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Chasing Shadows: The American Dream in the Play Clifford Odets' The Big Knife

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Abstract

"The Big Knife" by Clifford Odets is a play that delves into the complexities of success and the erosion of moral integrity within the American Dream. Set in the backdrop of Hollywood, the story follows protagonist Charlie Castle, a successful actor whose pursuit of fame and fortune leads to a series of betrayals and ethical compromises. As Charlie grapples with the consequences of his actions, including a tragic hit-and-run accident and marital discord, he finds himself trapped in a world of deceit and disillusionment. Through dynamic dialogue and thematic exploration, Odets critiques the materialism and superficiality of Hollywood culture, presenting a stark portrayal of the personal and societal costs of sacrificing one's principles for success. Critics have praised the play for its authenticity and philosophical realism, while also analyzing its thematic significance within the broader context of American literature and the myth of success. Ultimately, "The Big Knife" serves as a cautionary tale about the corrosive nature of ambition and the pursuit of wealth at the expense of moral values.

Keywords: Shadows, American, Dream, The Big Knife

Introduction:

Clifford Odets, renowned for his acute social awareness, was born on July 18th, 1906, to Jewish immigrant parents, Louis Odets and Pearl Geisenger. Louis hailed from a typical Russian Jewish family with a passion for music and aspirations for a luxurious life, while Pearl came from a Romanian Jewish background. Despite facing poverty and a shared determination to succeed, the family struggled in America amidst native hatred and discrimination against Jews. Louis endeavored to provide Clifford with a good education and a prestigious profession, but Clifford's interests leaned towards creative arts and theater rather than academics or commerce (Brenman-Gibson, 2002)

His artistic inclinations strained his relationship with his father, who emphasized practical success. As Clifford pursued a literary career, his protagonists often grappled with the clash between artistic desire and societal ideals. He found solace in amateur theater groups and embraced minor acting roles, prioritizing his creative pursuits over financial success. Alongside his theatrical endeavors, he worked as a disc jockey and an elocutionist, but theater remained his true passion.

In a comprehensive interview conducted two years before his death in September 1961, Odets expressed the profound significance of theater in his life, viewing it as a vital means of analyzing societal structures and conveying meaningful messages (Aronson, 2005).

Although Clifford Odets later gained recognition as a playwright exploring the ethical dilemmas and aspirations of the middle class, he initially launched his creative career with two radio plays, *"Dawn"* and *"At the Water Line,"* in 1926. These works delved

into the theme of men experiencing spiritual crises, reflecting the period just prior to the Great Depression when they were broadcast. Odets, sensing the impending turmoil, captured themes of crisis and failure (Seldes, 2009).

Despite being acknowledged by some critics as an influential writer, Odets did not receive the attention he deserved. Some critics focused more on his Hollywood connections and theatrical gossip rather than his literary contributions, resulting in varied opinions about his career. While some labeled him a *"betrayed talent,"* others hailed him as a *"golden boy of the theater."* (Warshow, 2001).

In his work *"American Literary Scholarship"* of 1981, Walter J. Meserve categorized Odets' plays chronologically into three phases: the Early Plays, characterized by anger; the Middle Plays, reflecting moderation; and the Post-War Plays, demonstrating maturity. However, Harold Cantor (2000) criticized this approach, arguing that even in early works like *"Waiting For Lefty,"* Odets displayed a maturity of thought despite the anger and outburst.

In 1935, Odets penned his full-length play, *"Awake and Sing,"* a family drama highlighting the struggles of a middle-class family facing economic challenges. The play emphasizes the importance of tenderness and mutual loyalty within the family, with music serving as a central symbol.

"Waiting for Lefty" (1935) reflects Odets' Marxist perspective, urging the suffering masses to rise up and express their despair. However, his idealistic view of Marxism clashed with the party's formal structure, leading to his departure due to feeling betrayed. The recurring theme in Odets' works is the cry and protest of society trapped in economic downturns. *"I Can't Sleep"* (1936) portrays the struggles of an American businessman, while *"Paradise Lost"* (1936) depicts a family battling societal erosion.

"Till the Day I Die" (1936) serves as a precursor to *"Waiting for Lefty"* and is notable for being the first anti-Nazi play in America. Despite commercial failures like *"Paradise Lost"* and *"The Silent Partner,"* and *"Golden Boy"* (1937) renewed Odets' reputation. The play critiques the American obsession with wealth and its impact on moral values. *"Rocket to the Moon"* (1939) explores marital relationships and the quest for true love amidst materialism, echoing Odets' belief in love as America's salvation. *"Night Music"* (1940) tackles themes of homelessness and societal disorientation during the Depression, but faced harsh criticism despite its hopeful ending. *"Clash by Night"* (1942) depicts ordinary people entangled in love affairs amid external pressures, reflecting the strain on relationships during the Depression.

