SOCIAL PROBLEMS IN AMERICAN DRAMA

FROM 1930 TO 1940

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CONTENTS

Chapter I. INTRODUCTION ........................................... 1
II. THE ECONOMIC PROBLEMS OF THE THIRTIES ............ 20
III. MARRIAGE AND FAMILY PROBLEMS ........................ 43
IV. OTHER SOCIAL PROBLEMS .................................. 61
V. CONCLUSION .................................................. 86
BIBLIOGRAPHY ................................................... 96
CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

The decade between 1930 and 1940 is unique in many respects. First of all, it is a brief period lying between two great catastrophes, the economic collapse subsequent to October 30, 1929, and the formal declarations which commenced the second world war in Europe. It brought into the spotlight many problems inherited from World War I and the preceding years. Many of these problems had lain dormant during the twenties or had been rendered comparatively inconspicuous by the dazzling prosperity of the postwar decade and by the predominant mood of optimism. The beginning of World War II in 1939 makes a decisive line of demarcation which separates the troublesome thirties from the following decade. The sudden and cataclysmic nature of a worldwide conflict tends to throw many of the characteristics and phenomena of the period preceding the conflict into bold relief and to accentuate their unique features. The great interest in social reform, which characterized the thirties, might have extended into the forties if the opening of the war and the inevitable participation of the United States had not changed the course of events. The fact that the decade from 1930 to 1940 is an easily delineated period makes it relatively simple to examine the drama of the American theater during those years, and to trace the greater
preoccupation of the nation at large with the social problems of the period through the manifestations of this interest in the works of one literary form, namely the plays written by American playwrights and produced on American stages during the period from January 1, 1930, through December 31, 1939.

The nineteen twenties had been by no means devoid of social progress or of concern with the problems which beset the world. Many of these problems had been aggravated and even produced by the first world war.

From the standpoint of foreign policy, the decade had opened with the flickering and gradual extinction of the bright flame of Wilsonian idealism with its emphasis upon an international outlook for the United States. The participation of this country in the war had been proof that the problems of Europe, of Asia, or of Africa, were likely to become those of the American people. There was a popular indorsement of full participation in international affairs urged by Wilson, and then a retreat from this position to a policy of isolation during the whole of the twenties. This retreat was evidenced by sharp declines in our armed forces and in the final rejection of the proposal to join the League of Nations. During this period of official aloofness from the problems of other nations between 1920 and 1928, the United States entered upon a period of general national complacency. The sharp contrast between this land of plenty and the war-devastated countries across the seas encouraged a tendency to extol the
virtues of American institutions and to condemn foreign conditions and alien institutions.

However, if the attention of the United States was engaged very largely in the contemplation of its own scene within its own national frontiers, there was certainly enough on the domestic horizon to retain the attention of the most conscientious of its citizenry. The twenties were the period of such developments as the legalization of woman suffrage, an increase in organized crime, the experiment in prohibition with its attendant problems of racketeering and bootlegging, the increased use of automobiles, the revelations of widespread corruption and graft in high public office,¹ a sharp rise in labor troubles,² the increase in divorces coupled with a decline of the birth rate, the decline in importance and authority of the family as a social unit, violent and widespread outbreaks of racial hatreds, the eclipse of organized religion as a potent social force, and a tremendous increase in educational opportunities.

Although the prevailing wish of the American people was to guard against the importation of foreign dogmas and alien philosophies, both communism and fascism left their influence on large elements of the population of the United States. Among certain groups there was a tremendous interest in the


²Paul W. Paustian and J. John Oppenheimer, Problems of Modern Society, pp. 27-49.
Marxist program of the communists, even in the face of a disapproving public. There were throughout the whole decade all the manifestations of a "red" panic. Any departure from conventional thought was likely to be condemned as fresh evidence of the infiltration of foreign radicalism on American soil. Although there was growth in numbers and activity of the American left-wing groups throughout the twenties, it was considered as a menace to American security and ideals by the great mass of the American people. 3 Perhaps the most striking evidence of the division of opinions and emotions concerning leftist thought was the tempest caused by the Sacco-Vanzetti case, which held the attention of the American people from 1920 until 1927, when the principals were executed.

Another major characteristic of the nineteen twenties was the protest of American youth against the taboos and the standards of the prewar period. The dominant concern of youth has always been security, but in the period following the first world war, when so many of the old inhibitions had been swept away, the clamor on all sides was from "... youth ... for security to develop a future, for homes and families, for living opportunities and pay, for the right to do creative work." 4 The increasing numbers of women who entered the professions and the trades emphasized both the partial liberation of the feminine sex from the traditional tasks of

3Slosson, op. cit., p. 87.

4Howard W. Odum and others, American Democracy Anew, p. 154.
child-bearing and rearing and home management, and the competition which they furnished to young men in the quest for jobs and a place within the economic order. The great advances in technological improvements had promoted the cause of the machine and had decreased the demand for the human worker. These factors, increasing leisure time and limiting opportunities for employment, exercised an adverse influence upon youth.

The emphasis upon individualism, which followed the rejection of Wilsonian idealism, was a major characteristic of the twenties. The increasing knowledge and acceptance of psychology, and particularly the implications of Freudian psychoanalysis, helped to sustain the emphasis of the period on self. This trend brought with it a questioning attitude toward the prewar concepts of morality, the prevalent attitudes toward sex, and the desirable goals of life. Their debunking attitude and indifference to the old group values led to the widespread use of the term, "the lost generation," to characterize the youth of the twenties. The materialistic emphasis of the twenties was not conducive to the rise of a major intellectual movement of social protest. Mammon reigned supreme, because his subjects were sure "that the problems of life could all be solved by the acquisition of enough money." The age was not without its protesting voices, but because

5Harvey Wish, Contemporary America, pp. 332-333.
6Leo Gurko, The Angry Decade, p. 4.
they were so completely in the minority, their influence was of little consequence.

H. L. Mencken fostered the notion that life in America was stupid, Sinclair Lewis that Life was drab, Ernest Hemingway that life was empty. The cultural campaigns of the age warred against the "booboisie," against the Philistinism of Gopher Prairie, and sought new sensations in French bistros and Spanish bull rings. But the rebels and protesters, though they commanded a wide audience remained in the minority.7

But the problems which confronted the United States after October, 1929, made those of the twenties seem trifling in contrast. The great economic depression was on a scale so vast and of a nature so complex that there was no ready remedy for the ills which beset the country in rapid succession. By 1931, an unofficial estimate placed the number of unemployed in the country at over six million persons.8 Between 1929 and 1933, American exports declined from $5,200,000,000 to $1,647,000,000.9 Farmers found themselves in dire straits as prices of agricultural products declined almost to the vanishing point. Evictions of tenants and foreclosures on former owners were both daily occurrences all over the country. Bank failures and closings doubled in 1930 and tripled the next year. In 1931, $1,690,669,000 was lost to depositors.10

Marriages during the depression were comparatively few and were often long deferred. Jobs were scarce, and many

7Ibid. 8Wish, op. cit., p. 416.
9Ibid., p. 422. 10Ibid., p. 425.
young people feared to venture into matrimony with so little security. The birth rate declined in the early thirties and rose only slightly toward the end of the decade. The divorce rate declined after 1929, and then rose rapidly after 1932 to exceed the previous records of the twenties. These phenomena suggest a decided trend away from the home and family life.

The increasing scarcity of jobs and the resulting competition fanned into flames of discord the old embers of racial and religious hatreds. Anti-Semitic and anti-Negro feeling was at a new high. Immigration declined while emigration actually increased for the first time in the history of the United States. To many, America was no longer the land of opportunity.

Labor unions were greatly weakened during the first phases of the depression. Labor leaders generally recognized the futility of conducting strikes under such adverse conditions as the depression years presented. As factories and shops laid off a sizeable portion of their employees, the labor organizations waned in power. This eclipse was halted only by the favorable and even protective attitude toward labor and labor organizations of the New Deal administration.

As the depression wore on and want increased, there arose a clamor of protest against the greediness of the capitalists, to whom was attributed much of the responsibility for the economic collapse. Many people were influenced by the tenets of leftist thought to regard the depression as the
inevitable breakdown to which a corrupt and even immoral capitalist system had brought this country. These pointed to the virtues of Russian communism and urged that the United States must adopt Marxist principles in preference to the old laissez-faire doctrines, which they believed had caused the depression. But, in general, the protest against Wall Street arose from the mass of citizens who wished to remedy the causes for our economic ills by means short of communistic methods. After 1929, it was revealed on every hand that many bankers and investors had indulged in unscrupulous practices to reap greater profits.

On the other hand, the same conditions led to a wide reception in this country of fascist thought. The competition for the scarce supply of jobs and the drop in industrial production led to bitter racial conflicts, particularly in the South and in the industrial centers. There was a segment of the population who admired the philosophy of the European fascists, and by the middle of the decade, there were large and actively growing groups, such as the German-American Bund, who were reciting the favorite theories and doctrines of Hitler and Mussolini, usually with very slight attempts to disguise their origins.

Coupled with the chaotic drop in farm prices and in the aftermath of farm evictions and foreclosures, came the disastrous "dust bowl" storms which devastated the farms of the Middle West in the early years of the decade. Driven from
their farm homes by this tragic sequel to economic devastation, the former residents were reduced to wandering along the highways of the nation in old jalopies and to seeking such bits of work as might be available to migrants on farms and in orchards in more fortunate sections of the country. The plight of these people was depicted by John Steinbeck in his documentary novel, *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939).

Even in the sections of the Middle West and of the South which were outside the "dust bowl," owners of farms were rapidly adopting machine methods of farming in an effort to cut the overhead. Thus thousands of tenants were evicted from the big plantations and farms to make way for the tractor and other farm machines, and to swell the ranks of the jobless and the homeless along the highways and in the cities of America.

This is a picture of the United States during the early part of the decade. At first, it was predicted optimistically that the depression would be of short duration. But soon the nation had become aware that the halcyon days of the twenties belonged to an era that had ended. After the first shocks of the catastrophe had worn off, the mind of the nation became centered on the social aspect of the calamity which had befallen the richest and the most vigorous nation in the world. Where the emphasis of the preceding decade had been on the individual, it was now on the social aspects of life. The old values were shattered in the wreckage which attended
the depression. The intelligentsia of the twenties "... with its hyper-aestheticism, its affectation of sophisticated but decadent principles, and its hedonism, surrendered to a new elite of 'class-conscious' intellectuals whose god was far more likely to be Marx than Freud."\textsuperscript{11} Alfred Kazin has pointed up the change in American thinking which was produced by the impact of the depression.

Life seemed at once so different in tone, in the very consciousness that sustained it, that all conventional values were suddenly uprooted and many of them seemed cheap. Society was no longer a comfortable abstraction, but a series of afflictions; the crazy rhythms of dissolution gave one the sense that people, like their most cherished illusions, were submitting without direction, submitting in a collective stupor of the will.\textsuperscript{12}

Indeed the predominant mood was a sense of the collective nature of such a disaster. In retrospect, the United States Department of Labor describes the general effects of the depression as "... an attendant loss of money income to all classes of society, and a reduction in human living standards so calamitous as to threaten the foundations of our democratic way of life."\textsuperscript{13}

The increasing tendency was to demand a closer scrutiny of our social and economic life in order to discover wherein lay the sources of the ills which beset society on all sides during the whole of the decade. The individual seemed to be

\textsuperscript{11}Ibid., p. 522.


helpless in the face of such tremendous odds as were presented by the economic breakdown. The quest for security was uppermost in men's minds. To survive the tragic days of the period and to maintain a degree of security when it was achieved, the momentous problems of social organization, unemployment, labor protection, crime, and greater opportunities for youth had to be approached from a positive point of view. The prevailing interest in social problems which characterized the early days of the decade ushered in the New Deal and lasted until the coming of the second world war. The administration of President Franklin D. Roosevelt was ushered into office during some of the most dismal days of the depression. Although conditions did not improve radically until the latter part of the decade, the whole country was cheered and encouraged by the aggressive attitude which the new administration adopted toward the urgent economic and social problems. Immediately, Roosevelt moved to strengthen the banks, to create work, to raise farm prices and income, to protect home owners against foreclosure, to improve living conditions and housing, to provide social security benefits, to curb the large utility corporations, and to aid both farm tenants and owners. Thus, in the aftermath of the depression, came a decade devoted almost entirely to social reform and characterized by the most intelligent and sincere interest in the causes and cures for social ills. Toward the latter part of the decade, as the shadows of World War II lengthened over
this country, there was a partial shift in interest from purely domestic problems to political, international, and ideological issues, although the Roosevelt administration continued to emphasize social reform until the attack on Pearl Harbor.

The effects of the preoccupation of the nation with these issues is reflected in the important literature of the decade. Abundant examples testify to the influence exerted on American writers by the social problems which were multitudinous and urgent all through the thirties. Kazin says in this connection:

One now saw enacted against a portentous setting - the crisis of a traditional order - the drama of a literary revolution that would, for once, work simultaneously toward a social revolution: a new generation armed with fresh purpose, fresh thoughts, ready to sweep away the follies and tinsel glamor of the twenties and to fulfill the perennial promise of the American commonwealth. . . . The obsession with society was much more than an influence; it often became the content of the new literature.14

The fiction of the period was particularly indicative of the "social consciousness" of the new literary era. Such novelists as John Dos Passos, James T. Farrell, Richard Wright, Meyer Levin, William Faulkner, Erskine Caldwell, John Steinbeck, and Ernest Hemingway found much to criticize on the national scene during the thirties. Dos Passos pointed up the struggle of the laboring classes in his famous trilogy, U. S. A. (1937). Farrell wrote an indictment of a society

which could allow the social degeneration of the Chicago slums such as he portrayed in *Studs Lonigan* (1935), also a trilogy. Richard Wright painted a vivid picture of degradation and squalor in Chicago's Negro section in *Native Son* (1940). Faulkner and Caldwell both pictured the degeneracy and decay of rural life in the South. John Steinbeck's bestseller, *The Grapes of Wrath*, was a sociological study of the "dust bowl" victims who were forced to roam the highways of the country looking for work and a home among the homeless. Representative novelists of the twenties, such as Ernest Hemingway and Sinclair Lewis, forsook their old themes of introspective morbidity and of satire to write novels more in keeping with the dominant social note of the new decade. In *To Have and Have Not* (1937), Hemingway expressed his conversion to the new social consciousness. Both his *For Whom the Bell Tolls* (1940) and Lewis' *It Can't Happen Here* (1935) expressed alarm over the threat of fascism to democracy.

