
Polarity of Law and Justice In Clifford Odets' *Till The Day I Die*

Vidya Dass*

**Assistant Professor of English, RVS College of Arts and Science, Sulur, Coimbatore*

ABSTRACT:

Till the Day I Die is based on the rise of communism in Germany when Hitler was in power. It concentrates on the plight of the German communists who were continuously arrested and tortured by the Nazis. Once arrested the communists do not accept them again in their camps. Ernst Tausig, the protagonist of the play is arrested and undergoes such suppressions but still foresee a promising new world. He is persuaded to commit suicide by one of the Nazi authorities who heart of hearts support the communists. "Law and Justice" is established in the vice versa which manifests the polarity of the two. The Major who had to use his authority to punish Ernst does not, and Ernst who has to be accepted by his comrades is not. Both the characters go against the "Law" but certainly they triumph by establishing "Justice" according to their conscience acceptable by all mankind.

Keywords: *Establishment of Justice according to the conscience of man against the Law of his land.*

It was a time when the entire United States of America and the rest of the world were hard hit by The Great Depression. There were great changes happening in the social, political and economical spheres of the society. The nineteen thirties proved to be a period of high tension and stress in the lives of the people. The Great Crash of the stock market on October 24, 1929 is considered to be a black day in the history of America and also the entire world. The epoch experienced serious repercussions that shook the general psychology of the people of the entire human race. America then, a nation sunk in dearth and desolation gave rise to new directions of life and new hopes and aspirations to its average citizens. Many young Americans lost hope and faith in "democracy" and started following "communism". Art and Literature too, reflected the varied issues of the Great Depression. The artist and literary men

of this era changed their usual course, and formulated a new course, concentrating mainly on the effects of the Great Depression.

The gloom of the era proved to have opposite effects for young talents. It gave rise to amateur dramatist and mediocre playwrights with powerful area under discussion to express the concerns of the nineteen thirties. The astringent protestors of the depression economy were the proletarian writers who articulated the ills of capitalism and proclaimed their right. Drama, among all other genres of literature virtually became a weapon in the hands of the writers. The dramatists of the depression era were Paul Elmer More, Maxwell Anderson, Clifford Odets, Lillian Hellman, Irwin Shaw, and Sidney Kingsley. These dramatists were deeply concerned with the socio-economic and political issues of the people. Some of the famous works of these writers were - Clifford Odets' *Waiting for Lefty*, *Till the Day I Die*, *Golden Boy* and Melvin Levy's *Gold Eagle Guy* and Elmer Rice's *We, the People!*, *Judgement Day* and S. N Behrman's *Rain from Heaven*.

The American folk were originally hostile to the radical activities of the USSR, Germany and France but the huge revolutions of those nations forced them to take a keen look at the policies; the related reactions and its optimistic results. The doctrines of Marx and Engels were also gaining popularity because it stood by many of the demanding factors of the proletarian society. The ideologies of Marx and Engels attracted a number of enthusiastic writers around the world. Many dramatists of the nineteen thirties became members of the Communist Party. Followed by this the communists of America took efforts to create their own theatres and staged the plays of the party writers. Clifford Odets, then a young dramatist was one among those who joined the party and helped to spread the party principles.

The scintillating responses of Odets' dramas elevated him to a higher level. He became the most prominent and promising playwright of the nineteen thirties as well as for the Party. He was hailed as the "White Hope" of the depression era and the "Golden Boy" of the left-wing drama.

The plays of Clifford Odets is categorised by some of his critics into three divisions namely, "agit-prop" plays or plays "Written in Anger", plays "Written in Moderation" and plays

“Written in Maturity”. The play taken for discussion is *Till the Day I Die* which speaks about the plight of the German communists. *Till the Day I Die* a deliberate and daring attempt by the author is particularly about the rise of communism in Germany when Hitler was in power. Odets has purposely dealt with the issues of a foreign nation only to educate the people of America and to reinforce the establishment of law and justice in an ideal manner.

Odets' *Till the Day I Die* is the first anti-Nazi play of the depression era. It is divided into seven startling scenes about a young communist by name Ernst Tausig, who is a violinist turned revolutionary activist. He works in an underground press with his brother Carl Tausig, fiancée Tilly Westermann and friend, Baum. Another activist in the camp is Zeltner who is lately released from the Nazi prison. The communists have a great suspicion that he works for the Nazis. He is considered a man of disgust and an intruder in the communist camp.

