

**The Poetics of Hope in Clifford Odets's  
*Awake and Sing!***

**شعرية الأمل في مسرحية كليفورد أوديتس  
(استيقظ وغني!)**

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الكلمات المفتاحية: الأمل، فترة الكساد العظيمة، طبقة العمال، الفكر الماركسي، الحالة الاجتماعية الأمريكية.





## الملخص

يعتبر الأمل أحد الأدوات الأساسية التي بها يستطيع المرء التغلب على صعوبات الحياة. وبما أن الظلم هو من بين العناصر الأكثر أهمية التي أثارت إهتمام كتاب القرن العشرين في كتاباتهم، لذا من الضروري إيجاد حل لهذه المسألة لأنقاذ فئات معينة من الطبقات الاجتماعية مثل طبقة العمال من الظلم والإضطهاد. ويتبنى البحث مقارنة نفسية ماركسية لتحليل مسرحية أوديتس (إستيقظ وغني!). ويهدف البحث إلى إبراز الأمل المنشود لدى الشعب الأمريكي خلال فترة الكساد العظيمة في الولايات المتحدة. يسعى البحث أيضا الى إيجاد الطريقة التي بها من الممكن تحويل الأمل الى حقيقة. في واقع الأمر، عدم وجود الأمل يعني وجود حالة من اليأس باستطاعتها تدمير المجتمعات كافة. يحاول الكاتب المسرحي كليفورد أوديتس في مسرحية (إستيقظ وغني!) في سنة 1935 أن يواسي الطبقة العاملة ويقف الى جانبها وكذلك إيصال صوتها إلى أبعد مكان في العالم. وتعتمد هذه المسرحية الى إرشاد الشعب الأمريكي إلى تحديد هويتهم وتعيين وجهتهم لتحقيق آمالهم. يحاول كليفورد أوديتس أيضا تسليط الضوء على الجهود المبذولة من طبقة العمال من أجل العيش بسلام على أمل أن لا يستغلهم الرأسماليون في أمريكا في ثلاثينيات القرن الماضي. علاوة على ذلك، يصر كليفورد أوديتس على إقتياد الطبقة العاملة إلى مستقبل أفضل. ويوضح أوديتس أيضا مكانة الأمل من خلال الإشارة إلى الحلم الأمريكي ومن تبني الفكر الماركسي لتحويل الحالة الاجتماعية الأمريكية في ذلك الوقت إلى حالة أفضل مما كانت عليه. وأخيرا يحاول الكاتب من خلال استخدامه للحب والموسيقى في المسرحية التخفيف من حدة الظروف الصعبة التي مرت بها طبقة العمال خلال الفترة ما بين الحربين العالميتين الأولى والثانية.

## Abstract

Hope is one of the essential tools by which one can overcome the difficulties of life. As the injustice is among the most significant elements that interested the writers of twentieth century in their writings, so it is necessary to find a solution for this issue in order to save some social classes, such as working class, from oppression and persecution. This study adopts a psychological Marxist approach to analyze Odets's *Awake and Sing*. It aims at showing the desired hope of American people during the Great Depression period in the United States. It searches for the way by which it is possible to turn hope into truth. In fact, if there is no hope, it means that there will be a state of despair which can destroy all societies. In *Awake and Sing!* (1935), Clifford Odets tries to console the working class and to stand by them as well as delivering its voice into the furthest spaces of world. The play guides the American people to identify their identity and to appoint their orientation so as to fulfill their hopes. Odets attempts to shed light on efforts exerted by proletarians for the sake of peaceful life in hopes of not being exploited by capitalists in America specifically in 1930s. Further, he insists on leading the working class to the best future. He shows the status of hope through his hint to the American Dream and through adopting Marxist ideology for changing the American social situation of that time into better one. Finally, the writer attempts, by love and music, to ease the difficult circumstances which were passed through by proletarians between the First and Second World Wars.



## 1-Introduction

The Great Depression represents the essential dilemma in America specifically in 1930s. At that period, American people suffered from the prevalence of familial dissociation, idleness, increasing crimes and the political chaos. These issues led the American society to face a hard economic crisis that resulted in its tearing apart. The society encountered such critical circumstances which made it vulnerable and was at a higher risk due to these conditions. Wherefore, writers saw it is indispensable to spread hope among people with a view to enabling them to have aspiration and to live peacefully (Saleh, 2017: 1).