The poetry of the nineteen thirties also manifested to a smaller degree the concern with the social problems of the day. Archibald MacLeish described the tragedy of evicted farmers and unemployed factory workers in *Land of the Free*. Carl Sandburg demanded social reform in *The People, Yes*. Edna St. Vincent Millay, although she still wrote the fragile verse of desire and of nature for which she became so famous during the previous decade, exhibited her skill and sincerity in condemning social injustice in *Wine From These Grapes*. 
In the early part of the decade there was a small group of poets who took their inspiration from Marx and Lenin. In 1933, poems by Herman Spector, Joseph Kalar, Edwin Rolfe, and S. Fumaroff appeared in a small anthology, We Gather Strength. A descendant of this school was Kenneth Fearing, who achieved wide success with his Poems (1935), Dead Reckoning (1938), and the Collected Poems of Kenneth Fearing (1940). Fearing's poems, while stemming from the main stream of the communistic literary movement, were formed of his own parodies of New York journalism, from which he derived many of the targets for his biting criticism. But, with these notable exceptions, the poetry of the nineteen thirties ran well behind American fiction and drama in both the quality and the fervor of its social consciousness. The latter deficiency is perhaps due to the fact that the investigation, exposure, and cures of the serious social questions of the day found a greater facility of expression in the novels and on the stages of the times. J. Donald Adams has explained the situation of the poets as an inability to lift up the spirit of man because "ours is a generation surfeited with facts and starved for vision; overwhelmed by doubts and grasping for certainties."15 The curious dilemma in which American poetry of the thirties found itself was the result of the retreat from the great poetic renaissance of the twenties into a period of doubt, individual frustration, and the cerebral

15 J. Donald Adams, The Shape of Books to Come, p. 155.
approach. The poetic spotlight was still held by the older generation of poets: Millay, Robinson, Frost, Sandburg, and Jeffers.

Thus, all forms of literature evidenced the tendency of American writers toward concern with the great social problems of the age. Many writers, particularly novelists, were frank in their endorsement of the communistic doctrines. Such writers as James M. Cain, Jerome Weidman, Erskine Caldwell, and James T. Farrell, were producing a new type of proletarian literature which had a strong communist bent until the Nazi-Soviet pact of 1939. Between 1930 and 1939, there was a strong movement of American writers into the communist ranks, but, as Alfred Kazin has pointed out, this is often not so much evidence of a real conversion to communist doctrines as of a desire to become affiliated with a group which seemed to offer "a new and warmer sensibility."16

Like the other literary forms of the thirties, the American drama was strongly influenced by the urgent social upheavals of the period and by the concern with which its creators viewed these upheavals. An index to the changing tastes of theater-goers in the thirties may be gained from the sharp contrast between the play which held the record for longevity in the twenties, Anne Nichol's Abie's Irish Rose (1927), and the play with a seven-year run on Broadway in the thirties, Erskine Caldwell's Tobacco Road. Abie's

16Kazin, op. cit., p. 376.
Irish Rose is a farce which derived most of its naive charm from such obvious and simple devices as frequent use of Jewish dialect, the wide divergence between Irish Roman Catholics and the orthodox Jews, and the confusions which result from the mild deception which Abie and Rose must practice in order to reconcile their respective fathers to their marriage. Tobacco Road, dramatized by Jack Kirkland from Erskine Caldwell's novel, portrayed the degenerate existence of shiftless Georgia "crackers" who have not even the initiative to till the tiny plot of land about their shack. The tragedy resulting from malnutrition, illiteracy, the displacement of former tenant farmers, and the resulting inability of the whole Lester family to adjust themselves to the new economic order, is far removed from the humor of Abie's Irish Rose.

The dramatist, like the novelist and the poet, has usually been sensitive to the problems of his contemporaries. One requisite of the literary artist must be of necessity some degree of sympathy for others. But, this concern with the problems of the social order about him has varied in degree with the various dramatists and with the playwrights of various periods and of various countries. This social sense which was manifested in the American theater between 1930 and 1940 has not been exceeded by that of the playwrights of another country or of another period in this country. Edmond M. Gagey has well described the absorption of the playwrights of the thirties with the more important social issues of the times:
The majority of American dramatists, however, were hard-bitten, literal-minded individualists who preferred to examine the contemporary scene with accurate and often jaundiced eyes. In their plays they might merely report what they saw, or thumb their noses from the sidelines at the picture of human imbecility, or take sides in the clash of contemporary issues.\textsuperscript{17}

If the ante-bellum American theater of 1916 rarely was concerned with greater problems than those of \textit{Pollyanna}, by Catherine Chisholm Cushing, or of \textit{Daddy Long-Legs}, by Jean Webster, its successor in the twenties, if one may judge by such plays as \textit{Abie's Irish Rose} or Kaufman's and Connelly's \textit{Dulcy}, was scarcely more productive of crusading drama. But the shocks of the depression and the shadows of the second world war led the theater away from the popular melodramas of the twenties toward plays of social significance. During this ten year span, Burns Mantle has reviewed one hundred and sixty-five plays of social significance in his \textit{Best Plays} series.\textsuperscript{18} While some of these plays are not timeless from the standpoint either of literary merit or of theme, it is important to note that they far outnumbered other types of plays during the decade. Using the stage for the discussion of problems with which a troubled nation had to contend during the whole of the decade, the writers of social plays always displayed an earnestness and a sympathy for the downtrodden which tends to set the drama of this period far apart from

\textsuperscript{17}Edmond M. Gagey, \textit{Revolution in American Drama}, p. 120.
\textsuperscript{18}Burns Mantle, editor, \textit{The Best Plays of 1929/30-1940/41}, and \textit{The Yearbook of the Drama}. 
that of any preceding period. Sometimes it is difficult to ascertain where concern for the social maladjustments of the period left off and where the communist party line began.

This critical difficulty is particularly inherent in the plays of such writers as John Howard Lawson, Clifford Odets, Irwin Shaw, and Elmer Rice. But no exception is made by reason of political leanings; if a play has made an effort to delve into some social theme, it is of interest in this study. For, regardless of the exact type, whether problem play, thesis play, propaganda play, play of social significance, or revolutionary drama, a play dealing with any of the various social problems of the nation between 1930 and 1940 has a rightful place within this framework.

My purpose in this work is to examine the major social problems with which the playwrights of the decade between 1930 and 1940 have dealt. The principal subjects which are reflected in these social dramas seem to be the relation of the individual to the economic system, marriage and family problems, racial relations, crime and juvenile delinquency, and the defense of American democracy. Accordingly, I have examined these problems and the dramas which dealt with them at some length in order to trace the rise of the sociological stream in American drama of the period. As a frame of reference, I have found it convenient and highly satisfactory to discuss the plays reviewed by Burns Mantle in his annual *Best Plays* series. This procedure has enabled me to see each
theater season as a correlated whole and from this vantage point to exercise a more judicious critical attitude toward the investigation of my subject. In a few notable examples, such as the "agit-prop" plays which were not produced by the regular commercial theaters, it has been necessary for me to go outside of Mantle's selection of dramas for the plays which I have discussed in the body of this study. It is my belief and intention to prove that this social drama is the most significant drama of the period. It is, by reason of its whole-hearted devotion and earnest approach to the revelation of the sore spots in the American social scheme, quite unique in the history of the American theater.
CHAPTER II

THE ECONOMIC PROBLEMS

OF THE THIRTIES

Prior to 1929, the problem of economic security had been little considered by the American people. Under our laissez-faire system, it was a basic assumption that an able-bodied man could find work if he really wanted it, and that he would save enough to tide himself and his family over periods of illness and old age if he were reasonably thrifty. There have been many estimates of the extent of unemployment in the United States throughout the decade of the thirties.

C. H. Pegg and his colleagues have stated that the number of unemployed reached from 14,000,000 to 16,000,000 in 1932, and even as late as 1938, it was 11,000,000.\(^1\) The financial loss to the nation has been estimated at \(\$130,000,000,000\), but in human terms the loss was immeasurable. In many cases, the protracted unemployment of the head of a family meant severe hardship for him and all his dependents. Every walk of life seemed to be represented in the ranks of the jobless. For many, after their savings had been exhausted, there was little inclination to subsist on the economic theories which might promote recovery. The situation demanded action of a

\(^1\)C. H. Pegg and others, American Society and the Changing World, p. 464.
radically remedial nature. But it is a startling fact that real recovery did not come within the span of the decade covered by this study. Mounting incomes and increasing numbers of employed workers appeared only with the coming of the second world war and the frantic efforts of the United States to arm itself through industrial and military might. Therefore, it cannot be considered that the depression was actually fought and conquered. It departed from the American scene in the early forties with the boom days of wartime conversion.

As the early years of the thirties passed by, with no appreciable change in the ranks of the unemployed, there was some wistful longing for the return of the "good old days" before 1929. But the economists realized that the twenties had not been as prosperous as they had seemed. Even then there was a sizeable number of unemployed, and it was painfully clear that much of the prosperity of the twenties had been based upon paper transactions and credit maneuvers to a large extent. The Roosevelt administration subsidized public works and spent billions of dollars in direct relief in an effort to place money into circulation and to expand employment throughout the country. In spite of all the hopeful plans which were sponsored by the government and other agencies, the high rate of unemployment continued throughout the decade with only slight rises. The effect of this in humiliation, malnutrition, suffering, and want can only be a matter for conjecture even at this date.
To say that the staggering impact of economic depression produced careful economic thinking is to engage in understatement, for the degradation and misery to which the depression led produced a critical approach to the social and economic institutions of the country. After prosperity failed to appear from around the proverbial corner, the optimism which had characterized the first year or so of the depression was gone, and in its place remained the somewhat natural feeling of the great mass of American people that perhaps the depression and its resulting sufferings were the fault of the men of wealth and of high financial positions. Some thought that the depression was the final and logical outcome for a society which had ignored the welfare of the whole for the profits of a few. For the inarticulate masses, the writers of the age often served as the spokesman. The political coloring of the writers of the decade, like that of the great mass of the American people, ranged from conservative to communistic. The playwrights of the communist party line probably produced the most notable contributions to the drama of social criticism. On the other hand, the theater audiences were not drawn to embrace communism even though its virtues were extolled by such Marxist masters of the drama as John Howard Lawson, Clifford Odets, Elmer Rice, and John Wexley. The contributions of the writers of the communist party line have been well summarized by the literary historian of the thirties, Leo Gurko.
But though the Communists did not achieve their principal aims, they achieved certain lesser ones. They helped mobilize sentiment in favor of collective security (until the signing of the Nazi-Soviet Pact). To a good many young people floundering during the depression... they provided intellectual direction and a documented promise of a better world to come. They fought for the rights of national minorities, the Negroes in particular, and, by dramatizing national unemployment, served as an irritant to the conscience of the nation. Not least of all, through the instrumentation of proletarian criticism and the proletarian novel...and it may be added, of the proletarian drama,...they were a major influence in the literature of the 30's.2

The conservatives were practically nonexistent in the drama of the thirties, although in the Southern Agrarians they formed an articulate group in poetry and literary criticism.

The comparatively long and seldom broken span of prosperity which had attended the country since the days of the Civil War had placed a softening influence upon the tensions which existed between capital and labor. However, with the depression, the faith of labor in the ability of capital to maintain a healthy economy which could guarantee employment was destroyed, at least for a time. In the very first stages of the depression, since work was so scarce, strikes and other labor disputes were temporarily at a standstill. But after a few years, the old belligerent attitude of labor again triumphed, and the sitdown strikes of 1937 presented a new phenomenon in the field of labor techniques. The passage of the Wagner Labor Relations Act indicated that the government was no longer solely on the side of industry, and that capital

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2 Gurko, op. cit., pp. 60-61.
could no longer resort to strike-breaking either through its own facilities or through the use of state and federal troops. As labor awoke from the doldrums and the despair of the early thirties, class consciousness was more conspicuous than at any other time in the nation's history. As the decade passed by, labor grew more powerful and even began to participate as a class in politics through the efforts of the Political Action Committee and similar organizations.

As this resurgence of labor gained momentum through the thirties, the dramatists who were sympathetic with the pro-labor viewpoints began to adopt themes and situations for their plays which glorified the struggle of labor against industry and capital. It is significant that many of the most effective of the pro-labor plays were produced by the Federal Theater, which was largely responsible for the introduction of the documentary play and the living newspaper technique. ³ Although the emphasis of this study is upon the commercial productions which emphasize social problems, it is worth noting that the influence of the Federal Theater was very pronounced in developing the "social consciousness" which became so important in the regular commercial theater.

³Cf. Ibid., p. 94: "The most famous of the documentary plays, Triple-A Plowed Under, One-Third of a Nation (on housing), and The Living Newspaper, were a link between the consciously proletarian drama begun by the Theater Union, in 1933, with Stevedore and the official trade-union theater represented by that light-hearted satirical revue Pins and Needles, produced by the International Ladies' Garment Workers Union."
One of the most famous plays of the decade, indeed of the modern theater, dealt with the results of public callousness which can allow an innocent man to be convicted of a crime largely because he was associated with the radical labor movement of the twenties. The play is Maxwell Anderson's Winterset, and is obviously built upon the famous Sacco-Vanzetti trial which had aroused so much feeling in the twenties. However, in Winterset, Anderson did not merely defend those who assert the rights of labor; he spoke an angry piece against the reactionary attitudes of the law enforcement agencies and the miscarriages of justice which can allow an innocent man to be executed for crimes which he did not commit. These same forces attempt to prevent Mio from investigating the true circumstances and clearing his father's name. Anderson also pointed out that persons such as Mio and Miriamne cannot rise above their environment to lead useful and productive lives because of the lack of money. Even the evidence which Mio needs to have his dead father vindicated cannot be secured without money, for as his friend, Carr, says to him in the third scene:

It's something you can buy. In fact, at the moment I don't think of anything you can't buy, including life, honor, virtue, glory, public office, conjugal affection and all kinds of justice, from the traffic court to the immortal nine. Go out and make yourself a pot of money and you can buy all the justice you want. Convictions obtained, convictions averted. Lowest rate in years.4

4Maxwell Anderson, Winterset, p. 29.
While Anderson's motive in *Winterset* was primarily to produce a tragedy in verse largely based upon the Shakespearean model, it is worth noting that he returned again to the theme of social wrongs and the injustice of the Sacco-Vanzetti case which had aroused the thinking liberals of the twenties. In 1928, Anderson, in collaboration with Harold Hickerson, had written another play, *Gods of Lightning*, which dealt also with the flagrant injustices of the Sacco-Vanzetti case.