Overall, Odets' works received diverse criticism, but he continued to explore themes of societal struggle and the human condition with optimism amidst adversity. After *"Clash by Night,"* Odets experienced a seven-year break before returning with *"The Big Knife"* (1949), marking the beginning of his final phase as a playwright. The play delves into the compromises made by success-driven individuals, highlighting the prioritization of material wealth over moral values. Odets sharply criticizes Hollywood as deceitful and corrupt, examining the degradation of the American Dream as a central theme.

In *"The Country Girl,"* (1951) Odets adopts a somewhat softer tone towards Hollywood, portraying actors striving for personal fulfillment amidst societal pressures. Despite achieving material prosperity and status, characters in the play grapple with a sense of emptiness in their lives. *"The Flowering Peach"* (1955) stands out as Odets' most acclaimed work, reflecting a sense of calmness and optimism towards American society and human life. It is hailed as a testament to the resilience and wisdom of humanity, conveying a message of hope (Williams, 2004).

In addition to these plays, Odets adapted *"The Russian People"* (1943) from a work by Konstantin Simonov and wrote several screenplays, including *"The General Died at Dawn"* (1936), *"None But the Lonely Heart"* (1944), *"Deadline at Dawn"* (1945), *"The Sweet Smell of Success"* (1957), *"The Story on Page One"* (1959), and *"Wild in the Country"* (1960). He also contributed to three television scripts. Notably, almost seven of Odets' plays remained unpublished.

Despite facing criticism for his portrayal of inequality and the perils of materialism, Odets gained recognition for his exploration of themes such as loneliness, alienation, and the quest for spiritual fulfillment. He passed away on August 15th, 1963, after battling stomach cancer.

OBJECTIVE OF THE STUDY

To analyze the portrayal of success, integrity, and moral dilemmas in Clifford Odets' play "The Big Knife."

RESEARCH QUESTION

How does Clifford Odets depict the pursuit of success and its impact on individual integrity in "The Big Knife"?

ANALYSIS OF *THE BIG KNIFE* (1949)

The Group Theatre played a crucial role in shaping Clifford Odets' early dramatic career, providing him with a platform to showcase his talent and develop his protagonists' yearning for communal ideals. However, after 1941, Odets shifted much of his focus to Hollywood, where he spent the majority of his life. His immersion in the business-driven environment of Hollywood had a detrimental effect on his authentic dramatic genius, leading to compromises that sacrificed his artistic integrity for commercial success.

During his Hollywood years, spanning over twenty-two years, Odets produced only three plays: *"The Big Knife"* (1949), *"The Country Girl"* (1950), and *"The Flowering Peach"* (1954). This period marked a creative decline and a period of self-reflection for Odets. He became disillusioned by the hypocrisy, rivalry, immoral behavior, and obsession with wealth prevalent in Hollywood, leading him to confess his own involvement in compromising his artistic principles.

The Big Knife, in particular, is seen as a reflection of Odets' personal experiences and frustrations with Hollywood. Despite Odets' denial, the play is interpreted as having a subjective nature, drawing inspiration from his own encounters and criticisms of the Hollywood industry. The play's harsh critique of Hollywood sparked controversy and garnered significant criticism.

Odets attempted to defend the objective nature of *"The Big Knife"* through various channels, though he struggled to fully justify his position. In an interview prior to the play's Boston premiere, Odets asserted:

"The Big Knife is that force in modern life which is against people and their aspirations, which seeks to cut people off in their best flower. The play may be about the struggle of a gifted actor to retain his integrity against the combination of inner and outer corruptions which assail him, but this struggle can be found in the lives of countless people who are not on the wealthy level of movie star. I have nothing against Hollywood per se. I do have something against a large set up which destroys people and eats them up. I chose Hollywood for the setting for The Big Knife because I know it. I don't know any other company town. But this is an objective play about thousands of people, I don't care what industry they're in" (Miller 81, 82).

Odets himself experienced the falseness of Hollywood and the pressures of celebrity status. While his success in the cutthroat world of Hollywood may have been viewed as practical success, it came at the cost of betraying his artistic conscience, ultimately leading to the decline of his literary career. This conflict within himself is mirrored in characters like Joe Bonaparte from *"The Golden Boy"* and Charlie Castle from *The Big Knife*. Odets chooses to express his bitterness towards Hollywood allegorically.

Despite being hailed as the *"Golden Boy of left theatre,"* Odets failed to fully realize his potential, succumbing to the allure of practical success and forsaking his dramatic talents. His pursuit of material success led him to abandon his promising theater career for the broader canvas of the screen.