The reason for such release and arrest by the Nazis officials very often is to create tension and impede the progress of the communist activities. The life of these activists becomes pathetic when they are caught and tortured until it becomes fatal in most cases. Some communists become informers in the course of time notwithstanding the series and degrees of tortures. An intense jerk is given to the play when the protagonist, the leader of the communists is arrested all of a sudden. He is taken for a trial to Captain Schlegel, a very rigid and tough officer of the Nazi and subjected to higher level of torture. He is released and brought back to the Nazi camp. During the course of his arrests and releases he finds that he too is not accepted by his men and also by the Nazis to work as an informer. Ernst becomes a tough guy to be dealt with in the Nazi camp. He is later sent to a higher official for further enquiries.

Major Duhring, an authoritative officer by right, enquires Ernst with all sincerity. Ernst seems to be stubborn to say a word about the communists and their activities. He could sense that the modus operandi of the officer's investigation quiet different but tries to play it safe. The Major comprehends the plight of Ernst and feels pity for him. He warns Ernst of the various degrees of torture that would be inflicted upon him for his stubbornness. He openly reveals in a private conversation that the right choice to end this kind of corporal and psychological anguish is to end his life. Ernst finds himself in a very delicate position. He is neither

accepted by his own men nor wins the trust of the Nazi officers. He is left with no other choice but to adhere to the Major's idea.

Major Duhring can be understood as a less deserving officer of the Nazi camp. He has indeed worked against conventions of the Nazis but can assuredly be alleged as a true gentleman. He has been instrumental in destroying the records of many communist captives in the course of his career. He justifies his jeopardous efforts with regard to his conscience. His wife Hedvig, a staunch follower of the Nazi, works as a radio announcer. The Major has throughout kept his lips tight to her about the files and his softness towards the communists against her rude mentality and behaviour. At a point when she and Captain Schlegel have a slight suspicion on the Major, he immediately commits suicide.

Odets in this play gives a lucid picture of the inner law (conscience of man) and the establishment of justice by it. Ernst Tausig is a person who has spearheaded the revolution against one of the most powerful dictatorship of the whole human race recorded in history. He has been instrumental in destructing a great force with his meekness. To be the leader is not to enjoy the rights but to get to work and find a solution as soon as possible. He has proved as a great and responsible leader by being in the fore front though had to commit suicide. Odets does not leave the audience awe struck at his death but gives a hope that the mammoth hands of the Nazis are on the decline. His death has given rise to many revolts all over Germany which proclaims the victory of the communists in the near future.

The two main characters of the play Ernst Tausig and Major Duhring strive to establish "Law and Justice" in the society in a righteous manner. The paradox is that Ernst is not believed fully even by his brother Carl Tausig and the Major is trusted as a most worthy officer of the Nazis. Ernst has shown his strength outwardly but standing against one of the most powerful man in the world and the Major clandestinely. The optimism of both the character is appreciable because they have wrecked the colossal empire one from within the Nazis and the other against them with external force.

Both undergo psychological upheavals which are not understood by the worldly. Ernst, when often released was not anymore considered as a communist rather believed to be an informer.

At the other end the Major keeps up a grave secret of his deeds even to his wife. By their conscience Ernst Tausig and the Major have been truthful. The Major does not inflict Ernst with severe vindications but helps him to escape. His suggestion to Ernst happens to be the end of the play but on a positive note. He feels satisfied that he has shown the right way to the protagonist for the attainment of ultimate peace.

Ernst trusts the words of the Major and ends his life with great expectation and is sure of an emphatic solution. In a way Ernst Tausig and Major Duhring have done martyrdom to established justice. They have both taken the law in their own hands and used it according to their whims, Ernst against the nature of man and the Major against the Nazis. The irony is that man has created these laws to bring about justice for mankind. But seldom law fails to establish justice.

The polarity is that the common law of the land does not render to establish justice ultimately. During certain trying times of the entire world, the law of a land has been an absolute failure. It has caused damage to some sections of the society because of its feeble framework. Instead should be rigid and has to cater to the purpose of the people of all walks of life in that particular society. Ernst establishes a law for the communists which boomerang at him. Major Duhring is part of the established law but goes against. According to them Law is secondary to Justice and so heads to establish only justice in terms of ethics.

REFERENCE:

- i. Luccok, Halford E. American Mirror; Social Ethical and Religious Aspects of American Literature 1930-1940. New York: MacMillan Company, 1940.
- ii. Mishra, Kishmanidhi. American Leftist playwrights of the 1930's: A study of ideology and technique in the plays of Odets, Lawson and Sherwood. New Delhi: Classical Publishing Company, 1991.
- iii. Reynolds, R.C. Stage Left: The Development of the American Social Drama in the Thirties. New York: The Washington Publishing Company, 1986.