Sidney Kingsley's *Dead End* (1935) was a powerful blast at the existing social order which allows slums and the sordid life which they engender. With much ribald street talk and some melodrama, a moving case is made against a society which will spend nothing to clean up its slums and thus give the people who live in them a chance to live a decent life. A far greater sum than that required for slum clearance and the rehabilitation of the children of the slum is spent each year by the state on penal and correctional institutions. Through the characters who parade up and down the street are revealed

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5Cf. Gagey, *op. cit.*, p. 84: "The play *Winterset* is less imitative of the Shakespearean form than *Elizabeth the Queen*, but it should be obvious ... that Anderson had absorbed much of the spirit and substance of the bard of Avon. Mio's mission of revenge for the murder of his father reminds us of *Hamlet*; Judge Gaunt's incoherent ravings during a thunderstorm offer a clear reminiscence of *King Lear*; Shadow, who comes back drenched and bloody from the river, is a modern counterpart of the Elizabethan ghost; the love at first sight of Mio and Miriamme and their tragic situation call to mind *Romeo and Juliet*. The play has its origin, therefore, in literary tradition rather than in observation and experience, even as its dialogue is artificial and conventionalized, though it has moments of power and beauty."
the types which the surroundings breed: the killer, the thief, the prostitute, and the tubercular child. Each of these might have been quite different had his environment been otherwise. But the formative years in the slums have left their marks, and it seems certain that most of the youths will ultimately be full-fledged gangsters like Baby-Face Martin, or, in the case of the girls, prostitutes like Francey. The degradation of the slums is further pointed up by the contrast between the squalor of the dead end and the magnificence of the East River Terrace Apartments which adjoins the slums. The only character who has been able to rise above his environment is Gimpy, an architect without a job and a product of the slums. He has gone out from the dead end to secure an education, and is now ironically enough on relief. But he has been able to see what happens to the people who live in the slums, for he tells Drina in a moment of bitter reflections upon his own childhood:

Yeah, Drina, the place you live in is awfully important. It can give you a chance to grow, or it can twist you - (he twists an imaginary object with grim venom) - like that. When I was in school, they used to teach us that evolution made men out of animals. They forgot to tell us it can also make animals out of men.6

Kingsley further sees injustice in the attitude of the police toward the people of the slums. Drina and her friends are hurt by the police while they are on strike to secure the better wages which might allow them to move to a better

neighborhood. But when the "dead end kids" hurt Philip, the son of one of the rich men who inhabit the East River Terrace Apartments, the police are there immediately to take punitive action against the poor and defenseless families of the slums. Kingsley makes it clear that there can be no solution other than total eradication of the slums such as he has pictured in Dead End. Otherwise, the same cycle will be repeated eternally; boys will join the gangs of the dead end, they will be sent by an erring society to reform school where they will become hardened criminals, and they will return, bitter and cruel, to prey upon the society which failed in their rehabilitation.

Clifford Odets presented to the American stage two plays which dealt with the economic dilemma of the America of the thirties. The first one, Waiting for Lefty (1935), was a violent attack on the capitalistic system and a demand that the workers of the nation should unite in the struggle for decent wages and better living conditions. The most effective means to accomplish this goal, from the viewpoint of Odets, was through the strike. For this play, the theater becomes a lecture hall and the stage becomes the platform from which the characters expound the case of the downtrodden proletariat against the vicious and cruel capitalists. The play itself is a series of rather loosely connected episodes in the lives of the group of workers who form the committee of a cab driver's union assembled to decide on the wisdom of a strike.
In each episode, Odets emphasized the degradation of the workers of America by capital, and then attempted to show how all this misery could be swept away by the acceptance of communist doctrines. In one episode, Phillips, an unemployed and penniless actor, when refused a job by the rich producer, Grady, is given a dollar to buy bread for his starving family and a copy of *The Communist Manifesto* by Grady's stenographer, a bright girl, who has realized for a long time that the communist way is the only solution for the economic ills of America.

Odets' second play, *Awake and Sing*, was more conventional in form and less violent in tone than *Waiting for Lefty*, although the same basic enthusiasm for communism motivates its characters. In this play, Odets went to some lengths to show the degrading effects of the depression on a middle-class family in New York City. All the traditional bourgeois virtues of thrift, respectability, and family pride are of no consequence against the gigantic problems which the depression has brought into the Berger home. The chief interest of the play is in the particular problems of Paul, a young, romantic, and sensitive boy, who is completely under the domination of his mother. Paul is in love with a girl but is unable to marry her because of his family's determined opposition. His mother cannot afford to lose the few dollars which Paul's salary contributes to the expenses of the household each week. The grandfather has spent his whole life reading Marx and
communist literature, and now that he is old, he is sure that this offers the only solution to the economic unhappiness of America. When the old man dies in a tragic accident, Paul realizes that it is improper for youth to sit grieving over the frustrations of the depression and the capitalistic system which caused it. It is time to obey the exhortation of Isaiah: "Awake and sing, ye that dwell in dust." In the last scene, therefore, he is taking down all his grandfather's revolutionary treatises to read and study in order that he can help to "... fix it so life won't be printed on dollar bills." There is throughout this play some very skillful sniping at sweatshops, strike-breaking, and the munitions industries of the United States.

Lillian Hellman also was concerned with the right of labor to strike for better living conditions in her play, Days To Come (1936). This strike situation is on a small scale, for it occurs within Andrew Rodman's plant for the manufacture of paint brushes in the small town of Callom, Ohio. The factory has been owned by Andrew's family for many generations, and most of the townspeople have always worked in the plant. If the differences between the workers and management could have been left to Andrew to solve, the strike could have never taken place. But there are two obstacles. First, outsiders have bought into the stock of

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7Clifford Odets, Awake and Sing, p. 108.
the plant, and second, Andrew is too weak to force his will upon the other members of the plant management. The workers are organized by Leo Whalen, a union organizer from the East, while Sam Wilkie, an expert strike-breaker, is employed by the owners of the plant to bring into the little town his gang of murderous thugs to break the strike. This situation, with the train of events largely in the hands of outsiders, leaves the laborers entirely at the mercy of circumstances. When the strike-breakers incite strife between their thugs and the strikers, as a part of their normal routine, Andrew realizes all too late that he has been dominated from the first by his lawyer and his sister, who own more of the stock than he. But by the time he realizes this, there has been the murder of an innocent child of the laborer, Tom Firth. The play ends with sadness for all. Andrew feels that he is a murderer. Working relations at the plant can never be the same, for the workers will always remember that the Rodmans brought in the thugs to break their peaceful strike for better wages. The strike-breakers leave the town angry because they did not have the full cooperation they desired in trampling down the strike sentiment of the laborers more completely. The strikers are defeated temporarily and can only come back to work, although Whalen, the union organizer, tells them when they say that they no longer care who wins: "You will care. More than I do. For me, you're only one of a thousand fights. But you've got only one fight. This one.
And someday you're going to have to settle it." The relation of one labor dispute to another is the close relation of the proletarian comrades all over the world, Whalen tells them.

Don't let 'em tell you that because your grandfather voted for Jefferson, you're any different from some Polack in Pittsburgh whose grandfather couldn't write his name. You're on the same side the Polack is, and that's where you belong.9

The only note of hope is that the workers, after being exhorted by Whalen, may try the strike all over again some day when conditions will be better. Next time, says Tom Firth, "... we'll be different."10 Thus did Lillian Hellman picture the ending of a benevolent industrial control of a small factory town in Ohio. Where once there was peace and respect between labor and management, now the world-wide struggle of the laboring classes has taken possession of the imaginations of the workers in the Rodman plant, and things can never be the same again. It is the end of the era which departed in 1929. In the plays of Maxwell Anderson, Sidney Kingsley, and Clifford Odets, we see labor strife through the eyes of the workers and the poor; in Days To Come, Lillian Hellman has shown us the upheavals of the poor against the rich from the vantage point of the drawing-room of the plant owner.

8Lillian Hellman, Four Plays, p. 150.  
9Ibid., p. 151.  
10Ibid.
Various phases of the economic life of the South received particular attention in three very successful plays of the decade. These plays are *Tobacco Road*, by Jack Kirkland; *The House of Connelly*, by Paul Green; and *The Little Foxes*, by Lillian Hellman.

*Tobacco Road* was dramatized by Kirkland from the novel of Erskine Caldwell. The region in which this tragedy of the displaced tenant farmers of the South is laid is the Georgia back country, near Augusta. The author states in his description of the setting that:

> It is a famished, desolate land once given over to the profitable raising of tobacco, then turned into small cotton plantations, which have been so intensively and stupidly cultivated as to exhaust the soil. Poverty, want, aqualor, degeneracy, pitiful helplessness and grotesque, tragic lusts have stamped a lost, outpaced people with the mark of inevitable end. Unequipped to face a changing economic program, bound up in traditions, ties, and prejudices, they unknowingly face extinction. It is a passing scene, contemporary and fast fading, hurling the lie at nature's mercy and challenging a god who reputedly looks after his own. Grim humor pervades all, stalking side by side with tragedy on the last short mile which leads to a complete, eventual elimination. The pride and hope of a once aggressive group, pioneers in a great new world, thus meet ironic conclusion. The world moves on, unmindful of their ghosts.11

The family of Jeeter Lester thus represents this lost people of the Southern agricultural scene. Absentee ownership of the land plus an increase in the use of mechanized methods of cultivating and harvesting has rendered these former tenant

farmers unnecessary. Like many others, the Lesters have been allowed to remain on a small plot of worthless soil all these years without agricultural implements, farm animals, or financial credit, all necessary to the making of a crop. Economic salvation lies in the opportunity for the family to move away from the soil and to enter the cotton mills at Augusta. But ignorant and shiftless as these people have increasingly become with each new generation, they are unable to break the ties which bind them to the exhausted soil even though it is apparent that there will never be a chance to make a crop or to even find the means of the barest existence. The curious acceptance by these people of unconventional sex practices and their naive code of morals contrast strangely with their religious fervor. The results of careless and uncontrolled breeding are exemplified by two of Jeeter's children, Ellie May, a daughter with a harelip, and Dude, who is not bright. Pearl, whom Jeeter discovers in one of the humorous sequences of the play is not his daughter at all, is mated off to Lov Bensey for the sum of eight dollars when she is only twelve years old. Jeeter and Ada have other grown children whose names they cannot even recall. Most of their children have left home as early as possible to keep from starving to death. This play had a phenomenal success on Broadway; it opened in 1933 and ran for 3,182 consecutive performances in New York
alone. Although this play was one of the real milestones in the sociological drama of a period which excelled in sociological plays, its tremendous audience acceptance seems to have been determined by other factors. Edmond Gagey has stated that:

The play's long run, however, was scarcely due to its social implications but rather to the colorful profanity, the realism of speech and stage business, the display of completely amoral behavior. With regard to the last the enthusiastic response of audiences perhaps represents the revenge of the subconscious for lip service paid to family duty and conventional morality. In any event, the superiority of Tobacco Road to earlier long-distance champions - Abie's Irish Rose, East Is West, Peg o' My Heart - would seem to indicate some improvement in popular taste.  

Paul Green also dealt with the changing agricultural picture of the South in The House of Connelly. (1931). However, his main concern has been with the declining aristocracy rather than with the degenerate tenant farmer of Kirkland's Tobacco Road. The Connellys, who represent the aristocratic families of the old South, are educated, courtly in manner, proud, and fearful of change. They trace their ancestry to the first families of the ante-bellum South, a lineage no less proud than that of the European nobility. But, like Jeeter Leeter in their inability to adapt themselves to a changed economic and social order, the Connellys face rapid extinction. They have tried to maintain on their dwindling acreage the same styles and standards.

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12 Gagey, op. cit., p. 140. 13 Ibid., pp. 141-142.
which characterized the life of old Dixie. But outside economic forces are too strong for them. Will Connelly, as the titular head of the family and owner of the Connelly acres, is faced with a choice between the pride of his class and the practical issues of making the exhausted soil yield paying crops again. The struggle between these issues within Will are heightened by the opposing ideals of his mother and his sisters with their emphasis upon family and class pride, and those of Patsy Tate, daughter of one of Will's tenant farmers, who offers Will a love which is unselfish and vital and her help in saving the remainder of the plantation through the use of sensible farming methods and cooperation with the tenant farmers. The follies of the aristocracy, their stubborn resistance to change, their childlike attitude toward money and finance, and the manner in which they ignore the sins of their fathers, such as miscegenation, are all pointed out in this play. Green has presented here the basic cleavage between the old South and the new South. Will and his family represent the former, with its feudal ideal and its emphasis upon the glories of the past, while Patsy Tate represents the new South, with its emphasis upon work as the basis for a sound and satisfactory life. In contrast to the Connelly family, Patsy lives in the present, and she looks forward to the future with confidence in herself and Will. Patsy states her philosophy to Will when she tells him:
To grow and live and be something in this world you've got to be cruel - you've got to push other things aside. The dead and the proud have to give way to us - the living. (Her face close against his, her voice fierce and vibrant.) We have our life to live and we'll fight for it to the end.\textsuperscript{14}

Green has stated that his purpose was sociological as well as literary in writing plays dealing with the problems of the South. In his introduction to his collected plays, Out of the South, he has defined the South as "... the land of poor wages in the midst of plenty, of ignorance at the door of opportunity, of exquisite culture and lewd barbarism, of high birthrates and frightful mortality, of killing work and easy living, of thoughtlessness when thought is needed."\textsuperscript{15}

It is his hope that:

... out of all these enquiries the true nature of this strange region we call the South is to be found. And the evils that fly up out of it like the wheeling buzzards will be finally driven off, and the carrion of ignorance and poverty now corroding the body politic will be cleansed away.\textsuperscript{16}

In The Little Foxes, Lillian Hellman turned to the consideration of another of the South's social classes, the industrial and financial aristocracy who have risen to their positions of economic and eventual social and political power in the South out of the wreckage of the Civil War and the decline of the old aristocracy. Aside from its general concern with the predatory maneuvers of the Hubbard family, this

\textsuperscript{14}Paul Green, The House of Connelly in Out of the South, p. 69.

