed stage play, the critically successful *The Flowering Peach*. Odets returned to Hollywood soon after and over the next few years worked on various movie scripts and, later, wrote for a television series. In the final year of his life he adapted his former work, *Golden Boy*, into a musical for Sammy Davis, Jr. On August 14, 1963, Odets died of stomach cancer at the age of fifty-seven.

MAJOR WORKS

During the early years of his literary career Odets was primarily concerned with social and political issues, and his dramatic works often demonstrate a sympathy with the struggles of the working class. In *Awake and Sing!* the author exposes the banalities and tensions of life for the Bergers, a modern Jewish and middle-class family living in the Bronx. Bessie, the materialistic matriarch of the family, rules over her meek husband, Myron, as well as her two grown children, Hennie and Ralph. As a result of Bessie's overbearing nature and interference, Hennie is forced into an arranged marriage to cover up a pregnancy, while Ralph hides his romantic attachments from his mother. Bessie's father, Jacob, a passionate Jewish immigrant, also lives with the family and serves as a mentor for Ralph, schooling him in such diverse topics as opera, religious mysticism, and

radical socialism. Encouraging Ralph to eschew his mother's materialism and remake the world according to his own ideals, Jacob ultimately sacrifices his life to provide insurance money so that his grandson can assert his independence. Meanwhile, Hennie abandons her infant and leaves her loveless marriage to start a new life with Moe, a World War I amputee. In addition to offering a critique of materialism and the American capitalist system, Odets also challenges middle-class values in the play and explores themes related to individual freedom.

In another significant early work, *Waiting for Lefty*, which was inspired by a violent strike of New York taxi-drivers in 1934, Odets confronts the exploitation of American workers and the hypocrisies of their union leaders. The play consists of a series of scenes, in which the striking workers act out their own stories at a meeting, while they wait for their leader, Lefty, who will serve as their negotiator with the company and the union bosses. Fatt, the foreman, and other union bosses preside over the meeting, and along with armed gunman attempt to persuade the workers to settle. One by one the strikers come on stage and enact the struggles of their daily lives, as they face injustice or racial discrimination, fight corruption, and attempt to support their families with meager wages. At the end of the play, when someone announces that Lefty has been murdered, the workers reject the idea of compromise and demand another strike. Odets has been credited with using innovative staging techniques in *Waiting for Lefty* and introducing a bold new vernacular to the American stage.

Till the Day I Die, a one-act play that premiered with *Waiting for Lefty*, explores themes related to political persecution, strength in the face of adversity, and self-sacrifice. Inspired by the persecution of German communists and Jews under rule of the Nazis, the play consists of seven scenes and features Ernst, the protagonist, and an underground cell of agitators, who are being pursued by the Gestapo for their subversive activities. As the play progresses Ernst is arrested by the Gestapo and eventually tortured when he refuses to provide information on his comrades. The Nazis release him, however, in hopes that he will lead them to his group, which includes Ernst's brother, Carl, and his girlfriend, Tilly. Realizing the probable motivation for Ernst's release, the group subsequently cuts off all contact with him. After being arrested and released again under surveillance, Ernst decides that the only way to free his comrades of danger is to commit suicide.

With *Rocket to the Moon*, Odets began to turn away from the political and social themes that characterized his earlier dramatic works. In this play he explores psychological themes, focusing on such issues as marital discord and sexuality. The protagonist, Ben Stark, a

dentist, is an average man, crippled by his own indecision, spiritual impotence, and inability to act. Suffering through both financial strain and the tensions associated with an unhappy marriage, Stark pursues an affair with his young secretary, Cleo, who attracts the attention of numerous suitors. Stark is ultimately unable to choose between Cleo and his wife, however, and eventually Cleo leaves all of her suitors, including Stark, to pursue her freedom and a more meaningful romantic relationship. After Cleo departs, Stark is finally able to appreciate his wife and the vows they have made to one another.

