



ISSUES FACED BY THE MIDDLE CLASS SOCIETY IN CLIFFORD ODETS' "THE COUNTRY GIRL"

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ABSTRACT



This article dissects the issues and troubles faced by the middle class society in the play, "The Country Girl". This paper also speaks about how the middle class people are psychologically affected by their problems. In this play, they aspire for something attractive but, they do not achieve success. This leads to frustration and disappointment.

Keywords: *Clifford Odets, Country Girl, Middle class Society, Aspiration, Problems and Issues.*

Citation:

- APA** Visalam,G. (2018) Issues Faced by the Middle Class Society in Clifford Odets' "The Country Girl". *Veda's Journal of English Language and Literature-JOELL*, 5(1), 58-61.
- MLA** Visalam,G. "Issues Faced by the Middle Class Society in Clifford Odets' "The Country Girl"." *Veda's Journal of English Language and Literature JOELL*, Vol.5, no.1, 2018, pp.58-61.

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INTRODUCTION

Clifford Odets' is one of the famous American playwrights between 1930 and 1960. He has written and produced eleven plays and has directed many plays. He was an active member of "The Group Theater" which was formed by Harold Clurman, Cheryl Crawford and Lee Strasberg. Odets' became the Group theatre's primary playwright (Reynolds, 1986). Some of Odets' plays are "Waiting for Lefty (1935)", "Awake and Sing! (1935)", "Till the day I Die (1935)", "Paradise Lost (1935)", "Golden Boy (1937)", "Rocket to the Moon (1938)", "Night

Music (1940)", "Class by Night (1941)", "The Big Knife (1949)", "The Country Girl (1950)" and "The Flowering Peach (1954)" (Weales, 1985).

THE PLAY

"The Country Girl" is a play which does not have political overtones. It is a psychological study. Bernie Dodd is an enthusiastic young Director, who offers to give a new life to Frank's sagging career by offering him a leading role in a Broadway play. Frank first refuses then accepts though Georgie, his wife was about to leave him. At first, Bernie believed that lies told by Frank about Georgie. He presumes that



her emotional problems would be a hindrance to Frank's comeback. Bernie and Georgie have a brief romance and work together to help Frank come out with a brilliant performance.

The thread runs throughout the play. Each of the three characters begins with self created set of illusions which he is forced to shed in the course of the play; thereby gaining new insights. Frank believes his own lies. He is unable to admit that his lack of confidence is responsible for his alcoholism. Though he pretends that his wife is neurotic, he is dependent on Georgie.

Georgie is the central character and lives a life of her own. She believes that Frank depends on her and she must protect him. She acts as Frank's mother rather than his wife. The ending is an ambiguity and this is a virtue in a psychological play.

Georgie as mentioned earlier is the protagonist of the play. As a child she was lonely "*My father was always away on to..... my mother was off with gardening and hobbies*" (Odets, 1953). Frank is a father-figure for Georgie. She married him because like her father he is a strong man. After years of faithful service Georgie decides to leave her husband. The outcome of her relationship with Frank and her feelings towards Bernie form the crux of the play. Frank has lost all his talents. But Bernie is a confident, talented man. Frank is unable to regain his losing confidence and talent. Georgie is impatient with her husband's increasing weakness. She emerges as the central force. Her husband Frank is estranged from her and the world of art. Frank is firmly associated with the real world and its attendant pains, which have come between him and his talent.

Frank, like a tragic hero, has been reduced to a man of no substance due to his weakness for alcohol. He has the desire to continue in the theatre of success but he does not get his chance. Desperately he drinks. Even his wife is not able to control him. He always thinks about the past. In recalling his happier past, Frank refers less to his theatrical success than to the details of everyday life with Georgie. He recalls the happy days they had spent together, almost in the lap of luxury.

Frank is an oral neurotic, a psychic masochist inwardly fixated on the bad cruel mother that he has imaginatively and unconsciously

constructed. Such a neurotic spends his time building defenses and pretending to be aggressive. Frank whenever he feels expensive, he turns to food. He assumes sometimes a conscious self-pitying pose: "*Now my stomach's all in a whirl again. That's what you wanted, isn't it?*" (Odets, 1953). Consciously, Frank wants people to like him; while unconsciously, he prompts rejection through his drinking and lying. To appease his unconscious conscience Frank denies that he wants to fail. He puts the blame elsewhere. "*They all want me to fail! And you want me to fail, you too don't love me!*" (Stanley and David, 1962), he tells Georgie.

Bernie is not as strong as he pretends. He calls himself frail. He is not able to work wonders for himself. The elder Dodd, Bernie's father an alcoholic destroyed himself. He is attracted to Frank. He was married but detests his wife. He calls Georgie 'Mrs. Dodd'. Does he intend marrying her or does she remain him of his mother? We are not able to answer these questions. He is in search of a home. He is against modern women, part of his grouse being that they "*Don't want a home: and the only peace of furniture they'll touch is the psycho analyst couch!*" (Stanley and David, 1962).

Georgie is a psychic masochist. She knew that Frank was an alcoholic when she married him. A streak of masochism is seen in her relationship with Frank. The marriage thrives on quarrels. For Frank, acting is a form of sublimation. He succeeds because he identifies himself with the character.