\textsuperscript{15}Paul Green, Out of the South, p. xi.

\textsuperscript{16}Ibid., p. xii.
play offered the audience a picture of a woman to whom finance has become so thrilling that she is willing to sacrifice her daughter, kill her husband, and alienate her brothers, although the latter are revealed to be as wicked and as mercenary as Regina. These people have made their wealth from a shrewd deal in which they have persuaded a northern capitalist to open a cotton mill in their small town in the South where there are cheap wages and no strikes. When the evil machinations of Regina and her brothers have reached their evil peak, Regina's husband speaks the reaction of honest, decent people everywhere:

I'm sick of you, sick of this house, sick of my life here. I'm sick of your brothers and their dirty tricks to make a dime. There must be better ways of getting rich than cheating niggers on a pound of bacon. Why should I give you the money? To pound the bones of this town to make dividends for you to spend? You wreck the town, you and your brothers, you wreck the town and live on it.¹⁷

Later after the tragic events have unfolded as a result of the financial tug-of-war of the Hubbard family, Alexandra, the daughter, sees the evil which people like Regina and her brothers force upon the world. Her eyes have been opened, and she tells her mother:

Because now I understand what Papa was trying to tell me. All in one day: Addie said there were people who ate the earth and other people who stood around and watched them do it. And just now Uncle Ben said the same thing. Really, he said the same thing. Well, tell him for me, Mama, I'm not going to stand around and watch you do it.

¹⁷Lillian Hellman, op. cit., p. 219.
Tell him I'll be fighting as hard as he'll be fighting some place where people don't just stand around and watch.\textsuperscript{18}

Besides these plays, all of which were very successful on Broadway, there were many minor plays which treated of the problems of economic America during "the angry decade."

The season of 1931-32 saw the production of many excellent studies of the social structure of the nation. S. N. Behrman was concerned with the futility of wealth in Brief Moment. Vincent Lawrence provided a study in poverty in Washington Heights. John Wexley wrote of strikes in a steel town from the viewpoint of labor in Steel. Claire and Paul Sifton wrote of the effects of the times upon the lives of society's underprivileged in a bitter play, 1931. During the season of 1932-33, Elmer Rice pointed out all the prevalent social ills in We, The People. In 1933-34, Ragged Army, by Beulah Marie Dix, studied the strike problem in a milltown. In 1934-35, Paul Green pictured the moral and physical disintegration caused by poverty in a Negro shanty-town in Roll, Sweet Chariot. This same season saw several pro-labor and pro-strike plays: Black Fit by Albert Maltz, Waiting for Lefty by Odets, and Tide Rises by Art Smith. The season of 1935-36 was particularly productive of drama which criticized the economic order. Albert Bein adapted Grace Lumpkin's novel, To Make My Bread, which was concerned with the results

\textsuperscript{18}Ibid., p. 247.
of starvation wages upon Carolina millworkers, and entitled his play Let Freedom Ring. The effects of the depression upon the youth of the period were pictured in Class of '29 by Orrie Lashin and Milo Hastings. Dan Toheroh was concerned with the depression and vagrancy in Searching for the Sun. Julius J. and Phillip Epstein studied dishonesty among financial circles in And Stars Remain. The effects of the depression were again the subjects of Around the Corner by Martin Flavin, and But For the Grace of God by Leopold Atlas. Strikes were the concern of George Brewer, Jr., in Tide Rising. John Howard Lawson exposed the unscrupulous methods of strike-breaking in Marching Song. In 1937-38, there was a condemnation of dishonest stock-brokers in John Lawrence's Wall Street Scene. Marc Blitzstein protested the economic royalism of America and praised labor's struggles against it in The Cradle Will Rock. Sunup to Sundown, by Francis E. Farough, was a commentary on the virtual enslavement of labor on the tobacco plantations of the South. The housing situation was surveyed in One Third of a Nation by Arthur Arent. By 1939-39, there was a noticeable decline in the number of dramas dealing with the criticism of the domestic economic order. This can be attributed to the approach of the war and the growing concern of our social dramatists with the threat to democracy which fascism offered. Clifford Odets was again concerned with the effects of the existing economic order on the individual in Rocket to the Moon.
John Stradley presented a sympathetic picture of labor during a steel strike in *Stop Press*. The effects of the depression on American industry and labor were again presented in George Sklar's *Life and Death of an American*.

Clifford Odets and Lillian Hellman are representatives of the left-wing group in the American drama of the decade. True to his communist leanings, Odets used his plays for a rousing endorsement of Marxism as the best solution for the critical condition of capitalist America. Hellman pointed to the greed and evil which she associates with capitalism, and reminded the wage earner that labor's fight is going on wherever there is a strike or a lockout. Anderson protested against the reactionary elements in our population, who use their great wealth to maintain the profitable status quo by their control of the courts and the instruments of law and order. Kingsley asserted that crime and juvenile delinquency are closely related to the economic and social opportunity of the environment. Kirkland and Green posed the special problems of the rural South. *Tobacco Road* revealed the failure of the promise of American democracy among the pitiable sharecroppers of the Southland. *The House of Connelly* emphasized its author's belief that the waning aristocrats of Dixie could achieve prosperity and stability only through an identification of themselves with the lives and the labor of their former social inferiors. Thus the attitudes and the motives of the playwrights differ. But
they are all of one accord in their belief that the masses could and would survive the economic storms of the age. They are not content with the existing economic order, and the plays are the measure of their social protest. This protest is not an isolated artistic phenomenon, but it is a lively manifestation in the theater of the nationwide concern for the rehabilitation of our whole economic life.
CHAPTER III

MARRIAGE AND FAMILY PROBLEMS

A marked change in the attitude toward marriage and family life was very evident in the United States by the close of the world war in 1919. The war itself was doubtlessly a major factor contributing to this change. The first major war in which this country had participated since it had emerged as a world power, it uprooted many of the prejudices, moral injunctions, and social taboos which had been transmitted to America as part of the western tradition. This tradition, the accumulation of centuries of European civilization, had gradually developed the belief that marriage was an irrevocable and sacred contract. It was a holy estate, entered by man and woman and blessed by heaven. Man was more powerful mentally and physically, and woman was morally, and usually legally, bound to obey him. Man was the provider for the family and within the home was a veritable autocrat. Woman was the homemaker, the housekeeper, and the mother and nurse of the children. The church and the state both taught that the proper object of marriage ought to be the begetting and rearing of children.\(^1\)

Although many of these basic tenets were questioned considerably before the first world war, the war itself hastened the downfall of Victorian concepts regarding marriage and the proper conduct of family life. The Nineteenth Amendment granted American women political and legal equality with men. In the wake of the war with its necessary emphasis on the possibility of death for the multitude of young men in the military service, there were many hurried marriages and a large incidence of extra-marital unions. Thus the emphasis was shifted somewhat from marriage as a social responsibility to a union of the sexes for such pleasure as might be snatched briefly before the men were off to the battlefields of Europe.  

The war exerted its influence against stable marriages even after peace was restored. In the aftermath of the conflict, youth underwent a period of profound disillusionment. Young people who felt that the war was fought in vain also thought that probably all the old values were based on the quicksands of hypocrisy. Life was cheap and transitory, and pleasure was the only worthwhile pursuit. This hedonistic philosophy characterized the "jazz age."

2The strong urge toward hasty marriage with which many young people of the first world war period were confronted was depicted in Eugene O'Neill's play Strange Interlude (1928). When her fiancé is killed in France, Nina develops a bitter hatred for her father, whom she considers responsible for thwarting her marriage plans.
The twenties saw the divorce rate rise sharply year by year until the depression struck in 1929. More rapid and easier divorces became the vogue for America's young married couples. Prior to 1930, the playwrights of the United States had dealt with the divorce problem to a considerable degree. Such plays as Guy Bolton's *Cradle Snatchers* (1923), Lynch Williams' *Why Not?* (1922), Lee Wilson Dodd's *The Changeling* (1923), and Austin Strong's *A Play Without a Name* (1928), reveal the extent of the change which has occurred in the country's moral outlook since the war years. Rachel Crothers was particularly adept at constructing plays about the divorce theme; *Let Us Be Gay* (1929) portrayed the unsatisfactory attempt of a divorcée to construct a satisfactory life for herself. Though there is considerable discussion of the new freedom for women, the play ends with Kitty agreeing to marry her husband again. Philip Barry was concerned with marriage, divorce, and infidelity in *Paris Bound* (1927).

It is true that when business is good, both the marriage and divorce rates rise. When business is bad, they go down. So it was in the United States for a time after 1929. In 1932 the number of marriages per thousand was estimated to be only three-fourths as large as the annual average from 1920 to 1929, while the divorce rate fell off in almost the same proportion. In 1933 the marriage rate began a rapid climb
upward. In 1934 the divorce rate started to rise, and by 1936, both rates were once more at the pre-depression level.\(^3\)

Plays which treated of marriage and divorce problems continued to be popular on the American stage even during the worst years of the depression, even though the national divorce rate was down momentarily. But the marriage rate was also down. John Hodgdon Bradley expressed the fears of many when he stated that "there is a general feeling abroad today that family life is vanishing from the world, that when industrialism destroyed the home as a center for the production of goods it all but destroyed the home as well."\(^4\)

The causes for this disintegration of family life were ascribed variously to the emancipation of women, the decline of religion, the rise of the movies, automobiles, drink, "and above all ... the ogre of sex."\(^5\) All of these problems re-occurred many times in the treatment of marriage and divorce in the American drama of the decade.

One of the most influential divorce plays of the period was Clare Boothe's *The Women* (1936). Like the other major plays of the period which dealt with the institutions of marriage and divorce, *The Women* portrayed people of the


\(^5\) Ibid.
wealthy stratum of American society. The author stated in her foreword that her purpose was to write "a satirical play about a numerically small group of ladies native to the Park Avenues of America." The principals of the play are shown as they pursue all the curious activities, such as the bridge party, the visit to the hairdresser, or the intimate small parties, which have come to occupy such important places in the hearts of wives and mothers that any interest in the home or the family has been of necessity pushed into the background. The central situation of The Women is the disintegration of Mary Haines' marriage largely through the distorted and malicious gossip of her closest friends. From this stem the subordinate threads of the plot, most of which is a further development of Clare Boothe's concern with the transitory nature of a large portion of wealthy marriages. To such women as Sylvia Fowler and Edith Potter, real happiness is impossible, for they have hardly the capacity to achieve stable and successful marriages. From their frustration has been born a cynical distrust of men and marriage, itself. Dissatisfied with their own marriages, they are determined that the other women in their social group shall not be happy wives either.

Ordinarily the talk in this female play centers about the depravity and the deception of husbands. Sylvia reveals her utter boredom with wifely responsibilities at the opening

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of the play: "So I said to Howard, 'What do you expect me to do? Stay home and darn your socks? What do we all have money for? Why do we keep servants?'" 7 When the women discuss Mary's marriage while she is out of the room for a minute, Sylvia states: "Maybe a woman's headed for trouble when she begins to get too--smug." 8 The material attractions of marriage and its financial security for women are emphasized by Sylvia when she asks: "What has any woman got to gain by a divorce? No matter how much he gives her, she won't have what they have together." 9

The problem of unwanted children and the rejection of motherhood as the central meaning of marriage is a social problem which recurs frequently in the drama of recent years. Edith Potter in The Women is very bitter about the discomfort of bearing children. She tells Nancy Blake, the only spinster in the group: "I wish I were a virgin again. The only fun I ever had was holding out on Phelps. Nancy, you ought to thank God every night you don't have to make sacrifices for some man." 10 Nancy, who is one of the most sensible of the lot, thinks women such as Sylvia and Edith are criminally foolish because they cannot be happy with a husband, a home, and children, for all of which she yearns.

Clare Boothe gave us a glimpse of life among the divorcees in Reno in The Women. Mary has gone to Reno for

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7Ibid., p. 4.  
8Ibid., p. 9.  
9Ibid., p. 97.  
10Ibid., p. 11.
her divorce from Stephen, because everyone in her class goes there. The same people who go to Sun Valley, Miami, or Malibu for the appropriate seasons, go to Reno for their divorces. Reno, like Juarez, Mexico, was a new phenomenon on the American social scene. The rise of the "divorce capitals" during the twenties made divorce so simple and withal as legal as courts can make the dissolution of the marriage bonds. The spectacle of present day divorce is decried by Mary's mother who tells her: "Damn them, [modern divorce laws] I say! Fifty years ago, when women couldn't get divorces, they made the best of situations like this. And sometimes, out of situations like this, they made very good things indeed!"\textsuperscript{11} Maggie, the coxk, passes almost the same judgment:

She's indulging a pride she ain't entitled to. Marriage is a business of taking care of a man and rearing his children. It ain't meant to be no perpetual honeymoon. How long would any husband last if he was supposed to go on acting forever like a red-hot Clark Gable?\textsuperscript{12}

Although The Women was not in all respects a good play, it was highly successful from a commercial viewpoint and brought forth considerable discussion about the married women of leisure peculiar to the American scene. Clare Boothe has explained that she did not intend this play as an indictment of all American women, but she did achieve a biting commentary on the failure of the wealthy class of American society to secure widespread success in marriage during recent years.

\textsuperscript{11}Ibid., p. 114. \textsuperscript{12}Ibid., p. 108.
That the situation was not exaggerated may be ascertained readily by a glance through the newspapers of the period.