Corruption and the corrosive effects of American commercialism are the major themes of *The Big Knife*, one of Odets's last major plays. In this work the protagonist, Charlie Castle, is a Philadelphia-born actor turned movie star, who, at the height of his acting career, faces the deterioration of his personal life. Estranged from his wife, Marion, and having lost his artistic passion, Charlie is also haunted by the death of a young boy he killed in a car accident, a crime for which his loyal publicist took the blame. Meanwhile, Charlie's mistress, Dixie, an aspiring actress, is a witness to the crime and threatens to blackmail him. The situation is further complicated when Hollywood studio representatives suggest that Dixie can be "gotten rid of." Marion, realizing that her husband's ideals have been lost to the materialism of Hollywood, finally leaves Charlie. At the end of the play the protagonist chooses suicide as an act of redemption, in an effort to reclaim his lost integrity.

CRITICAL RECEPTION

Odets first drew attention as a playwright with the production of *Waiting for Lefty*, which, though written after *Awake and Sing!*, debuted first, in January of 1935. Audiences responded favorably to the play's focus on the stories of everyday working individuals, and its unapologetic use of American slang. Theater reviewers also praised the play but were ambivalent over Odets's leftist political message in the work, leading some to label him a radical propagandist. The recognition Odets achieved as a result of *Waiting for Lefty* facilitated the production on Broadway of *Awake and Sing!*, also in 1935, which reinforced his reputation as an innovative and idealistic new playwright on the American stage.

His next play, *Paradise Lost*, which premiered in December of 1935, was less successful, in part because of its more poetic, less plot-driven focus, and closed after only a few weeks. After a brief hiatus in Hollywood Odets returned to the New York stage with *Golden Boy* in 1937, which was hailed as a triumphant return for the author, as well as the Group Theatre company. *Rocket to the Moon*, which appeared the following year,

was also favorably received, particularly for its exploration of emotional and psychological themes, as opposed to political ideas, which some critics perceived as an indication of the playwright's growing maturity.

While Odets was consistently regarded as one of the most promising new playwrights during the latter half of the 1930s, his reputation waned after 1940, a change resulting, in part, from the commercial failure of such works as *Night Music* and *Clash by Night* (1941). As some scholars have noted, however, the playwright's tumultuous personal life overshadowed his literary achievements during this time and influenced popular and critical reactions to his work. Odets received some recognition for his final plays, *The Big Knife*, *The Country Girl*, and *The Flowering Peach*, which was short-listed for the Pulitzer Prize in 1955, but he never fully overcame the perception that he sold out his ideals for commercial success and money in Hollywood and failed to develop as an artist. At the time of his death in 1963, Odets was generally considered a playwright of great promise who had never fully lived up to his potential.

In the decades following his death Odets's contributions as a playwright and screenwriter received ambivalent reactions from scholars of American drama. Most continued to maintain that his best works were those written earliest in his career, during the socially turbulent period of the Great Depression. While some critics, such as Malcolm Goldstein, criticized the repetitive nature of his work and claimed that Odets failed to evolve beyond the materialist themes of his early plays, other commentators, such as Robert J. Griffin, Edward Murray, and Michael J. Mendelsohn, emphasized the author's formal and stylistic achievements as a young playwright. Griffin characterized Odets as an "imaginative spokesman" of his times and argued that his "humanitarian" focus and vivid characterizations elevated his work above the category of agitprop drama. Murray lauded Odets's dramaturgical achievements, including his "complex construction, his rich characterizations," and "his unforgettable dialogue," and described the author as "one of the finest writers we have produced in the American theater."

In more recent years scholars such as Gabriel Miller, Michael Woolf, and Christopher J. Herr, have revisited lesser-known works in the playwright's canon and reassessed his importance within the greater scope of American theater. While Miller has explored Odets's use of symbol and allegory in later plays, such as *The Big Knife* and *Golden Boy*, Herr has examined the author's treatment of popular culture in his late works, stating that Odets attempted to show "how popular forms both embodied the American Dream and betrayed it." Woolf, however, has reconsidered several presumptions regarding Odets's "complex career," refuting the generally accepted ideas that his work should be relegated to the

category of proletarian literature, and that his creative ability suffered as a result of his involvement with Hollywood.

Despite the commonly held opinion that Odets remains a marginal figure of twentieth-century American literature, critics have increasingly acknowledged the artistry of his writing and the innovations he brought to the theater in the 1930s and later. Woolf has asserted that "the tendency to categorize Odets as a writer contained and bounded by the 1930s distorts the real value of the work which encompasses the emotional signs of those nightmarish times but goes beyond them," adding that he should be regarded as "a playwright whose work sought to address broad issues of human behaviour, passion and inspiration," and not just political themes. Woolf concludes that Odets's "considerable talent was to encompass" the complexities of his times, "and express them in forms that were passionate, articulate, and, at times, profound."