Clifford Odets (1906-1963) was the *Sturm und Drang*<sup>1</sup> playwright of American theatre of the thirties (Gassner, 1960: 129). At that time, he had been named as a “writer of promise,” that is the standard feature by the American critics for any new playwright whose writing is acceptable and promising (Goldstein, 1965: 133). Wherever despair exists, so there is hope. Hope also lies at the root of the unlimited and effective despairs of modern literature. For that reason, it defines itself not as a thought one is concerned with, or an aim one is ready to die for, but as a matter of a necessary fact of life like metabolism (Bentley, 1964: 352). Snyder, et al. (2001: 115) in an essay titled “Optimism and Hope Constructs: Variants on a Positive Expectancy Theme” see that extreme hope is in accordance with lower degrees of gloom and sorrow and it is positively linked to trouble settlement.

*Time* magazine in 1935 named Odets the White Hope of the American theatre. Odets had carried that title since five of his plays, *Awake and Sing!* is among them, were running at the same time in New York. The American psychologist, Margaret Brenman-Gibson, believes that Hennie’s desertion of her baby signalizes that Odets is constantly expressing hope for a woman who will never betray him because he sensed that his mother had done that before. Therefore, treachery and abandonment became Odets’s permanent misgiving. Brenman-Gibson also suggests that the obsessive aim of *Awake and Sing* is the hope for treating the American materialism and alienation. Odets hoped that he could apply his Marxist theories to his career anticipations in a capitalist culture (Brustein, 1987: 22-27).

*Awake and Sing* is a play that brings out Odets’s sharing of the feelings of working class and it shows his hope of social equity during the Great Depression. In addition, it explains the difference between the realism and idealism among the members of Bergers’ family. Its events revolve around the dreams, hopes, ambitions and fears of each character through their style of living safely. The matriarch Bessie aspires to Bergers’ bright future. Her father, Jacob, adopts a Marxist view of getting rid of capitalism and eventually he commits suicide. Bessie’s son, Ralph, looks forward to forcing his way of life far from his family’s style. Hennie, Bessie’s



daughter, elopes with her lover Moe Axelrod After her failed marriage to Sam Feinschreiber. Myron is Bessie's husband who does not have an active role in the play and he supports materialism. Uncle Morty, Bessie's brother, is a felicitous businessman who never cares of family's affairs. The whole family struggles against the urgent social problems, most importantly the financial issues, in order to survive:

*Ralph: "Sure, five dollars a week for expenses and the rest in the house. I can't save even for shoe laces."*

*Bessie: "You mean we shouldn't have food in the house, but you'll make a jig on the street corner?"*

*Ralph: "I mean something."*

.....  
*Ralph: "I don't know. . . . Every other day to sit around with the blues and mud in your mouth." (1.1.227)*

.....  
*Jacob: ". . . In a house like this he don't realize even the possibilities of life. Economics comes down like a ton of coal on the head." <sup>2</sup> (2.1.250)*

As a matter of fact, this play elucidates the situation of civic proletarians at the time of Depression, especially in America.

## **2. The Poetics of Hope in Clifford Odets's *Awake and Sing!***

The poetics is considered a prime point in the background of all literary works. Its importance lies in being presented as the eventual judgement of tragic drama. It focuses on what is initial significance such as the necessary fulfillment of the aims of tragedy rather than the construction of its history. It attempts to explore what is good in the literary work by intellectual ways (Tilak, 2010: 22-24). Snyder, et al. define hope as "a positive motivational state that is based on an interactively derived sense of successful (a) agency (goal-directed energy) and (b) pathways (planning to meet goals)" (Cited in Chang, 2001: 102). Gerald Weales (1985: 14-15) sees that Odets insists on not making the legend die by regarding him as the White Hope of the theatre of United States. And by his own self-confidence he could persuade some critics that the hope had changed to reality. Weales also adds that Odets, through an interview, said that "the white hope of the drama at the age of 26 and a bum when he is 35". Harold Clurman, an American drama critic, once described this play accurately by saying: "There was in it a fervor that derived from the hope and expectation of change and the desire for it ..." (Cited in Bigsby, 1982: 173). He also refers to Odets's great aspiration when he wrote: "He wanted to be the great revolutionary playwright of our day and the white-haired boy of Broadway..." (Cited in Brustein, 1987: 26). In this play, Odets expresses that his greatest hope, as for the character of Sam Feinschreiber in *Awake and Sing!*, is to find a home to live in, a community to work in and in which he should be treated respectfully:



*"No more free speech in America? I'm a lonely person. Nobody likes me"*  
(3.1.269).