Rachel Crothers' comedy, As Husbands Go, which opened in March, 1931, dealt with a marriage problem as did her successful play of the previous year, Let Us Be Gay. During the twenties, American tourists, swarming to Europe on the bright bubble of national prosperity, were naturally influenced to some extent by European standards of marital devotion and obligations. These standards Miss Crothers contrasted with the less sophisticated ones of the American small town. In this instance, the problem is that of a middle-aged American woman who fancies that she has found during a visit to Paris a vital and romantic love in an affair with a young English novelist. Upon her return to her home and her husband in Dubuque, Iowa, Lucile is faced with telling her husband about her affair in Paris and with asking for a divorce. Later, when her lover follows her to Dubuque to press her to insist upon the separation from her husband, Lucile is forced to consider the more substantial devotion of her husband. The easy conventions of Paris cafe society cannot be so easily applied in Dubuque. As Philip Barry had suggested in Tomorrow and Tomorrow, Rachel Crothers suggests that wives without children are more prone to indulge in dangerous extra-marital experiments. Lucile's acceptance of her husband's orphaned nephew into her home eases the pain she might have felt at parting with her lover.
Her love affair was a compensation for the boredom and frustration which she felt in common with the Park Avenue ladies of *The Women*.

S. N. Behrman's *Brief Moment*, although comedy, is a very earnest indictment of the casual attitude which many American couples have adopted toward marriage and the extra-marital affairs. Roderick, wealthy and introspective playboy, married Abby, a night-club singer, to bring order into his confused life. The fact that Abby maintains her regular entourage of admirers after her marriage makes no difference for a while. Rod is so occupied with his self-contemplation that he is scarcely aware of his wife's activities. The fact that Abby's most devoted swains are a gentleman racketeer and a vain, swaggering sportsman, is a commentary on the curious composition of the upper stratum of society during the late twenties and the thirties.

Philip Barry's *Tomorrow and Tomorrow* opened in January, 1931. It deals with the desire of a woman for children, a problem somewhat in contrast to the familiar one of the mothers who do not want their offspring. This play represents an affirmation of the importance of children as a real value in a successful marriage. The drop in the birth rate during the twenties and its possible relation to the rise of the divorce rate had been suggested by the sociologists. Barry points up the complete frustration of Eve's life and the emptiness of her marriage to Gail. After the birth of the
boy, Christian, Eve finds her fulfillment; she grows in mental stature. Of course, Barry's drama is built upon Eve's extra-marital relations with Dr. Nicholas Hay, the father of Christian, and her subsequent deception of Gail. Although it is subordinate to the dramatic situation of the choice Eve must make between husband and lover, the social import of childless homes for America is clearly pointed up.

Rose Franken's *Another Language* (1932) is a domestic comedy which deals with the eternal question of the essence of a happy and successful marriage. Mrs. Franken later returned to this same theme in the notoriously successful *Claudia* (1941). In *Another Language*, we have the case of Stella and Victor. There are many obstacles between them and a satisfactory adjustment to marriage. Among the problems posed by Mrs. Franken are the relations between a wife and her husband's family, the right of a mother to interfere in the domestic life of her sons after they are married, the chances for enduring love between persons who are intellectually and spiritually incompatible, the proper pursuits for a wife in her leisure time, and the lengths to which mutual faith and trust must be carried.

Stella Hallam is representative of a rapidly developing group of young middle-class matrons who, having no children, are faced with the problem of how to use wisely leisure time. Finding her husband's family greatly opposed to her attendance at art school and resenting the interference and malevolent
criticism of her mother-in-law, Stella is forced to choose between submission to the Hallams' ideas and open rebellion which will result in the alienation of her husband. This situation is somewhat reminiscent of Nora's choice in Ibsen's A Doll's House, although a reconciliation is at length effected between Stella and Victor. In this play, Mrs. Franken has utilized the menace of the matriarch, Mother Hallam, the cruel and indomitable jealousy of excessive mother love. When this misguided mother love is directed against a daughter-in-law, it can assume a really vicious form, as Sidney Howard had pointed up earlier in The Silver Cord (1926).

The woman who substituted social success for family love and devotion is well illustrated by the character of Millicent Jordan in Dinner at Eight (1932), by George S. Kaufman and Edna Ferber. Mrs. Jordan has long ago forgotten her real responsibilities as a homemaker in the struggle to outstrip her rivals of the social circle in which she is a power. At a crucial moment in the play when her husband has been told he has a serious heart ailment and is also facing financial defeat, and when her daughter wants to talk over an emotional crisis through which she is passing, Millie exclaims:

Business thing! At a time like this you talk about a business thing! And feeling rotten. This is a nice time to say you're feeling rotten! You come to me with your--

(Turning to Paula)
--and you, whimpering about Ernest! Some little lover's quarrel! I'm expected to listen to Ernest and business and headaches when I'm half out of my mind! Do you know what's happened to me? I've had the most hellish day that anyone ever had! No aspic for dinner--and that Vance woman coming in--and Gustave looking like a prizefighter--and sending for crabmeat--crabmeat--and now, on top of everything, do you know what's happened! (Quivering breath of rage and bafflement as she prepares to launch her final thrust.)

The Ferncliffes aren't coming to dinner. They call up at this hour, those miserable cockneys--they call up and say they've gone to Florida! Florida! And who can I get at this hour! Nobody! I've only got eight people! Eight people isn't a dinner! Who can I get? And you come to me with your idiotic little--I'm the one who ought to be in bed! I'm the one who's in trouble! You don't know what trouble is--either one of you!\[^13\]

Susan Trexel, in Rachel Crothers' *Susan and God* (1937), is a good deal like Millicent Jordan. Susan returns from a long sojourn in England during which she has been won over to Lady Wiggam's movement, which is somewhat like the Oxford movement. It is characteristic of Susan to be devoted to such a movement; it takes the place of her husband and her child, with both of whom she is rather bored. She is a selfish woman, who has never given her family the love they need. Consequently her husband has taken to drink, and Blossom, the adolescent daughter, rotates between boarding schools and summer camps. There can be no home life, because Susan is always occupied with some new project. Upon her return from Europe, she characteristically goes to a friend's home rather than to her husband and Blossom. There she tells

about Lady Wiggam's movement. "You can keep right on being what you are—an Episcopalian—or Ethiopian—or Catholic or Jew—or colored—or anything. It's just love—love—love—for other people—not for yourself." Typically, Susan repeats this Lloyd C. Douglas philosophy without realizing that she has violated it completely. In this play, Rachel Crothers pointed out that modern women, with their many interests outside the home, could easily neglect and even come to be bored with their home, husbands, and children, in favor of external diversions.

The Animal Kingdom (1932), by Philip Barry, propounds the rather unusual thesis that a mistress may be more adequately a wife than the legal spouse. While Barry's thesis is as true as it is novel, it certainly indicates a radical change in the moral and social complexion of theater audiences since the beginning of the century. In the early twentieth century, audiences were horrified because Nora, in Ibsen's A Doll's House, rebelled against her husband. Yet a scant thirty years later, in Barry's play, a husband not only rebels against his wife but walks out on her to return to Daisy, his erstwhile mistress. It cannot be said that Barry actually argues for divorce in this play, but it is clear that in such a situation as that of Tom Collier, divorce is the only solution. Although Cecelia, his wife, is attracted to Tom

physically and is equally interested in the money which he will inherit, she is totally uninterested in his dreams and his publishing activities. On the other hand, Daisy, the other woman of the triangle, is just as attracted to Tom as is Cecelia but she is not much impressed by his money. Furthermore, she is always eager to encourage him in his work. In the final scene of the play, Tom is slowly becoming aware that his wife's seductive wiles have been only a means to persuade him to obey her wishes. Barry seems to point out in this play that many other elements besides sexual attraction are needed to make a happy marriage.

A particularly brilliant comedy of marriage is *The Philadelphia Story* (1939), by Philip Barry. It represents the peak of a long line of such successful plays by Barry dealing with marriage and the family which include *You and I* (1923), *Paris Bound* (1927), *Holiday* (1928), *Rebound* (1930), and *Tomorrow and Tomorrow* (1932). Employing matchless irony, Barry contrived situations revealing the changes affecting marriage which have characterized our social mores in recent years. Blithe talk characterizes the dialogue, in which grave issues of homes, families, and marriages are disposed of with glib smartness and gay witticisms. Gagey finds in Barry's Catholicism the motivation of his abiding interest in marriage and divorce.15

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In *The Philadelphia Story*, the dramatic situation arises out of Tracy Lord's impending second marriage. The Lord family is of the old Philadelphia aristocracy. Tracy has been married once before to C. K. Dexter Haven, who was of her own social set, but their brief marriage ended in divorce. Now she is preparing to marry George Kittredge, dull and earnest commoner, who made his wealth in the coal mines and who is being groomed as a presidential possibility. Against all the gay wedding preparations the story of Seth Lord, Tracy's father, is revealed. For many years, Seth has been separated unofficially from his family. At the moment, it is rumored that Seth is involved with a New York dancer, Tina Mara. In fact, the magazine *Destiny* is ready to publish an article about Seth and his life in New York if their reporters are not allowed to cover Tracy's wedding.

When Dexter Haven, Tracy's former husband, appears on the scene, the story of their wedded life is briefly sketched. Dexter blames Tracy for the failure of their marriage because she is intolerant to a fault of the weaknesses of others.

**Dexter.** . . . You could be the damnest, finest woman on this earth. If I'm contemptuous of anything, it's of something in you you either can't help, or make no attempt to; your so-called "strength"—your prejudice against weakness—your blank intolerance—Tracy. Is that all?

**Dexter.** That's the gist of it; because you'll never be a first class woman or a first class human being, till you have learned to have some regard for human frailty. It's a pity your own foot can't slip a little sometime—but no, your sense of inner divinity won't allow it. The goddess must and shall remain intact.—You know, I think there are more of you around than people realize. You're
a special class of American female now—the Married Maidens—And of Type Philadelphiaensis, you're the absolute tops, my dear.\textsuperscript{16}

Later, when Tracy upbraids her father in a scathing speech for his affair with Tina Mara, his gross infidelity to her mother, and the scandalous gossip which he has inflicted upon the family, Seth tells her that she has failed him as a daughter just as she failed Dexter as a wife.

\textbf{Seth.} --In fact, you have everything it takes to make a lovely woman except the one essential—an understanding heart. Without it, you might just as well be made of bronze.

\textbf{Tracy} (after a moment). That's an awful thing to say to anyone.

\textbf{Seth.} Indeed it is.

\textbf{Tracy.} So I'm to blame for Tina Mara, am I?

\textbf{Seth.} If any blame attaches, to some extent I expect you are.

\textbf{Tracy.} You coward.

\textbf{Seth.} No. --But better to be one than a prig—and a perennial spinster, however many marriages.\textsuperscript{17}

This expert Barry comedy ends with Tracy's sudden decision to remarry Dexter in preference to the pompous and priggish George. This time, says Tracy, resorting to a nautical term, "I'll promise to be yare."\textsuperscript{18}

Although the marriage plays of the thirties usually fall into the class of high comedy, there is no lack of seriousness in the approach which they made to marriage. The playwrights have unanimously agreed that marriage is a serious business; their charming heroines and heroes have all


\textsuperscript{17} Ibid., p. 435.

\textsuperscript{18} Ibid., p. 458.
discovered that divorce is usually not the solution to the petty difficulties which beset any home from time to time. Rachel Crothers, Clare Boothe, and Philip Barry, have shown in their plays that abiding concern for the fragility of marriage as a social institution with which the sociologist, Ray E. Baber, was concerned when he wrote:

Society has a deep concern for the stability of the home. The increase in divorce is disquieting evidence of a growing instability, and society fears that the divorce pattern may come to be considered normal instead of abnormal. It being granted that "normal" is a relative term and any technical discussion of what is normal and what is abnormal being avoided, the typical American attitude toward divorce is fairly clear. It is still considered an "evil," but sometimes a necessary one. It is to be used sparingly and only after sincere efforts at adjustment have been made.19

However, the playwrights have revealed in the plays mentioned the normal aspect which the divorce pattern was assuming among the leisure classes of the country. With only minor exceptions, all of Clare Boothe's females in The Women regard divorce as a logical and normal step in the evolution of adult life. Marriages are to be endured only until a promising affair comes along to make the monotony of the marriage ties unendurable. Tracy and Dexter of The Philadelphia Story were divorced because Tracy cannot bear the imperfection which Dexter is wont to exhibit on occasion. Susan in Susan and God must have a divorce because her husband has been drinking as their marriage disintegrated.

19 Ray E. Baber, Marriage and the Family, p. 495.
although this is due to her extensive outside interests; besides a divorce will free her more completely for her pet projects, such as Lady Wiggam's movement. These plays of marriage and divorce, often high comedy, offer further evidence to Baber's statement that "the thoughtful student of social problems soon perceives that the major issue is not divorce, but marriage."20

The people in these plays are not victims of an age of increased marital misery but are dwellers in an age which is increasingly unwilling to endure any unhappiness. To the degree which these plays have laid a finger on the causes for marital discontent have they attacked the social problem which is divorce. In no cases have stern pronouncements been delivered against the evils of divorce itself; in The Animal Kingdom Barry presented a situation in which divorce is a desirable and logical way out of an unsatisfactory marriage. The writers of marriage plays have chosen to allow the shoddy situations to speak for themselves in preference to delivering lectures liberally mixed into the dialogue. In general, it may be said that this reluctance in the case of the marriage plays made for better drama, even though the effect on the social conscience of the audiences was not so marked.