PRINCIPAL WORKS

- Awake and Sing!* (play) 1935
Paradise Lost (play) 1935
Till the Day I Die (play) 1935
Waiting for Lefty (play) 1935
The General Died at Dawn [adaptor; from the novel by Charles G. Booth] (screenplay) 1936
Golden Boy (play) 1937
Rocket to the Moon (play) 1938
Night Music (play) 1940
Clash by Night (play) 1941
The Russian People [adaptor; from the play by Konstantin Simonov] (play) 1942
None but the Lonely Heart [adaptor; from the novel by Richard Llewellyn] (screenplay) 1944
Deadline at Dawn [adaptor; from the novel by William Irish] (screenplay) 1946
Humoresque [adaptor, with Zachary Gold; from the short story by Fannie Hurst] (screenplay) 1946
The Big Knife (play) 1949
The Country Girl (play) 1950
The Flowering Peach (play) 1954
Sweet Smell of Success [adaptor, with Ernest Lehman; from the novella *Tell Me About It Tomorrow* by Lehman] (screenplay) 1957
The Story on Page One (screenplay) 1960
Wild in the Country [adaptor; from the novel *The Lost Country* by I. R. Salamanca] (screenplay) 1961

CRITICISM

R. Baird Shuman (essay date 1962)

SOURCE: Shuman, R. Baird. "The Locust and the Peach." In *Clifford Odets*, pp. 119-45. New York: Twayne Publishers, Inc., 1962.

[In the following essay, Shuman critiques Odets's three late plays, *The Big Knife*, *The Country Girl*, and *The Flowering Peach*, maintaining that while these works "mark a redirection of the author's interests," and show him "grappling with new techniques and with new social problems," they nonetheless give evidence of his ongoing concern with "the effect of mendacity on a broad social situation."]

"There is idealism
in just survival."

(From *The Flowering Peach*)

Clifford Odets spent the years following *Clash by Night* writing motion picture scenarios in Hollywood. He was not to produce another stage play until 1948, when he finished working on *A Winter Journey*; renamed *The Big Knife*, it reached Broadway early in 1949. This play was followed in 1950 by *The Country Girl*, and in 1954 by *The Flowering Peach*.

Odets' years in the film industry had brought about very noticeable changes in him. If *Waiting for Lefty* and *Till the Day I Die* had reflected the vigorous anger of his youth, and if *Rocket to the Moon* and *Clash by Night* had revealed a cynicism not evident in the younger Odets, then surely *The Big Knife* gave evidence, first, of an Odets who had grown immeasurably in dramatic technique and, second, of an Odets who was proving himself sufficiently versatile to write with as much feeling about problems of the well-to-do as, fifteen years earlier, he had written of the problems of those who were oppressed through poverty. *The Country Girl* represented, in many respects, a continuation of the promise found in *The Big Knife*. The play dealt superficially with theatrical life, but more deeply with the effects of alcoholism and insecurity. The hero, Frank Elgin, is grappling with the problems of conquering his alcoholism so that he may make a comeback as an actor. The play is basically concerned with the deep and complicated insecurities which face him and over which he must gain control.

When it appeared that Odets had settled into a pattern of writing plays about show business and the people in it, he surprised his public and the critics. At the same time, he gave further evidence of his versatility with the presentation of *The Flowering Peach*, a warm and hu-

morous allegory based on the biblical account of Noah and the flood. This play reached Broadway in December, 1954, and ran for some four months.

Odets is presently hopeful that he will be able to produce alternately film plays and stage plays. He recently was quoted by the *New York Herald Tribune* as saying with assurance and genuine conviction, "My best plays are ahead."

I. *THE BIG KNIFE*

In a statement to the press in 1938, Mr. Odets said that ". . . acting is a whorish thing." What he meant becomes fully clear in *The Big Knife*, a play which chronicles the events in the life of a highly successful actor who ultimately commits suicide. This actor, Charlie Castle, is one of the leading cinema idols in the country and, as such, is worth millions of dollars to the studio which holds his contract. Marcus Hoff, a motion-picture tycoon, is determined that Charlie shall sign with his studio and has had an unprecedented contract drawn up offering the actor nearly four million dollars for his services during the next fourteen years and offering him, also, the right to reject any scripts which he does not deem worthy of his talents.