Through writing this play, Odets tried his best to preserve his identity and achieve his ambition of being an important playwright (Weales, 1985: 29-32). To reject the truth of the American dream in Odets' *Awake and Sing* means to condemn the Berger's family members to constant loss (Bigsby, 1982: 167). Bessie's hope is corresponded with the capitalist values and with American dream when she wished Ralph to be successful like Morty (Weales, 1985: 69):

*Bessie: "Ralph should only be a success like you, Morty. I should only live to see the day when he rides up to the door in a big car with a chauffeur and a radio. I could die happy, believe me."*(2.1.246)

Brenman-Gibson thinks that the American people's learning of who they are and where they are going is the fact to which Odets aspires through this play (Brustein, 1987: 24). Moe and Hennie's hope is to escape with each other. In fact, Odets gives a good example of failed-paradise image which indicates the failure of that hope. The likelihood of the achieved dream which leads to a failed paradise always exists in the modern life (Weales, 1985: 71). Although the middle-class family is hit by Depression in this play, but hope still appears in some of its members, Ralph is one of them. He wants to change the world and hopefully tried to do that. In spite of his argument with Bessie, Ralph tries his best to refute his mother's material view to the world when she is determined that without money no one can do anything. So he does not want people's life to be painted on dollar bills: *"We don't want life printed on dollar bills, Mom!"* (3.1.270).

For Odets, the abolition of family does not insure paradise though his adoption of Marxist norms which support such idea. Hope can confront Depression in the play. Moe dreams of orange orchards, Myron dreams of obtaining the Irish Sweepstakes, and Ralph dreams of mail planes (Cohn and Dukore, 1966: 222). Although Ralph claims that he wasn't so happy in all his life; however, he relates his happiness and his ability of singing to his reunion with Blanche: *"Life with my girl. Boy, I could sing when I think about it! Her and me together—that's a new life!"* (1.1.231). In addition, the title of the play suggests the sense of hope of Ralph's new birth, who himself announced it, after Jacob's death and sacrifice: *"I saw he was dead and I was born!"* (3.1.274). Jacob dies for the sake of his grandson who hopefully may lead a life that is not printed on dollar bills: *Jacob: "Boychick, wake up! Be something! Make your life something good. For the love of an old man who sees in your young days his new life, for such love take the world in your two hands and make it like new. Go out and fight so life shouldn't be printed on dollar bills."* (1.1.232)



Jacob's listening, when he is upset and depressed, to records of Caruso singing "*O Paradiso*" sheds light on expressing the hope of "*a big explorer comes on a new land*" (1.1.234). Odets, by Paradise, means America which is dominated by greed and which it should be saved (Bigsby, 1982: 171). Jacob's hope, too, is to hand over the leadership to young generations since they have energy as long as their minds are free (Goldstein, 1965: 146). Because Ralph rejected Jacob's material legacy which is the dollar bills of an insurance policy and accepted the legacy of his books, so he may fulfill the hope of waking up and singing.

Optimism and ambition are found in Odets' *Awake and Sing* under the umbrella of hope. This fact exists in Bessie's love of life. She likes to laugh, she has a great finesse and she takes pleasure in life from day to day. Myron's ambition is to be a leader and to make a huge amount of wealth. He has never been seen miserable and depressed in the play though his yearning to the past. Furthermore, Hennie inherits her mother's sense of optimism. Ralph, in turn, aspires to learn and he is attempting to know why a lot of filth should be removed away before it can "*get to first base*" (1.1.226). Ambition, too, plays an important role with Jacob who tries his best to explore the appropriate road for himself and for other people around him. His optimistic view lies in his real and ideal sense of life but he couldn't turn it to action. Moe expressed the great hope for marrying Hennie while Sam desiderated to find a home by which he can obtain his belonging (Cohn and Dukore, 1966: 224-25). Further, because of Odets's ambition is of a higher status and irresistible nature, it is impossible to believe that he will take the truth and let the allegory leave. All the split in his works and the gap between aims and achievement are the outcome of that ambition (Gassner, 1954: 310). Odets once mentioned that by writing any play, including *Awake and Sing!*, he hopes to explain himself to himself. He wished to depict his great aspiration that working together for the unique goal in Depression times can make America a real safe refuge for all people in the world (Chinoy, 2013: 161-64).