20Ibid.
CHAPTER IV

OTHER SOCIAL PROBLEMS

The economic upheavals and injustices and the problems of marriage and home life were not the only problems which arrested the attention of the American dramatists of the thirties. While the depression and the changing role of the family posed problems which were outstanding because of their vital relation to the welfare of the nation and because of the prolific drama inspired by them, the American scene was also beset by such knotty issues as race relations, crime and juvenile delinquency, the state of organized religion, the occasional absence of ethical considerations in the professions and in politics, the results of an increased interest in and knowledge of abnormal psychology, the problems of education, and the rising threat to democracy. The last of these was the basis for plays treating primarily of the conflict between opposing political theories, but the line of demarcation between the political and the social aspects of our national life is often too dim to allow substantial separation of the one from the other. Therefore the plays which depicted the menace of fascism to democracy in the decade preceding the second world war are treated in this chapter at sufficient length to demonstrate another of the myriad facets of the social drama of the period.
Race relations have been a subject for serious plays since the days of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, although the Negro and the Jew were usually comic types in American drama until the thirties.\(^1\) Because of the racial prejudice existing in the South and to a smaller extent in the rest of the country, serious treatments of the race problem were seldom seen on the American stage. Even in 1930 a play dealing with Negro life, Daniel Reed's *Scarlet Sister Mary*, was presented by a white cast with blacked faces.\(^2\) After the first world war, however, talented Negro actors and actresses emerged who interpreted the plays of Negro life in a superior manner; in this connection, the names of Paul Robeson and Charles Gilpin immediately come to mind. During the twenties and early thirties, the tremendous success of such Negro folk plays as *Forces* (1927), by Dorothy and DuBois Heyward, and *Green Pastures* (1930), by Marc Connelly, indicated the remarkable rise of interest in the Negro as serious dramatic material.

During the theatrical season of 1933 and 1934, two violently moving plays dealing with the injustices which

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\(^1\) The plays of Eugene O'Neill are notable exceptions. In *All God's Chillun Got Wings* (1924), he has boldly tackled the issues of miscegenation and racial hatred. In *The Emperor Jones* (1920), O'Neill treated the Negro with sympathy and with dignity.

\(^2\) *Gagey, op. cit.*, p. 156.
the Negro race has suffered at the hands of the predominant white race in the southern states were presented. The first was John Wexley's *They Shall Not Die* and the other was Paul Peters' and George Sklar's *Stevedore*. The former was based upon the famous trial and conviction of nine colored boys for rape at Scottsboro, Alabama, although the author has carefully insisted that the characters and incidents of the story are entirely fictitious. The brutality with which the Negro boys are treated in the Cookeville jail, the travesty of justice in the court at Dexter, and the bigotry of the prosecution's case are placed in bold relief in the dialogue. There are practically no decent, unbiased white Southerners among the characters. Stark Young has found this play "a good example of a playwright's intensifying the theatre line of his work by simplifying the matter involved."\(^3\) This fallacy of the propaganda play is usually evident; to put his point across, the playwright has all too often had to forego fine shading of characters and issues in order to highlight the message of the play and to simplify the issue for the audience. Therefore a play such as *They Shall Not Die* loses in sheer literary merit proportionally as it gains in the violent force of its propaganda.

*Stevedore* (1934), mentioned in Chapter II among the plays dealing with economic injustice, was also an important

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contribution to the drama espousing the cause of justice for the Negro. Written by Paul Peters in collaboration with George Sklar, Stevedore is frankly propagandist and presents the violently controversial question of racial equality in a southern setting. Laid in the docks area of New Orleans, the play was inspired by Peters' experiences as a laborer there. Though it is effective dramatically, it often depends upon melodramatic devices and its bitter social indictment for its real power. Lonnie Thompson, the protagonist, is framed by a girl of the "white trash" in connivance with the evil bosses who seize the opportunity to get rid of him, since he has offended them by his organization of the stevedores. In a highly incendiary speech to the dock laborers, Lonnie states the plight of the American Negro:

The lowest animal in the field will fight fo' its home. And all you can think of doing is running away. Suppposin' you do run away? Whah you gwine to? Baton Rouge? Mississippi? Is it gwine to be any different dar? Dey gwine to treat you better dar? You gwine find jobs? You gwine get yo'self a home? Nassuh! You got black skin. You can't run away from dat. Make no difference whar you are, dey hound you just de same. . . . Every time de white boss crack de whip, you turn and run. You let him beat you, you let him hound you, you let him work you to death. When you gwine to put a stop to it, black man? When you gwine say: "You can't do dat. I'm a man. I got de rights of a man."

Lonnie is accused of attacking the worthless and base white woman who has lied to prevent the neighborhood from knowing that in reality she was beaten by her lover with whom

4Paul Peters and George Sklar, Stevedore, pp. 106-107.
she has quarreled. Immediately a white lynching mob is formed to wreak vengeance upon a Negro. Thus a similar situation to that in They Shall Not Die is evoked to decry the inhumane treatment of the Negro in the South. The social implication of Stevedore, as of all the plays of the decade dealing with the race problem, is clear; the Negro, as a minority group in America, has been unjustly treated in the United States. However, there is one vast difference between Stevedore and the other Negro plays; Peters and Sklar have suggested that the Negro will only achieve true justice by meeting violence with violence and by united efforts with laborers of the white race.

There were several finer dramas which touched on the problem of the exploitation and injustice experienced by the American Negro, although they did not state the problem as powerfully as did Stevedore and They Shall Not Die. Among these are Paul Green's The House of Connelly and John Steinbeck's Of Mice and Men. In Green's play the holding of the Negroes in virtually the same bondage existing prior to the Civil War is one of the features of the planter ideal against which Will rebels. The Negro women, Big Sis and Big Sue, relate at the opening of The House of Connelly that Will's father, old General Connelly, as judge of the local court, actually sentenced his own illegitimate mulatto son, Purvis, to death:
Big Sis. Old General stood up in his long robes and said silence in the court—Purvis to be hung by the neck till dead—and Lord have mercy on your poor souli—uhm—Big Sue. (Gazing restlessly about her.) Uhm—yah, and the sky look black like when they killed the Son o’ God. Big Sis. Poor Purvis!
Big Sue. Poor General!
Big Sis. Own flesh and blood make no difference. The law say hang.
Big Sue. The General say hang.
Big Sis. Purvis can’t say "pappy."
Big Sue. General can’t say "son," no, Lord, no!5

Later, Will recreates the same scene to the horror of his mother and sisters:

I stood in the courthouse a boy and heard Father sentence poor Purvis, his own son, to—-the gallows. . . . There in the robes of justice he rose up, the power of the law. Why didn’t he strip himself and say "I am the guilty one, judge me"?6

In this case, Paul Green merely points to the problem of miscegenation as a legacy from the Bourbon South. There is no solution suggested. Will finds that the damage for himself and his family has already been done by the dead. "Our character’s gone. We’re paying for their sins."7

But it was not only in the South that the dramatist might place the ugly spectacle of racial prejudice. In Steinbeck’s Of Mice and Men, which is laid on a ranch in the West, there is the case of Crooks, the black stable boy. Even the democracy of the ranch hands does not extend to Crooks. When Lennie, the moron, wants to come into Crooks’

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5Paul Green, The House of Connelly in Out of the South, pp. 3-4.
6Ibid., p. 60.
7Ibid.
room to visit while the other hired hands are celebrating
Saturday night, the Negro expresses his bitterness and lone-
liness:

Crooks. . . . You go on and get out of my room. I ain't wanted in the bunkhouse and you ain't wanted in
my room.
Lennie (ingenuously). Why ain't you wanted?
Crooks (furiously). 'Cause I'm black. They play cards
in there. But I can't play because I'm black. They say
I stink. Well, I tell you all of you stink to me.\(^8\)

The Jew has seldom been a figure in dramatic literature.\(^9\)
In the twenties the Jewish minority appeared in American
drama in such diverse vehicles as Abie's Irish Rose (1922),
by Anne Nichols, and Processional (1925), by John Howard
Lawson. Although there has been anti-Jewish sentiment in
the United States, the small amount of drama dealing with
the plight of Jewish families may be attributed to the fact
that generally the Jewish segment of our population is well
treated and enjoys full civil rights, outwardly at least.
One of the most effective and original plays of the thirties,
Clifford Odets' Awake and Sing (1935), pictured the life of
a Jewish family in the Bronx "struggling humbly with their
everyday problems."\(^10\) However, the tragic greatness of
Awake and Sing rises above racial considerations; its

\(^8\)John Steinbeck, Of Mice and Men, in John Gassner,
Twenty Best Plays of the Modern American Theatre, p. 668.

\(^9\)The Merchant of Venice (1597), The Jew of Malta (1592),
and The Bella (1878), are outstanding exceptions in the drama.

\(^10\)Harold Clurman, "Introduction" to Clifford Odets,
Awake and Sing, p. xi.
characters could as well have been a Negro family in Harlem or a low income Anglo-American family in Chicago's West Side. As we moved toward war in the early forties, and in the period after the war, the success of such plays as Deep Are the Roots, On Whitman Avenue, Native Son, Anna Lucasta, Tomorrow the World, and Strange Fruit, gave eloquent testimony to the foundations laid by the crusading race problem plays of the thirties.

During the twenties, the incidence of organized crime increased considerably. The rise of such czars of the underworld as Capone in Chicago, and the gangsters' arrogant disregard for law and police force, shocked the nation into a re-examination of society's responsibility for the outrageous menace which the dominion of crime had become. Harry Elmer Barnes observes of American crime:

It is pretty obvious that racketeering and organized crime on a large scale, which is the really important crime of our day, is concentrated mainly in the great cities of the urban North, including such midwestern metropolitan areas as Chicago and St. Louis. This fact results not only from the obviously greater opportunities for racketeering in these urban centers but also from the more direct contact with the something-for-nothing psychology of the leisure class, big business, speculative finance, and the like.\textsuperscript{11}

Barnes might have added here that the tenement areas of the large cities have provided an environment especially conducive to the development of criminal tendencies among its youth. Anderson's Winterset and Kingsley's Dead End, an even

\textsuperscript{11}Harry E. Barnes, \textit{Society in Transition}, p. 673.
more outspoken problem play, showed how such things can happen. In the former, tragedy is spun by Anderson in the situations of the tenement residents, Garth and his family, completely at the mercy of and dominated by the dangerous criminal, Trock. But in *Dead End*, Kingsley has actually shown the young in the process of becoming hardened criminals in the hostile environment of the slums. "Baby-Face" Martin, the gangster, is an outstanding alumnus of the dead end. He has become a legendary hero to the adolescent gang of the neighborhood, whose members are well on their way to achieving "Baby-Face's" status a little later. Tommy, the leader of the gang of adolescents, hovers between right and decency, as taught him by his sister, and the petty crime in which he is involved on the streets. The neighborhood boys are frequently sent to reform school, where they pick up other tricks from the inmates; they usually leave there as hardened criminals to return to an active life of crime in the city. But in the latter stage, they are now influenced by the "something-for-nothing" philosophy mentioned by Barnes. "Baby-Face" in a speech to Gimpy, the only boy from the slum area who went to college, derides people who struggle along on a small salary:

What ta hell did yuh tink I wuz gonna do, hang aroun' 'is dump waitin' fer Santa Claus tuh take care a me, fer Chris' sake? Looka yew! What a yew got? Six years yuh went to college and what da hell a yuh got? A lousy handout a thifty bucks a month! Not fer me! I yain't like yew punks . . . starvin' an' freezin' . . . suh what? Peanuts? Coffee an'? Yeah, I got mine, but I
took it. Look! (Pulls at his shirt.) Silk. Twenty bucks. Look a dis. (Pulls at his jacket.) Custom tailored—a hundred an' fifty bucks. Da fat a da land I live off of. An' I got a flock a dames at'd make yew guys water at da mouth.

And does society solve the problem of crime through its present system of penal correction and execution of the offenders? The dramatists who dealt with the subject in plays thought not. In *Dead End*, Kingsley demonstrated that reform schools for the youthful incorrigibles, far from providing social and psychological rehabilitation, too often provide the finishing touches to make hardened criminals of boys. John Wexley, in *The Last Mile*, a tight melodrama laid in the death cells of an Oklahoma prison, portrayed the hopeless inadequacy of our capital punishment system. Here in the death cells, men are leading a day-by-day existence, horribly tortured with each passing hour which brings death closer. There is no mournful lament for innocent men wrongly convicted and sentenced. The point Wexley seems to attack is capital punishment as a satisfactory solution for our crime problem. Death even by legal sanction is largely an admission by society of its failure to cope with the criminal tendencies which occasionally capture men of all classes, races, and circumstances. In *The Last Mile*, we have a cross-section of all kinds of men merged into the democracy of despair which is the death-house of any penitentiary. The hardened

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criminal is represented by John ("Killer") Mears. The young boy who committed a murder dictated by the wild passion of a moment is Fred Mayor. There are other assorted types, including a Southern Negro, "Sunny" Jackson, and an Italian-American, Tom D'Amoro. Even in the prison's democracy of expediency, racial differences and bitterness cannot be forgotten completely. It is revealed in a conversation about the possible final whereabouts of one of the convicts who has just been electrocuted.

JACKSON
Ah shuh didn't wanna see that fellah Waltahs go.

KIRBY
That's all right. You'll meet him in Heaven, Sunny.

JACKSON
Ah'm thinkin' ah won't ever meet him, nor you, nor any white man up in Heaven, Red Boy. You know that song--I got shoes, you got shoes--(Begins to sing.) All Gawd's chillun got shoes. When ah get to Heaven ah'm gonna put on my shoes, ah'm gonna walk all ovah Gawd's Heaven--Well, that song is all one grand lie--and it's a fool niggah that believes it. Don't you all know theah is two heavens, one foah the white man and one foah the black man? Why--if ah could sneak mah way into that theah white man's Heaven by accident or somethin'--why yoush keepahs up theah would say to me--What for you want in this Heaven anyhow? Who told you to come heah? Don't you all know this ain't yoush place? Git ovah in your own niggah Heaven long by that toilet, you black bastard, before you is sent to niggah hell.

KIRBY
What--have you got a hell--too--for the niggers?

JACKSON (bitterly)
Shuh--shuh there is a niggah hell. Do you think they're gonna let us fry in the same fiah with yoh white meat?--Hell no!13

The brutal treatment of the Negro boys in the jail at

Cookeville is the high point of one whole act of another Wexley play, They Shall Not Die. A sadistic sheriff can maltreat the prisoners to his heart’s content because of the predominant racial antagonism of his county. That such conditions exist only by the sanction, active or passive, of the social group is implicit in Wexley’s thesis.