But Charlie does not wish to sign such a contract because his wife Marion, who is now living apart from him, vows that she will not return if he makes such a commitment. However, a simple refusal to sign is not possible; for Marcus Hoff is blackmailing Charlie, threatening that if he does not accept the contract, he will make public the fact that Charlie is responsible for a hit-and-run death for which his publicity man, Buddy Bliss, out of friendship for Charlie, took the responsibility and subsequently served time in prison. Because of his fear of this revelation Charlie finally signs the contract; but, having signed it, he cannot live with himself. He comes to realize that he is little more than a chattel. His self-respect has been sold for a price, and without self-respect Charlie cannot face himself. He does the only thing left for him to do; he slashes his wrists and dies.

Odets' identification with Charlie Castle is very obvious in many instances throughout the play. Castle, like Odets, had read Victor Hugo and, in the play, he states that ". . . Hugo's the one who helped me nibble my way through billions of polly seeds. Sounds grandiose, but Hugo said to me: 'Be a good boy, Charlie. Love people, do good, help the lost and fallen, make the world happy, if you can!'" (*The Big Knife*, Random House Edition, p. 9. All subsequent references to the play shall be to this edition.) Stated with simplicity, this was the ideal by which Charlie Castle desired to live; it was his awareness of the gap between his ideal and the reality of his life which caused him to be essentially a

weakling and an escapist—a man who, in his mid-thirties, could look forward to very little except the forgetfulness which he found in an overindulgence in liquor.

Actually, Charlie had accepted fame in exchange for his manhood. He had become an object to be haggled over, to be lent out, to be subdivided, just as Joe Bonaparte had become such an object in *Golden Boy*. His loss of identity, first engineered by the studio, which made him change his name from Cass to Castle, increases with the action of the play. His recognition of this loss of identity is fully realized when, in conversation with a neighbor, Charlie says, "I'll bet you don't know why we all wear these beautiful, expensive ties in Hollywood. . . . It's a military tactic—we hope you won't notice our faces" (106).

Charlie, at the acme of success in his profession, has reached his nadir as a man; he is not in control of his own destiny. He can never act naturally, never speak frankly, because someone is always watching and listening; someone is always eager to help lead the great man to his downfall. He tells his wife that "free speech is the highest-priced luxury in this country today" (16). Charlie must, in this atmosphere, have his thoughts shaped for him and must yield his ideals utterly to the forces which have brought about his success. He has no choice but to make an amoeba-like adaptation to the sort of life which is now inevitable for him. He must pay heed to the words of Marcus Hoff's toady, Smiley Coy, who advises him, "Don't study life—get used to it" (81). It is in such casual statements as this that one finds Odets' most cutting, most subjective criticism of the film industry.

Only in *Till the Day I Die* and in *Golden Boy* has Odets produced such a clearly defined and fully delineated central character as Charlie Castle. In *Waiting for Lefty* there was no single central character; rather, the working class emerged as hero. In *Awake and Sing!* and in *Paradise Lost*, the emergent character was a composite family character. In the plays dealing with love, the emphasis was not on a single character. However, *The Big Knife* revolves around Charlie Castle, who, peculiarly enough, is probably the weakest character in the play. The only thing which makes him central is that he can make money for his studio. Marcus Hoff can use Charlie as a means towards making millions. Buddy Bliss and Dixie Evans are both attracted to Charlie because of the position which Hoff has given him. Charlie, as an individual, does not assume any overwhelming proportions in the play, hence it can be only a false Hollywood glamor, contrived by the studio, which draws people to him. Even the kindly Nat Danziger has no deep intrinsic feeling for Charlie. He is, of necessity, involved with him in business dealings, and his nature is so obviously outgoing and humanitarian that he does

all in his power to give Charlie the kindly counsel of which he stands in need; however, Odets does not give the reader cause to suppose that Nat could have become Charlie's friend through any natural affinity.