The music of Caruso records to which Jacob is listening alludes to Odets's hope of replacing the world of Depression with better one of Communism. In his dreams of change which didn't come true, Odets discovered the raw material for American theatre (Balakian, 1998: 173-75). In spite of depression which dominates the play but Jacob still has the hope that Ralph can change the deviated world for better one: "*Boys like you could fix it some day*" (1.1.229).

As a matter of fact, Odets connected hope with time in the play when Morty assures Bessie that the conditions of financial crisis in Berger's family will change through it: "*Times'll change*" (2.1.242). It shows Morty's optimistic prospect of turning the social situation into the better one. Odets implies the impact of the First World War on his play through



Jacob's talk to Ralph: "*The memories of the last world slaughter are still vivid in our minds*" (2.2.254). Jacob still considers Ralph his hope of changing the world and expects him the future goodness and happiness. He urges Ralph to invest his youth to achieve his aim and to fulfill whatever on his mind. He warns Ralph from losing the opportunity of his youth to reach his goal:

*Jacob: "You're a young boy and for you life is all in front like a big mountain. You got feet to climb.*

*So you'll find out. Never a young man had such opportunity like today. He could make history.*

.....  
*Jacob: Do! Do what is in your heart and you carry in yourself a revolution. But you should act."* (2.2.255-56)

As Berger's family belongs to the working class, so it could be attacked easily (Bigsby, 1982: 167). Depending on that fact, Odets uses the image of meditation to express the situation of depression and worry for the proletarians in the United States at the time of the play is being written. Bessie looks at the picture calendar and contemplates on its beauty as a sense of depression and tiredness. She hopes to live in the land that is similar to the one on the picture in which there is no work and worries: "*It's a beautiful picture. In this land, nobody works .... Nobody worries.*" (3.1.269). Odets criticizes the capitalist thought that dominated America through Bessie's speech: "*but here without a dollar you don't look the world in the eye. This is life in America.*" (3.1.269). Through Bessie, Odets shows how the soul is spoiled by the materialistic and success-worshipping world. But in Ralph he sees the hope of amending that corrupted soul.

Odets is an allegorical playwright in his writings. The allegorical way of using hope was a necessary tool for a writer who searches for significant narration, outlets for the outburst of his characters, and a method for his poetic eruption. It was not a problematic issue for a professional playwright, such as Odets, to produce hopeful drama of social issues. By hope Odets detected identification with people and he liberated himself from alienation which encountered the despair in life. This hope, either true or deceptive, has been a vent for the optimism that has been in him (Gassner, 1954: 304-5). Art is thoroughly a challenge to despair. One cannot deny the fact that despair can get down and real hope can be explored only by real despair. If there is no hope in Paradise in which we would dwell for good, so there will not be a less valuable hope that we cannot live without it nowadays (Bentley, 1964: 352-353). Nietzsche once said: "what does not slay me makes me stronger" (Cited in Bentley, 1964: 353).

Berger's hope is to escape the reality of their bad condition through marriage, through chance, through a cynical humour, through self-





