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## The Great Depression and the American Drama of the Left

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Widely known as the Decade of the great Depression, the 1930's in America were a period of turmoil and flux. This was an era of great social, economic, political and moral upheaval. Seldom was a period in history so demarcated as this to be bracketed by two major catastrophes that shook the entire world. Preceded by the great Stock Market Crash of October 24, 1929 that ended the "get-rich-quick" dreams of millions of Americans, the 1930's were followed almost exactly after ten years by the Second World War which began on September 1, 1939, with the German invasion of Poland. As a contrast to the prosperous 1920's, this Decade in America witnessed a nation in great economic depression struggling hard to alleviate the sufferings of its people.

One of the worst impacts of the economic collapse was to turn men into paupers. Thousands of Americans who had purchased stock "on margin" saw their savings wiped out in a matter of days. Many of them were completely swamped and needed help to keep from being sold out. Their mad scramble for wealth during the stock market boom instead of bringing them luck as they hoped it would, ultimately brought them down to the condition of paupers. Tasting the bitterness of in-adequacy they at last swallowed their pride and applied for relief, "writhing in humiliation." Unemployment was a widespread phenomenon during the great Depression. The decline in production, closing of tens of thousands of plants and mines, and the enormous under utilization of existing plant capacity, all led to a colossal growth in unemployment.

As a result of poverty, unemployment, the dwindling away of personal savings, working families were faced with the real threat of death from starvation during the Depression. Despite repeated official assurance that nobody would be allowed to starve, at least twenty-nine persons were known to have died from starvation in New York City in 1933, while one hundred and ten such fatalities, chiefly children, were reported for the nation at large prior to 1934.

The condition of the farmers also took a catastrophic turn during the Depression. Even in the affluent twenties the farmers were not economically sound. They were even unable to pay the taxes and debts. After the Crash thousands of them went bankrupt and were forced to sell out. The ruined farmers either remained as tenants on their former-holdings or packed up and joined the huge army of the unemployed. Housing problem was also very acute during the Depression. In New York homeless people slept in subway stations, in doorways or on park benches and in Chicago thousands of homeless people slept on the grass of Grant park. All over the country the destitute congregated in abandoned factories or cardboard shacks ironically called "Hooverilles" in the outskirts of the cities. The crude shacks, "constructed out of packing boxes, scrap iron, anything that could be picked up free in a diligent combing of the city dumps," were a symbol of homeless state of countless Americans.

The Depression, the worst of its kind had its serious repercussions on the general psychology of the people and affected adversely the family relations too. The sense of optimism which prevailed during the Coolidge years was replaced by a black and brooding pessimism. The patriarch who lost his job did not command the same respect from other members of his family as he used to enjoy when he was a bread-winner. For some weak minds constant worries and struggles caused frustration that led to psychological depression and in some cases to insanity. Strikes, agitations, and protest demonstrations became the order of the day. On March 6, 1930 demonstrations against unemployment were held throughout the country. The spring of 1932 saw hunger marches all over the country and a serious unemployment

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riot at Dearborn, Michigan, resulting in bloodshed. The Veterans' Bonus March was another important episode in which twelve to fifteen thousand homeless veterans of the First World War streamed into Washington demanding the Congress to pay them their war service bonus which was not due until 1945.

Walter Rideout, in his analysis of the proletarian novel, divides such novles into four main categories: "(1) those centred about a strike; (2) those concerned with the development of an individual's class- consciousness and his conversion to Communism; (3) those dealing with the 'bottom dogs,' the lowest layers of society; and (4) those describing the decay of the middle class." Such a division also holds good for proletarian drama of the thirties that uses each of these four categories. However, so far as the leftist play is concerned, in addition to these four categories could be added three more categories-(5) agitprops; (6) anti- Nazi plays strongly protesting against the rise of Fascism and Nazism and (7) anti-war plays showing much concern over the possibility of another world war. In order to portray a clear picture of the American drama of the Left during the great Depression, the important plays of the period may be discussed under these seven categories. However, there is no watertight compartment between these categories and a drama may be discussed under more than one category.