Marion Castle's relationship to her husband also boils down essentially to a matter of economics. Marion, the daughter of a noted history professor, has always known security and been socially above Charlie, whose background is sketched in at the beginning of the play when, in telling about his uncle, he says, "He merely raised me when my parents died. . . . They were awfully poor, my aunt and uncle. I made money too late to be able to help them. I regret that" (9). The cultural gap between the two is re-emphasized throughout the play in various incidental ways, as when Marion asks Charlie, "Why do you keep using words like 'ain't'?" (60).

Marion, because of her inborn security, something which Charlie will never be able to attain, is essentially a fearless person. Audacious enough to tell Patty Benedict, the gossip columnist, to mind her own business, she also stands her ground with Marcus Hoff, one of the most powerful men in Hollywood, when she says, "Mr. Hoff, can't you stop talking about yourself?" (124). To Charlie, who is very much in love with her, she represents all that is not Hollywood. Hank Teagle characterized the relationship between them very well when he said to Charlie, "I know that Marion stands in your life for idealism . . . and that you've wounded her and it" (109). Charlie cannot deny this. It is clear to him that, just as their expected child has been killed by an abortion, so has his idealism been annihilated by the false and destructive values which he had to accept as the price of success in Hollywood.

Odets' most direct criticism of Hollywood is found in *The Big Knife*. Hollywood is depicted as the place of "sin" which Odets had called it some years earlier. Even as the play opens, the venomous Patty Benedict gives a vivid insight into Hollywood's social attitudes:

PATTY:

I like the airiness of this room. . . . French paintings, dear one?

CHARLIE:

Yeah.

PATTY:

Don't you buy American any more?

CHARLIE:

. . . I don't know one painter from another. . . . I wouldn't want my fans to say I've gone arty, would I?

(6)

Because Patty is a widely read columnist, and because she is basically so warped and unwholesome, every question she asks must be answered with extreme caution. She is to be fenced with rather than talked to. Her question—"Don't you buy American any more?"—is an irrelevant and unfair one. Charlie's answer, while a safe one, is also characteristic: the implication is obviously that the buyers of paintings are more prestige-conscious than artistically aware. Finally Charlie admits in this bit of dialogue that he must live and act constantly in the shadow of what his fans are likely to think of him; for him to admit a proclivity towards one of the finer aspects of human endeavor would be damaging to him professionally.

There seems in this situation to be an echo of the central conflict of *Golden Boy*; but the deeper conflict is the one within the author who is faced with the problems of writing what is within him, or of producing popular films which he knows to be of limited artistic value. Down to the present time, Odets has not completely solved the problem of merging his artistic integrity with practical necessity, and the question of how to meet both the artistic and practical needs in his life is still one of his major personal problems. Marion speaks directly of this conflict when she tells Charlie that "Your sin is living against your own nature. You're denatured—that's your sin!" (62). But by this time Charlie is so far removed from his real nature that he can no longer be said to have one. He has lost his personality; life has eroded his ideals to such a point that the only thing that remains of him is his likeness on a kiosk. His life is one of constant retreat.

The insincerity of Hollywood is a major factor in bringing about Charlie's disillusionment. The film magnates who stoop to blackmailing him are the very people who profess adoration of him. Charlie, disgusted after having been forced into signing his fourteen-year contract, very tellingly says, "The free giving of hearts out here begins to freeze my blood" (47). His eyes are open to the real Hollywood: the Hollywood which can pay a man a thousand dollars a week for four years and not even ". . . remember his name or what he wrote" (114); the Hollywood which can ponder over how a man is able to live so well ". . . on four thousand a week" (36-37).

In writing a critique of life in Hollywood, Odets has not departed so far from his original interests and ideals as many of his critics would have one believe. One must remember Odets' statement: "All of my plays . . . deal with one subject; the struggle not to have life nullified by circumstances, false values, anything." All of Odets' plays have been concerned with the problems brought about by the effect of mendacity on a broad social situation. In *The Big Knife* he has chosen to write of a level of society with which he had not previously con-

cerned himself, and many critics viewed this as a weakness, as a retreat from the social problems which were at the heart of the earlier Odets plays. But who is to limit the playwright in this way? It must be remembered that Charlie Cass came from the same sort of background which Odets had been writing about in his earlier plays and from which Odets himself had come. The play is concerned with the effect of a notably false society upon a person who, by circumstances, is forced into it. Odets is able to write of this problem with feeling and conviction because of his intimate personal association with it.