The tremendous strides made in the field of abnormal psychology during the two decades subsequent to the first world war were phenomenal. The findings of psychologists were related to practically all fields with very beneficial results. Education, medicine, personnel administration in industry, and even religion felt the influence of this comparatively new science. The writings of Freud, Jung, and Adler were much admired and much discussed during the twenties and thirties. Psychoanalysis, with its emphasis upon the subconscious life of the human animal and its analysis of dreams, frustrations, and inhibitions, provided for the layman, as well as the psychiatrist, a new aid to the understanding of the psychological maladjustments of mankind.

The fruits of new psychological knowledge began to appear in literature with amazing frequency. Many laymen became amateur psychologists. It is not surprising, therefore, to find psychological abnormalities frequently portrayed in the important plays of the period.

One of the most effective of such plays was Rose Franken’s Another Language. Excessive maternal affection, misguided
and selfish, was the subject of this play. Sidney Howard had also considered the social problem of the domineering mother in *The Silver Cord* (1927). John Steinbeck introduced the pathetic moron, Lennie, to the stage in his *Of Mice and Men*. But of the successful plays dealing with psychological abnormalities and their relations to the social group, perhaps the most daring and the most notable was Lillian Hellman's *The Children's Hour* (1934). Touching lightly on an unfounded accusation of Lesbianism, *The Children's Hour* is an expert psychological study of the disastrous and widening effects of a lie. Laid in a girl's school, the play shows, moreover, the various psychological quirks which appear in childhood. There were also many minor plays dealing with the application of our growing knowledge of psychology to the problems of society.

Ethics in the professions and in politics took some hard blows at the hands of the playwrights. It seemed to some of them that the idealism of a younger America was giving way to a great emphasis on personal profit and selfish considerations among our professional men and our statesmen.¹⁴

The profession of medicine had long demanded a lifetime of selfless devotion from its members. The Hippocratic Oath set forth the ideals which young doctors swore to uphold. But in the Pulitzer Prize play *Men in White* (1935),

¹⁴The materialistic objectives of the business barons, as a dramatic subject, were discussed in Chapter II.
Sidney Kingsley examined some types characteristic of those in the practice of medicine. There is Dr. Hochberg, tireless and devoted scientist, who would build up at St. George's Hospital a staff devoted to the cure of the sick without thought of personal profit or prestige. There is, in contrast, Dr. Dunningham, a "courtesy" physician at St. George's, who concentrates upon a professional appearance rather than upon the science of healing. His "system of logic concludes that impressing the patient and assuaging his fears are more important than keeping up with medical journals and the march of treatment."¹⁵ Between these is George Ferguson, the young interne and house physician. Torn between love and the desire for money and position, on the one hand, and a sincere wish to work hard and to continue the study of medicine, on the other, George faces a dilemma which is the product of a materialistic age. The struggle within the soul of a doctor between the love of money and his dedication to humanity is the factor which may lead some day to socialized medicine.

Ferguson. ... My dad used to say, "Above all is humanity!" He was a fine man--my dad. A small town physician--upstate. When I was about thirteen, he came to my room one night and apologized because he was going to die. His heart had gone bad on him. He knew if he gave up medicine and took it easy he could live for twenty years. But he wanted to go right on, wanted to die in the harness. ...And he did. (Pause.) Above all else is humanity—that's a big thought. So big that alongside of it you and I don't really matter very much. That's why we do it, I guess.

¹⁵Sidney Kingsley, Men in White, p. 50.
Levine. You're right, of course! Ah... it's not good--too much suffering. Kills things in you... A doctor shouldn't have to worry about money! That's one disease he's not trained to fight. It either corrupts him... or it destroys him. (He sighs.) Well... maybe some day the State will take over Medicine... Ferguson. Before we let the State control medicine, we'd have to put every politician on the operating table and cut out his acquisitive instincts.\footnote{16}

That the business men who control the destinies of hospitals, through their boards of trustees, do not always understand the problems of unfettered scientific endeavor is implicit in this play. For example, the board of trustees wishes to place a young man, who lacks the necessary training, in a supervisory position at the hospital, because it might encourage his wealthy father-in-law to subscribe generously to the hospital's endowment. From the viewpoint of Dr. Hochberg, such a compromise to expediency can never be justified.

Dr. Hochberg. ... It's a social crime, gentlemen, that hospitals should depend on the charity of a few individuals... And till hospitals are subsidized by the community and run by men in medicine, we'll continue to need our wealthy friend. I realize that.\footnote{17}

In his play, \textit{Counsellor-at-Law} (1931), Elmer Rice attacked the occasional absence of ethics in the legal profession. In this play, Rice traces the rise of a successful and brilliant lawyer, a Jew who has come up from the obscurity of East Side origins. He marries a Christian divorcée, whom he blindly worships. She is a snobbish society

\footnote{16}Ibid., pp. 65-66. \footnote{17}Ibid., pp. 84-85.
woman who does not really love her husband; only his wealth and prestige impress her. The lawyer, betrayed by his wife and her friends, faces disbarment. But, inspired by his Jewish secretary, he sets to work on a sensational murder case. The questionable types who are found in a criminal lawyer's office are present in Rice's play. In this respect, Gagey said: "The play's interest comes partly from Rice's expert expose of a law office... but his main thesis seems to be the contrast between Simon's material success and what this success has done to him."  

Maxwell Anderson wrote an angry attack on the unscrupulous politicians who divert governmental funds and functions to their own personal profit. The play was Both Your Houses (1933), and it won the Pulitzer Prize for 1932-1933. Anderson took a segment of the House of Representatives for his target, although it is clear that the whole of American officialdom is included in his indictment. Through the operations of the House Appropriations Committee, the members reveal how graft and corruption in high office may appear to be high patriotism and faithful service to the voting public.

Sol. . . . You never get anything by taking things away from people, Alan. You've got to give them something. Alan. Why?
Sol. Because the sole business of government is graft, special privilege, and corruption—with a by-product of order. They have to keep order or they can't make collections... 

Gagey, op. cit., p. 147.
Alan. Sol, you know—you may be right.

Sol. No, I'm all wrong. But what I'm mostly wrong about is I don't steal in a big enough way. Steal apples and they put you in jail—steal a nation and the hosts of heaven come down and line up under your banners.19

The conflict in Both Your Houses is between a young, honest, and inexperienced liberal representative from Nevada, Alan McClean, and the "Old Guard," who regard legislative appropriations largely from the standpoint of patronage and votes. The conflict between the viewpoints of these two groups is divulged in an exchange between Alan and Sol Fitzmaurice, who has been a member of Congress for many years.

Sol. . . . There ain't half as many honest men as thieves. Never have been. There's just one fallacy in your argument. Would it be your plan . . . to run this government honest—as being the best policy?

Alan. Why not?

Sol. Then there wouldn't be anything in it for anybody, would there? Nothing beyond his salary?

Alan. Well—no.

Sol. You see, that's the fatal flaw.20

Alan's honesty is defeated, of course. But, he warns his colleagues, as he prepares to resign his seat in Congress, that they will be defeated in the end by an electorate tired of "boondoggling," inept Congressmen, and the evil activities of political machines in government.

Alan. More people are open-minded today than you'd believe. A lot of them aren't so sure we found the final

19 Maxwell Anderson, Both Your Houses, pp. 103-104.
20 Ibid., pp. 101-102.
answer a hundred and fifty years ago. Who knows what is
the best kind of government? Maybe they all get rotten
after a while and have to be replaced. It doesn't matter
about you or me. We have a little set-to here over a
minor matter, and you've won, but I want to tell you I'm
not even a premonition of what you're going to hear
crashing around you if the voters who elect you ever find
out what you're like and what you do to them. The best
I can do is just to help them find it out.21

The spreading triumphs of totalitarianism in lands across
the seas during the nineteen thirties constituted an ominous
background to the grave domestic problems which the United
States was facing. As the decade progressed, it became ap-
parent that the irrepressible conflict between democracy and
fascism, long a "cold war" between ideologies, was likely to
erupt in the outbreak of armed hostilities. This situation
posed a real threat to democracy as it was practiced in
America. Although the dramatists had found much to criticize
on the national scene, they reacted wholeheartedly in the
defense and glorification of American democracy when they
were fully aroused to the dangers of fascism.

Early thrusts at European dictatorship were Elmer Rice's
Judgement Day (1934) and Victor Wolfson's Bitter Stream
(1936). Sinclair Lewis' novel It Can't Happen Here (1936),
an expose of the dangers from native fascist elements, was
dramatized in collaboration with John C. Moffitt.

But the really important plays which emphasized the
struggle between the two antagonistic political philosophies
began to appear on our stage in 1939, the year in which war

21 Ibid., pp. 177-178.
actually broke out in Europe, and the last year of the decade. Maxwell Anderson's *Key Largo* (1939) was based upon the conviction that the war of Loyalist Spain was the struggle of all liberty-loving peoples. Many of the young American liberals had fought in the Spanish Civil War against Franco, and they believed, as Anderson believed, that Spain was the proving-ground for the arrogant fascist legions of Italy and Germany. One of the Americans in the play voices this conviction:

*Victor.* Yes, but if I die then I know men will never give in; then I'll know there's something in the race of men, because even I had it, that hate injustice more than it wants to live.---Because even I had it---and I'm no hero.---And that means the Hitlers and the Mussolinis always lose in the end---force loses in the long run, and the spirit wins, whatever spirit is. Anyway it's the thing that says it's better to sit here with the moon and hold them off while I can. If I went with you I'd never know whether the race was turning down again, to the dinosaurs---this way I keep my faith. In myself and what men are. And in what we may be.22

Later, after the end of the war in Spain, the disillusioned and spiritually sick Kind McCloud returns to Key Largo, near the Florida Everglades. Here he finds the gangster, Murillo, and his henchmen relentlessly tramping on the freedom and human dignity of people with the passive assistance of the neutral law enforcement agencies. The Sheriff explains that he cannot arrest Murillo and his gang for their

22 Maxwell Anderson, *Key Largo*, p. 23.
crooked activities because "there's nothing against them,"23 and because "the law can't deal with prophecy, you know; only with facts."24 The analogy here is clear; the gangsters are symbolic of the fascist powers. The people on Key Largo represent Spain, and the uncompromising neutrality of the Sheriff is plainly suggestive of the neutrality of the democracies during the Spanish War. King thus finds here the chance to vindicate his desertion of the Loyalist cause in Spain in defeating the evil machinations of Murillo, in asserting the wrath of free men against oppression:

King. It doesn't come to us all. It comes to many in certain generations, comes to only a few in others; and it says, if you want to live you must die now--this instant--or the food you eat will rot at your lips, and the lips you kiss will turn to stone, and the very ground you tread will curl up under your footsteps like a snake and hiss behind you.--Yet if you're chosen out, or choose yourself, and go out to die, you die forever after, and that's farther away than one can say in light-years;--and the thing you die for is as far away as that. You die to bring about a race of men who'll walk the heavens on a rope of sines and cosines, looking like Wells' martian polyp, and operating on the womb of night with a long sharp equation. It's no fun to perish in your own person, when you're young, for this remote eventuality--even if it were attractive, which it's not; and so in the last analysis one dies because it's part of the bargain he takes on when he agrees to live.--A man must die for what he believes--if he's unfortunate enough to have to face it in his time--and if he won't then he'll end up believing in nothing at all--and that's death, too.25

23Ibid., p. 31.  
24Ibid., p. 32.  
25Ibid., pp. 117-118.
Irwin Shaw's *The Gentle People* (1939), sub-titled "a Brooklyn fable," was another symbolical treatment of the Nazi threat. As in *Key Largo*, the symbol of fascist oppression is a gangster. The gangster, Harold Goff, demands "protection" money from two old men, Jonah Goodman and Philip Agnagnos, who spend their spare time in the evenings fishing off a pier near Coney Island. He has also seduced Goodman's daughter, Stella. When the two old men complain in court, they find that the judge is cooperating with the gangster; thus, there is no recourse to legal action. Driven to desperate lengths finally, the two fishermen decide that they must take the law into their own hands and kill Goff, although they have never before resorted to violence.

PHILIP

Everything you say is true, Jonah, but . . . All my life I wanted only peace and gentleness. Violence, (He shrugs in distaste) Leave it to men like Goff.

JONAH

Finally, Philip, if you want peace and gentleness, you got to take violence out of hands of the people like Goff and you got to take it in your own hands and use it like a club. Then maybe, on the other side of the violence, there will be peace and gentleness. All my life, Philip, I have believed in reason. I convince you, you convince me. Can you convince airplanes with bombs and men with guns in their pockets?26

Here again a dramatist suggests that sometimes those who hate violence, that is to say, democratic peoples, must resort to violence to rid themselves of violence, the threat of violence, and those who would use violence to destroy their freedom. It is significant that Shaw's two old "gentle

people," a Greek and a Jew, were representative of two pathetic group victims of Nazi terror in the European war.