deception, through suicide in spite of the latter is formed to free the coming generation, Ralph. Odets' hope is to change the situation that only the gambler and the cynic, such as Morty, who can live in American society at that time. Consequently, he avoids accusing the capitalism directly but he desires to affirm the necessity of a morally amended world and the need for the individual to become awake to a washout that is as much private as public. The repudiated hopes, lost chances, disappointing schemas are all presented in the play. Odets wishes American society to get rid of urban pressures, such as the deconstruction of individual space and the familial dissociation, which destroyed the personal relationships and moral values (Bigsby, 1982: 167-68). John Gassner (1954: 687-91) believes that Odets was concerned with the conflict between capitalism and middle class in addition to the neglect of the common worker. Odets devoted himself to radical ideology that is produced by Marxist dialectics and he reflected it in his writings. His diagnostic philosophy depended on two norms: the awakening of the middle class and the rising revolt of the proletariat. *Awake and Sing* has expressed the hope for awareness from the middle class materialistic principles of success. It shows how the pursuit of well-being twisted the soul of human beings. Furthermore, this play uncovers that awareness via a depressed family. The mother has become ruthless because of her struggle against poorness. She obliges her daughter into a loveless marriage and suppresses her son's romance with a poor orphan because his marriage would obstruct his support for the family's income. Her intense anger leads her sensitive father to commit suicide when she breaks his favorite Caruso records. But hope still drives the son, who abandoned the girl and has been influenced by his grandfather's lamentable death, to "*struggle for existence*" (2.1.252). Without that hope, Ralph would have been nothing.

There are hints that hope in *Awake and Sing* enabled Odets to confirm the prerogatives of people against the tradition and puritanical morality. The straightness of romantic relationships and the freedom to create them is one of Odets's greatest hopes in this play. With Uncle Morty, it sounds as if Odets had abandoned hopes for a typical environment and he is prepared to consent humanity on its own minor status (Gassner, 1960: 154-55). Malcolm Goldstein (1965: 134-39) in an essay entitled "Clifford Odets and the found Generation" points out that Odets's main problem was how to create acceptable central points of his redundant hopes. In addition, Odets was unable to liberate himself from materialist subjects from which he started his career. His hope discovered itself in appropriate place and time in America of thirties. He was tied by the concept of social drama. He was scarcely attracted by a play unless it is a scream against poverty, fascism or fundamentalism. By this attraction he knew what he hopes to achieve for himself and largely for the public. *Awake and Sing* consists of



hope, enthusiasm, self-righteousness and it is class-conscious and revolutionary-ending play. It demonstrates the powerful struggle between contrary classes and it suggests the force of Odets's hope at its best. It expresses the perplexing situation of financial crisis of American middle class society. Ralph's speech "*May be we'll fix it so life won't be printed on dollar bills*" (3.1.271) presents the announcement of self-discovery in which he believes himself as a hope for a better world.

Odets was considered the Voice of Protest in the thirties. In *Awake and Sing*, he skillfully used the imaginative aspect of dialect that refers to the playwright's internal identification with individuals who use that dialect. Because of that, Odets was named a poet and of the theatre with one poetic style; that is the poetry of theatre (Bentley, 1984: 210). Odets believes that the lofty hopes could be delivered by the poetic sense. Maxwell Anderson once said: "It is incumbent on the dramatist to be a poet, and incumbent on the poet to be a prophet, dreamer... What we become depends on what we dream and desire" (Cited in Balakian, 1998: 180). As Bessie represents the American people who are overwhelmed with hopelessness, Jacob and Ralph symbolize the ambitious ones because they stand for the spiritual hope despite depression struck the family.

Harold Clurman described Odets as a poet who belongs to a vulnerable middle-class with revolting eagerness. On this ground, Odets hopes to be far from the tricky values and to understand that the individual capacity of typical life emerges from the tension between that eagerness and his class's ideals. He sympathizes with the poorness of his characters and he expresses hope for their living with dignity (Dukore, 1984: 103-104). Having compared to hope, love represents one of the main pillars in the play as it expresses the continuity of life which may contain depression. Love gives a ray of hope after every crisis. It is remarkable in this play because it is considered a part of wholeness of life. This important pillar in spite of its failure in this play as for Hennie and Sam, but it is embedded between Ralph and Blanche as well as between Moe and Hennie. In addition, Bessie's love for life and her family presages the main part of hope as it refers to something good is coming. Myron has a role of taking everything as easy as possible and he tries to soften the hardship of depression in the Berger family. He tells Ralph that "*That's how it is—life is like that—a cake-walk*" (1.1.227). Jacob's love for work gives hope for everybody to fulfill his/her aim in life: "*if it rained pearls—who would work?*" (1.1.228), "*It don't hurt . . . extra work for men*" (2.2.254). Odets himself also owns that sense of love for his country and middle class people which results in the hope of their change for the better situation: "*I think the whole world's changing. I see it, right under our very eyes.*" (2.2.262).