Strike is also urged on the workers in John Howard Lawson's revolutionary play. *Marching Song* (1937). Directly portraying the proletarian revolution in an industrial town, the play preaches the need for group solidarity that would ultimately bring about the victory of the working class. Lawson, in order to affirm his revolutionary commitment, overloads the case against capitalism in the most tendentious manner by presenting the extreme examples of capitalist brutality and proletarian nobility. He does so by resorting to the most obvious devices of melodrama. Strike being the central preoccupation of the playwright in *Marching Song*, the play is a direct call to arms. Despite their alliance with the police and the fierce firing by the gangsters, the capitalists are not capable of subjugating the mass of workers. The barbarous murder of Bill Aderson, the militant union leader, instead of suppressing the strike, rather gives new momentum to the Workers' movement that would hopefully end in something positive.

The second category also deals with the class warfare but the scope of the class war is restricted to some individuals. While showing the transformation of Prof. Owens, a quiet middle class citizen, into a political activist, the authors of *Peace on Earth* are more concerned with the conversion of an individual into social awareness than with the solidarity of striking longshoremen.

Coming to the third category, *Stevedore* exposes the sad plight of Lonnie, the black protagonist and the organizer of the Stevedores' Union, who is murdered by the capitalists. The shooting of Lonnie incites the white dockers to join hands with their black counterparts in a united labour front as they realise that it is not the blacks who are their class enemy, but the whites with wealth and power. While teaching the moral that race prejudice must disappear with the awareness of the black and white workers of their class unity, *Stevedore* presents the Marxist message that all underdogs must unite to fight their common class enemy.

Coming to the fourth category, *Odets's Paradise Lost* (1935) is one of the finest examples of the decay of a middle class family. It presents a vivid picture of the decay of the middle-class Gordons. The Gordons' dream of an earthly paradise becomes a nightmare of economic and moral bankruptcy towards the close of the play. They are dispossessed at the end and the paradise is lost to them.

Agitprop, one of the important traditions in the movement of Leftist American drama popularised by the Left-Wing theatres, constitutes the fifth category of Leftist Drama. It is usually a very short play with a loosely constructed episodic structure written for the purpose of political agitation and propaganda that can be performed indoors or out. Its conspicuous feature is the direct presentational technique meant for exciting and convincing the audience emotionally to participate in the show. As little thought is given to rounded characterization, it offers satiric, cartoon-like characters. The actors shouting Marxin slogans in unison stand for the working class solidarity that is essential for the overthrow of the capitalists.

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Odets's *Waiting for Lefty* is also in the agitprop tradition. It contains some familiar ingredients of the agitprop: the episodic structure, the cartoon-like capitalists, Marxian slogans, and direct presentational technique. It also retains other stylised theatrical devices of the agitprop. A blackout, for example, brings an end to each brief scene, and a spotlight immediately picks out the next, much in the manner of *Newsboy*.

American dramatists, far from being isolationist, produced anti-Nazi plays during the 30's to show their protest against Fascism. These plays may be grouped under the sixth category. Elmer Rice projects Germany as the national enemy in *Judgement Day* (1934) that ends with a note of hope when the Dictator, Grigory Vesnic, is murdered by one member of the five-man panel of judges. His *Flight to the West* (1940) shows the confrontation of democratic and fascist mentalities.

Coming to anti-war plays, the last category of leftist drama, Paul Green's *Johnny Johnson* is an expressionistic fantasy about a young idealist's abhorrence of war and his frantic efforts to stop it. Johnny takes war as gory charades of the generals who are so obsessed with the idea of national honour that they become indifferent to life itself. For his pains Johnny is ironically rewarded with many years of imprisonment in a lunatic asylum. After he is set free, he becomes a peddler of children's toys but refuses to stock model soldiers, the only toys in which children show an interest. But *Peace on Earth* is not concerned with generalized protest in the manner of *Johnny Johnson*.

The theatre of the 30's thus encompassed plays written from various political angles. It witnessed the growth of Marxist plays that explained the Depression problems by the philosophy of "dialectical materialism." It also saw the production of Communist plays that offered the Marxian analysis of the capitalist society and advocated for the violent "transition" to a Soviet America. Above all, there were liberal dramas which not only suggested radical reforms in the society but also called for pacifism and confrontation against Fascism and Nazism.

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