*The American Way* (1939), by George S. Kaufman and Moss Hart, was a spirited defense of the American way of life, admittedly with numerous imperfections, against the political systems of the Old World. Covering the years between 1896 and 1939, this play is a sweeping panorama of all the significant national events of those crowded years as they affect the lives of a German immigrant couple, Martin and Irma Gunther, and their family. The basic freedoms which American citizenship guarantees are contrasted with the tyranny the Gunther family would have endured if they had remained in Germany. When Martin Gunther faces loss of his shop during a business crisis and his wife suggests that they should return to Germany, Martin says:

> No, no, Irma. Whatever happens we stay in America. Why did we come here? We do not want our Karl to be used just for an army, like me. Like my father. No, Irma, we do not give up. It is worth working for—these things—for our children and for us, both.27

Characteristically, the play ends with a spirited condemnation of fascism and an affirmation of faith in American democracy:

**MARTIN**

(Speaking above the cries and taunts of the crowd)

> Think! Think what you are doing! There are not many countries left that are free! If this country goes down, what will men do? Where else can men go? Do not do this

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thing, I beg of you! Do not bring this madness over here. You will not starve in this country. There will be jobs again, just as there have been in the past. This is not our first crisis! Read! Read the history of America! Again and again we have fought our way through! And now, just because one man—one man—stands over in Europe and tells us that democracy is finished, that this country is no good, are you going to believe him? Because if that is what you believe, you have no right to call yourselves Americans! Democracy is not finished; it still exists in many countries of the world, and we are not going to let it die! We are going to keep up the fight until this evil force is wiped from the face of the earth.28

One of the most articulate voices of the expression of faith in the democratic ideals in the drama of the period was Robert E. Sherwood. Having asserted his faith in the common man and his disgust with the fascist war-makers in Idiot's Delight (1938), he passed on to a brilliantly conceived treatment of the glories of American democratic idealism in Abe Lincoln in Illinois (1938). Although laid in the scenes and times of Lincoln's life, the message of the play is doubtlessly directed to the troubled America of the late nineteen thirties. Lincoln's farewell speech to his friends and neighbors of Springfield in February, 1861, is a fitting challenge to America to gird itself for battle against the troublesome domestic problems and the threats of alien ideologies from abroad:

... It is a grave duty which I now face. In preparing for it, I have tried to enquire: what great principle or ideal is it that has kept this Union so long together? And I believe that it was not the mere matter of separation of the colonies from the motherland, but that

28 Ibid., pp. 150-151.
sentiment in the Declaration of Independence which gave liberty to the people of this country and hope to all the world. This sentiment was the fulfillment of an ancient dream, which men have held through all time, that they might one day shake off their chains and find freedom in the brotherhood of life. We gained democracy, and now there is the question whether it is fit to survive. Perhaps we have come to the dreadful day of awakening, and the dream is ended. If so, I am afraid it must be ended forever. I cannot believe that ever again will men have the opportunity we have had. Perhaps we should admit that, and concede that our ideals of liberty and equality are decadent and doomed. I have heard of an eastern monarch who once charged his wise men to invent him a sentence which would be true and appropriate in all times and situations. They presented him the words, "And this too shall pass away." That is a comforting thought in time of affliction—"And this too shall pass away." And yet—(Suddenly he speaks with quiet but urgent authority.)—let us believe that it is not true! Let us live to prove that we can cultivate the natural world that is about us, and the intellectual and moral world that is within us, so that we may secure an individual, social and political prosperity, whose course shall be forward, and which, while the earth endures, shall not pass away. . . . I commend you to the care of the Almighty, as I hope that in your prayers you will remember me. . . . Good-bye, my friends and neighbors. 29

In this chapter, the works of numerous playwrights have been cited to show the many and varied social problems of American life in the plays of the thirties. The playwrights were not merely good Marxists who interpreted life in terms of economic theories, or good Catholics who were concerned with divorce; their social interests were widespread and extended to all the phases of our social life which required exposure and correction. Race relations, crime and punishment, psychological abnormalities, professional and political

ethics, and the impending crisis between American democracy and totalitarianism, as well as the breakdown of our economic and family institutions, were the important subjects of newspaper headlines all during the thirties. All these issues contain good inherent dramatic possibilities, and the playwrights of the thirties, with their strong sociological inclinations, made the most of them.
CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION

The underlying contention of this study has been that social problems of the United States became the principal subjects of the drama written in this country between 1930 and 1940. From the vantage point of later years, the thirties may be viewed as a decade of great social and economic upheaval. The social issues of the times generated a reform movement which found its impetus in the pronounced social consciousness of the New Deal. Behind the Roosevelt administration was, of course, the will of the people who brought it to power and retained it in control for an unprecedented period of time. During the years between 1930 and 1940 the country was vitally concerned with the problems which the great depression of 1929 had emphasized in its catastrophic tenure. The will to delve deeply into the social mores and the economic bases of American life to see wherein society had erred was the dynamic force behind the reforms of the New Deal. This social re-awakening was therefore reflected in the artistic life of this country, for real art must always reflect the ideals of the times in which it is created. Social problems have never before enjoyed such a vogue in any other theater or in any other period of our own.
We have seen in the second chapter how quickly and how enthusiastically competent playwrights reacted to the grave economic crisis of America which culminated in the depression of 1929. Before the New Deal existed as a political philosophy, the American stage was liberally furnished with plays dealing with various phases of our economic life. Liberalism, sometimes extreme, characterized the outstanding plays dealing with our financial ruin and its devastating influence upon the lives of our people. But poverty and its sordid legacies of crime, disease, and despair existed in America long before the depression came, and it is from this point that the attack on the economic institutions of our society usually proceed in the plays included in this study.

Jeeter Lester and his kind are largely the victims of a changed agrarian system which replaces tenant farmers with machines. At the other end of the social scale stands Will Connelly, who is forced to adapt himself to a new agrarian order which has no place for the aristocracy of Southern feudalism. Jeeter and Will are typical of the maladjustments which appeared in the South as a result of the changing agricultural system. The playwrights have not suggested in either Tobacco Road or The House of Connelly that the changes which produced such maladjustments were undesirable, but these plays have pointed out that the maladjustments exist and that measures must be taken to correct them.

Other playwrights dealt with economic problems which
were less sectional in scope. Maxwell Anderson's *Winterset* is a liberal's indictment of reactionary suppression of labor groups in this country; it is tragedy concocted from an imaginative interpretation of the events which followed the famous Sacco-Vanzetti case, itself an event of highest significance in indicating the widening chasm between the interests of capital and those of labor. Thus Anderson's play, fashioned on a familiar episode, was a real landmark in the rise of the drama of social significance. Sidney Kingsley depicted the sordid life of the city slums as vividly and as grippingly in *Dead End* as Jack Kirkland had painted the decadent life of the Georgia sharecroppers in *Tobacco Road*. Clifford Odets wrote fiery denunciations of capitalism and vigorously asserted the salvation for the proletariat to be found in communism in his plays, *Waiting for Lefty* and *Awake and Sing*. Lillian Hellman utilized similar themes in *The Little Foxes* and *Days to Come*. Anderson, Odets, and Hellman asserted that a healthy society will arise only when all classes have achieved economic as well as political freedom. Kingsley's play is a development of the rather obvious thesis that crime, disease, and social maladjustments are the natural by-products of the urban slums in which American cities abound.

Second only to the great concern for economic livelihood as the central quest of the thirties were the social implications of the deterioration of American marriage and family life. The tight family unit of our pioneer days seemingly
had become as archaic as the covered wagon. The security
and social control of the American home seemed to disinte-
grate with increasing rapidity all through the first three
decades of the twentieth century. The growth of easy divorce
and its ultimate popular acceptance in the United States were
ascribed by sociologists as the major threats to the American
home. In *The Women*, Clare Boothe dealt with the twin problems
of loose marriages and easy divorces. The tremendous emphasis
upon sex as the dominant factor in marriage was touched upon
in *The Women*, and was treated at greater length by S. N. Behrman
in *Brief Moment*, by Rachel Crothers in *Susan and God*, by
Philip Barry in *The Animal Kingdom* and in *The Philadelphia
Story*.

In the study of plays dealing with the other social
problems, it is evident that no major issue of the period was
left untreated in the plays. The eternal paradox of American
democracy, the plight of the Negroes in the South, was the
subject of John Wexley's *They Shall Not Die*, Paul Peters' and
George Sklar's *Stevedore*, and many less important plays. The
national concern for the increase of crime is reflected in
*Dead End*, by Sidney Kingsley, and in *The Last Mile*, by John
Wexley. The increased awareness of psychological abnormal-
ities within the social group is manifested in such plays as
John Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men* and Lillian Hellman's *The
Children's Hour*. Professional ethics in the medical profes-
sion is the problem of *Men in White*, by Kingsley. The legal
profession received similar attention in Elmer Rice's play, 
Counsellor-at-Law. Maxwell Anderson wrote a scathing attack 
upon the legislative branch of the government in Both Your 
Houses. When it became apparent that the ideological conflict 
between democracy and totalitarianism was likely to result in 
actual warfare, the defense of democracy became a favorite 
theme with liberal playwrights. Accordingly, some of the 
finest plays of the period deal with the fascist danger and 
the glorification of American democracy. Maxwell Anderson in 
Key Largo, Irwin Shaw in The Gentle People, Robert Sherwood 
in Idiot's Delight and in Abe Lincoln in Illinois, and George 
S. Kaufman and Moss Hart in The American Way, celebrated the 
American concepts of freedom, liberty, justice, opportunity, 
and equality, and pointed out how these conflicted with the 
tenets of fascism.

The drama of the decade between 1930 and 1940 is not that 
of a "lost generation" drifting through the wastelands of 
nihilism and despair; it is a representation of the age's aim 
"at positive solutions, at affirmations of various kinds."\(^1\) It 
reveals the extent to which American playwrights were 
keeping pace with the turbulent times through which this 
country, along with the rest of the world, was passing. An 
objective critical viewpoint, which is characteristic of 
most of the playwrights of the thirties, gave them the 

\(^1\)Gurko, op. cit., p. 5.
necessary perspective for understanding the vital issues of the age. Although this concern for the world in which we live was manifest to some degree in the drama of the nineteen twenties, there was in that decade still a large representation of the prewar school of sentimentality. For example, Anne Nichols' *Able's Irish Rose* was the greatest single dramatic success of the twenties, but it is unthinkable that such a play might have merited serious attention during the following decade. Moreover, the playwrights of the twenties tended to emphasize the individual aspects of their characters rather than their relation to the social order. O'Neill's *Strange Interlude* (1928) and Howard's *The Silver Cord* (1926) illustrate the emphasis which the earlier playwrights placed upon the psychological life of the individual.

We can safely conclude that the depression itself was the greatest single force in the impulse toward drama of social import which characterized the American theater after 1930. Its impact on the national economic structure was so great and its influence on American life at all levels so disastrous that some of our dramatists wondered if the capitalist system would ever recover. The depression emphasized the great degree of dependence of the individual upon the workings of the social group; his welfare was inextricably bound up with forces so vast and so complex that the individual seemed powerless within its toils. From this generally accepted premise came the strong interest in the social media
of our times, and the theater was quick to respond to the new interest of its audiences. For the people who went to see plays and those who read them were no longer satisfied with saccharine tales of happiness and delight. The disastrous events which followed the economic crash of 1929 had made it all too clear that life was certainly not, in the idiom of a popular song of the period, "just a bowl of cherries." The dreary prospects of daily bank failures, mortgage foreclosures, and mass unemployment and starvation, seemed to indicate that life was a serious, if not a grim, affair, and by no means a blissful series of happy endings. To such an audience, Abie's Irish Rose would have seemed an entirely erroneous representation of life.

The economic crisis probably accentuated the host of other social problems which lingered on the national scene. The reform spirit was in the air, and our playwrights breathed deeply of it. The questionable future of marriage and the home, the omnipresent racial problems, a decline of professional ethics and idealism, society's attitude toward its psychologically abnormal members, and the serious threat of totalitarianism to democracy, were familiar subjects for the serious drama of the "angry decade," which was the nineteen thirties. Therefore Odets, Kirkland, Rice, Sherwood, Hellman, Wexley, and the other writers of social problem plays were the logical successors to the American theater of the late twenties. These playwrights gave to our dramatic
literature numerous plays of ideas suited to the period's quest for social security in the broad sense.

Other playwrights, whose aims were not so directly pointed toward the real social problem play, nevertheless contributed important ideas about and criticisms of the workings of society. Foremost in this group is Maxwell Anderson. Anderson was primarily striving to bring about a rebirth of interest in the verse tragedy of the Shakespearean mold. However, there are no more forceful and more bitterly outspoken indictments of the forces of evil in American society than in *Key Largo* and *Winterset*.

The serious plays of social problems were not the only successful plays of the period by any means. Comedy of high quality such as *Reunion in Vienna* (1931), by Robert Sherwood, *You Can't Take It With You* (1936), by Hart and Kaufman, or *Life With Father* (1939), by Howard Lindsay and Russell Crouse, flourished successfully on the American stage of this decade. However, the comedies of the period seem to follow in the tradition set for this form during earlier periods. Philip Barry's brilliant plays such as *The Animal Kingdom* and *The Philadelphia Story* were distinguished expositions of social problems as well as clever comedies.

But the social problem plays were a relatively novel form which prospered during the thirties. All of the leading playwrights of our country, except Eugene O'Neill and William Saroyan, tried their hands at plays dealing with the
problems of society during the decade. Out of this concern with the crucial issues of the age were fashioned some of the most significant plays of the whole American theater. Among such distinguished products might be mentioned Anderson's Winterset, O'Niel's Awake and Sing, Kirkland's Tobacco Road, Green's House of Connelly, Crothers' Susan and God, Barry's The Philadelphia Story, and Sherwood's Abe Lincoln in Illinois.

There is, however, some disagreement regarding the merits of the new social problem plays. Edmond Gagey remarked of the playwrights who adapted social problems to the drama that "it is difficult to avoid the conclusion that their work has been the most significant drama of the period." 2 On the other hand, the eminent theatrical critic and historian, George Jean Nathan, decried the obsession with present-day issues of our most promising playwrights who "while they have progressed far beyond utilizing the old theatrical hokum implicit in Mother, the Baby, and maybe to some extent the Flag... still freely surrender themselves to the newer hokum implicit in Lincoln, Democracy and Racial Persecution." 3

There is some justification in Nathan's dismissal of the plays of social protest. It has usually been true that

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3 George Jean Nathan, "The Decline of the Playwrights," American Mercury, LII (March, 1941), 357.
the literary artist who writes on a sociological theme suffers a handicap; often his writing suffers from his concentration upon the sociological issue or vice versa. Great writers are seldom, if ever, great social scientists. The demands of each field are too great. Furthermore, the playwrights of social protest, particularly the left-wing writers, have offered salvation to mankind only in terms of a party line or some favorite "ism." The arrogance with which they have often lectured their audiences has affected adversely the esthetic of the plays.

On the other hand, the facts seem to support Gagey's position. The American theater produced the only vital and lively drama in the world during the nineteen thirties. Although it suffered from some esthetic imperfections, it stemmed from the issues of a confused society struggling to find clarity in the midst of disorder. The trend toward the treatment of social problems by no means declined after 1939; the second world war and its aftermath witnessed the production of numerous plays which represented "the fate of the individual in terms of the fate of society." 4 Under the beneficent influence of democracy, which the American social play has striven in the long run to uphold and strengthen, it is likely that our leading playwrights will continue to treat the great social problems of American life in their plays.

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