Charlie ultimately is forced into committing suicide because his life has ceased to have any meaning. Hollywood has nullified all of the challenge which his life had held during the early days of his marriage when he and Marion had struggled to eke out an existence in New York. In addressing Hank Teagle, Charlie makes his desperation quite clear:

And do you say in your book it isn't even easy to go to hell today? That there's nothing left to sin against? . . . Correction! There's health left to sin against! Health—the last, nervous conviction of the time! We're sick at heart, but we'll increase the life span! What for? Nobody knows! . . . You're right, Hank. Your hero's half a man, neither here nor there, dead from the gizzard up. Stick him with a pin and see, psst! No feelings! When I came home from Germany . . . I saw most of the war dead were here, not in Africa and Italy. And Roosevelt was dead . . . and we plunged ourselves, all of us, into the noble work of making the buck reproduce itself!

(111)

But even more telling is a statement in the very last minute of the play. Charlie, speaking to Marion, says, "You see, everyone needs a cause to touch greatness" (137). This statement reveals a great deal about Charlie, but even more about Odets.

The Big Knife was received in New York with great interest and mixed feelings. John Gassner indicated that since Odets' rise to prominence, only two young writers, Tennessee Williams and Arthur Miller, had written with such animation. Certainly the force of this animation is felt in such a scene as that in which Charlie is feeling remorseful because of the problems which he has caused Nat, his agent. He says, "Why did I add this burden to that grotesque, devoted soul? Did you ever notice? He moves his lips when he reads" (136). This sort of acute and revealing observation reminds one of the careful artistry of a Rembrandt who so fully caught the nuances of his characters' expressions that he made them seem alive. In another scene, Marion says that ". . . to be faithful . . . gives you that loony, old-fashioned moral grandeur of an equestrian statue in the park" (25). This sort of keen observation and expression has helped to establish Odets as a foremost American playwright.

Writing in *School and Society*, William H. Beyer, after calling *The Big Knife* ". . . bitter, angry, diffused, and garrulous diatribe, a sprawling melodrama of the sinister ways of Hollywood," admits that "in the lesser characters . . . Mr. Odets has given us some sharp, compelling characterizations." However, Beyer did not feel that *The Big Knife* represented a step forward for Odets, and he called the play contrived. Miss Wyatt of the *Catholic World* called the play a "Hollywood nightmare," and looked upon it as a purge for the author, who, she hoped, would go on to write a really excellent play. Wolcott Gibbs, writing in *The New Yorker*, labeled the play ". . . an enormous commotion"; he was disappointed at not finding in it a suggestion of more universal moral implications.

Possibly the most just and balanced evaluation of *The Big Knife* was that written by Kappo Phelan in *Commonweal*. While she was not entirely pleased with the play, she admitted that ". . . the astonishing rhetoric Clifford Odets has welded to his astonishing plot in this particular performance is almost indescribable." She gives a perspicacious estimate of Odets when she writes, "It would seem, adding his promotion to his history, that he [Odets] is angry about his position in our society: a position of a man who thinks to the left and at the same time is holding jobs as far to the right as possible." She makes what seems a legitimate criticism in objecting to the fact that the catastrophe of the play is presented in talk rather than in action.

Most of the criticism of the play dealt with specifics and with the immediate story of the play. As a result, some of the significant, far-reaching implications were lost. Brooks Atkinson pointed out that ". . . one of Mr. Odets' virtues [is] that he always tries to write on the high plane of dramatic art, and he has the talent to do so." Some critics lost sight of this fact, even though Odets himself had said that ". . . essentially it [*The Big Knife*] dealt with the tragedy of lost integrity everywhere."

II. *THE COUNTRY GIRL*

It has been suggested that *The Country Girl* may have been merely a slick potboiler, written by Odets for commercial reasons. Indeed, the author himself stated that the play was without a very serious message and aimed merely to present ". . . certain small aspects of life—and I hope reality." In a recent review, the author accounted for the adroit glibness of the play by saying, ". . . I picked up half my technique here [in Hollywood]. I did . . . [a number of] movies before I wrote *Country Girl*. The movies are a brilliant training school for a dramatic writer." This statement surely seems to be a reasonable explanation of his change in style, and it also represents a rather dramatic reversal of his earlier opinions regarding the effect of Hollywood upon a dramatic talent.