Odets considers that all his characters strive for the sake of life during trivial situations. The character of Jacob reflects Odets's ambition



for nullifying families which are similar to Bergers' family. That is because Jacob thinks, as for Marx, that Bergers' family has connected people's relations only to financial aspects. Jacob also hopes to help the young generation by committing suicide. He desires to support Ralph's abandoning the family, to enjoy Jacob's inheritance, and to start a decorous life. Hennie's escape with Moe expresses hope for a chance of obtaining delight and to refuse this type of family. Ralph insists on achieving hope that is sarcastically suggested by his mother: "*go out and change the world if you don't like it*" (3.1.270) (Dukore, 1984: 115-19). Odets indicates that Ralph has lower levels of depression and higher degrees of hope as he could think positively. On the contrary, Odets presents Sam as a character who has higher degrees of desolation. Over and above, Jacob has a cognitive hope that aims at achieving the goal of liberating America from materialism.

Bessie hopes to make Moe's dwelling legally valid among her family by facilitating the marriage between Hennie and him. Myron prioritizes to dream of the past than to live in the present (Krasner, 2006: 5). Myron also reflects the hope of the second generation which struggles for its dignity as well as its wish to sacrifice for the sake of observing the third descent emanates from the proletariat to bourgeois. Bessie, as opposed to Myron, also represents Jews who contend in the hopes of being Americans but they failed. She is dominated by her desire for honor. Ralph's insistence on staying among his family without eloping indicates his desire to create alteration to the family's better future (Ibid, 11-15). It is wrong to depend only on hope, rather than judgement in a correct way, so as to make life meaningful because this idea contains false explanations of human existence and experience (Spinoza, 2020: 29). Therefore, Jacob was not right when he made Ralph the only hope of changing family's situation. People have to fear so much what they most hope for, because this hope may hurt them (Arendt, 2020: 90). Odets wrote this play in order to express the great hope for shaping the world in his own style of understanding what is the reality of life of his times and all times. His hope was created as a consequence of the strict inner separation, continual financial crisis, the gloomy fascism and world war which devastated the dreams at the start of Depression era. He wrote *Awake and Sing* showing the true and purposeful American life (Chinoy, 2013: 153-59).

Eventually, one can say that *Awake and Sing* leads one to believe that Odets's humanism is strictly linked to the conception that the human spirit is susceptible to damage in the realm of American materialism. However, it still has the hope of being recovered sooner or later. Odets also hoped to build a great structure on which illusion and reality could coexist.



## Conclusion

It is worth noting that some people sacrifice their life for circulating hope and optimism among their society and the generations that follow them. Although the hard times by which the American proletarians passed in the thirties, but the hope for bright tomorrow is still ubiquitous. It is truism that achieving dreams may take long time but they have to come true some day. In *Awake and Sing!*, fulfilling any hope doesn't depend thoroughly on money but it could be achieved by knowledge and learning as well. Odets could instill great expectations in the American society in general and in the working class particularly. That is obvious through supporting the Marxist thought which is seen, by the writer, as one of the outlets of implementing the social justice and erasing the unfairness from the proletarians. He carried the ambition of inventing a new world. He attempts to construct a new society and a new humanity that has the moral, spiritual and economic meaning. He wishes to emerge before our eyes the profiteers and the exploited in American society at the time between the two World Wars.

To conclude, Odets derived that hope from the most difficult financial and economic circumstances of the working class during the Great Depression epoch and the hegemony of the capitalists after the First World War. He emphasized the continuity of work for the sake of achieving an aim because it occasionally comes true in the end of that work.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> German literary movement of the late eighteenth century that glorified nature, sense and human individualism that searched for destroying the Rationalism sect. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Clifford-Odets>. Accessed: 12/12/2021.

<sup>2</sup>All quotations of the text are taken from Clifford Odets's play *Awake and Sing!*, in *Twentieth Century Drama: England, Ireland, the United States*. Introduced by Ruby Cohn and Bernard Dukore. New York: Random House, 1966. Further references will be to act, scene, and page number.



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