Frank's moral disintegration could be attributed to his married life and his continuous drinking due to the death of his child. The absence of children creates a dent in his married life. Bernie mistrust women because of his wife's desertion. When Frank, to justify his action bluffs that his wife is a drunkard, Bernie believes him at once. But when he comes to know the truth, he loves her. He confesses to Georgie that she is his real anchor, his haven. But Georgie resolves to stay with her weekend husband. Constantly assuming a filial responsibility in dealing with Frank, Bernie is at last drawn to Frank's young wife, whose qualities of loyalty and self-sacrifice appeal to him as a promise of security and maternal care. Frank has suffered a long period of separation



from his vocation. Later Frank blames Georgie for the disintegration of his life:

Then we had a child..... After that..... every part I play, it's just like I ran off with another woman. I begin to drink myself. Don't ask me where the money went. She cuts her wrists, sets fire to a hotel suite – any time I'm on the stage By 1940, '41 – well, when you're in that situation you beat a bottle hard!" (Odets, 1953)

Later we discover that Frank spins this web of lies to Bernie only to defend himself. He is weak in his outlook but charming. The focus then shifts to Georgie. She is associated with music. Bernie talks to her with polite charm but this is a façade for a certain amount of scorn. She is disturbed and switches on the radio. The piece of music is the link between her longing and the reality.

Despite her romantic idealism, Georgie proves herself both practical and perceptive. She realizes her husband's childish dependence on her. She also understands what attracted her to Frank. She understands why her efforts to reform him have ended in defeat. She feels that he must be given a mental confidence to withstand his own inferiority complex.

Odets gradually stirs audience in Georgie's favor. We are able to understand her despair and frustration. Georgie not only understands Frank but also Bernie. She tells Bernie that he has no real understanding of Frank or the reality of human commitment. Odets' psychological melodrama reaches its climax in the final moments of the last scene. When Bernie declares his love, Georgie has to make the difficult choice between her husband and Bernie. When Frank comes backstage after a scene, she tells him:

Frank, I certainly did in want to bring up any of this tonight. But you did... so, let's have the whole truth. I married you for happiness, Frank.... and, if necessary, I'll leave you for the same reason (Odets, 1953).

And she adds:

And yet I'm sure both our lives are at some sort of turning point.... There's

some real new element of hope here... I don't know what. But I'm uncertain... and you, Frank, have to be strong enough to bear that uncertainty (Odets, 1953).

She encourages Bernie, "Wrestle Bernie... You may win a blessing. But stay un generate. Life knocks the sauciness out of us soon enough" (Odets, 1953). Thus Gabriel Miller is right in saying. "Within the world of the theatre Odets has fashioned a struggle involving art, idealism, and the fragility of human relationships, presenting three fully developed protagonists who are flawed but manage to learn, and who promise to emerge from the struggle stronger and better able to battle with life" (Odets, 1953).

CONCLUSION

In this play, "The Country Girl", all the characters help each other. All of them have their lasting sense of purpose. They hope to attain their realistic dreams. Odets has achieved a vision of harmony in the Country Girl.

When Frank Elgin is given a chance, he establishes the depth of his self-doubt and his fear of rejection. Georgie has been married to him too long to accept his moods at face value. He often chides her, but Georgie supports him in every way. Frank, however falsely accuses her of being neurotic. Georgie has convinced herself that Frank is dependent on her. She knows that she must protect him. She refers to herself as an "Old Lady" and that's more like Frank's mother than his wife. Frank is not in a position to take control of the situation. So, it is Georgie who pulls him back in to shape for a performance. Georgie and Bernie are ironically united in their efforts to rehabilitate Frank. Odets tells us that the fettering and enfeebled artist is prescription for restoring Frank to his old self is a mixture of love of a women and assistance of a friend. The role of Georgie was drastically changed from that of a nagging wife to that of a firm but understanding and supportive marriage partner. The love relationship that grows between Georgie and Bernie is the time worn love-hate relationship.

Frank at last succeeds in acting his part well. He has been struggling to make a comeback and he



succeeds. The poser is whether this success will be long lasting. Frank is one of the weak and insecure characters of Odets. A pathological liar he successfully undergoes rehabilitation. Odets has written this play with psychological insight. Frank is old and his inner self is shattered. He is spiritually very weak. He is to be blamed for his downfall as no external forces cause it and he is an alcoholic. Through the efforts of his wife, he becomes a successful actor but he lacks the sustaining power. He does not have the spiritual strength to retain the success he has attained.

According to Nietzsche's tragic system, the playwright designates action and character to function as meta-physical complements to the physical world. Schopenhauer defines music as a universal language, the language of the will. Music, is Odets' metaphor for the soul, the immaterial, that mode of exaltation with Joe strives after but cannot attain.

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Dr. G. Visalam has 13 plus years of teaching experience in handling Major English and General English classes. She has guided several M.Phil Students. She is an Approved eligible staff of Madras University, Exam paper valuator, Question paper setter and scrutinizer for various Universities in Tamilnadu. She is presently writing a textbook on *Communicative English using Modern Techniques*. She is Proficient in Languages such as Tamil, English, Hindi and Sanskrit.