There are striking parallels between Odets' personal experiences and the life of Charlie Castle, the protagonist of *The Big Knife*, who leaves behind his theater roots to become a Hollywood star, only to discover the emptiness of his success. For both Odets and Charlie Castle, the American Dream of success ultimately proved disillusioning.

In 1948, disillusioned by his experiences in Hollywood, Odets returned to New York and began writing *The Big Knife*. Initially considering titles like *"A Winter Journey,"* he eventually settled on *The Big Knife*, which he believed captured the idea of a powerful force working against individuals.

Odets focused on highlighting the influence of external forces on human life, reflected in his choice of titles for his plays. Originally titled *"A Winter Journey,"* suggesting a life filled with crisis and character-driven struggles, Odets ultimately changed the title to *The Big Knife* to convey the impact of powerful external forces on human existence.

The Big Knife premiered at the National Theatre in New York on February 24, 1949, marking Odets' return to the stage after eight years. However, unlike *"Golden Boy,"* this play faced harsh criticism from notable reviewers like Harold Clurman and Joseph Wood, who had previously supported Odets. Critics like Gabriel Miller accused Odets of overcompensating for his years in Hollywood with bombastic apologies, while Clurman saw the play as a defeatist confession reflecting Odets' own sense of guilt projected onto society.

Despite the negative reception and parallels to Odets' own life, the play showcases his potential as a dramatist, delving into human psychology and the futility of pursuing the myth of success.

Set in the affluent neighborhood of Beverly Hills, California, the play opens in the playroom of the protagonist, Charlie Castle. As a famous Hollywood movie star, Castle exudes confidence and success, with his friend and publicity agent, Buddy Bliss, managing his public image. They await Patty Benedict, a renowned movie columnist described by Odets as authoritative, cynical, and assured. Charlie Castle reluctantly welcomes Patty Benedict, recognizing the necessity of maintaining cordial relations with the press for his profession. Buddy Bliss, well-versed in handling such situations, joins in the pretense of warmth and hospitality. They both put on a facade of happiness, prepared to lightly entertain Patty and engage in banter.

The pursuit of fame and fortune epitomizes the American Dream, yet these rewards are often fleeting and challenging to maintain. Those in the entertainment industry are particularly susceptible to the pressures of celebrity status.

Patty, a Sunday columnist, has already caught wind of rumors regarding the possible separation of Charlie's wife, Marion. She sees this as potential fodder for her column, illustrating how success attracts attention and invades celebrities' personal lives with relentless scrutiny and gossip.

Charlie and Buddy employ their skills to conceal the truth from Patty, fabricating a story about Marion taking their son to the beach due to fears of polio. Despite their efforts, Patty persists in her inquiries. During their conversation, she also probes about the new contract negotiations between Charlie Castle and Marcus Hoff, the studio head.

Charlie's resentful remark is quite significant to express his unrest about the profession: *"He is the head of studio, isn't he? It doesn't cost him anything to dream"* (1949: 8)

Charlie has sacrificed his integrity and freedom in pursuit of success, leading to feelings of guilt and helplessness. As a figure that has compromised his principles, he feels he no longer has the right to dream independently. He bitterly remarks that only those in power can afford to dream, while those who are enslaved by their pursuit of success cannot. The relentless pursuit of success has alienated Charlie from his virtues and ideals, leaving him with no way to turn back except to regret and express a longing for what he has left behind. The world of theater and art represents Charlie's true home, and his desire for success has estranged him from it.

So he is homesick to say: *"We are homesick all our lives, but adults don't talk about it, do they?"* (8).

Basically, Charlie Castle is a good person, brought up in ideal cultural legacy. He has read London, Upton Sinclair, Ibsen and Hugo.

He recalls his Hugo reading, *"… Hugo said me, "Be a good boy, Charlie love people, do good, help the lost and fallen, make the world happy, if you can!"* (8).

As Patty regards him skeptically, Charlie comes to the painful realization that he has sacrificed his virtuous beliefs and idealism in exchange for success.

Suddenly he adds to his remark, *"I know before you say it, dear … I buy it all back"* (8).

Patty brings up another painful episode from Charlie's past: a Christmas Eve when, under the influence of alcohol and drugs, he was involved in a hit-and-run accident that resulted in the death of a child. Buddy Bliss, out of loyalty and perhaps a sense of misplaced idealism took the blame for Charlie and served a ten-month jail sentence. Despite knowing the truth, Charlie allowed Bliss to take the fall to protect his own career. This incident reflects Charlie's compromised integrity and his willingness to prioritize self-preservation over honesty. Additionally, Charlie's business interests further hinder his ability to act with honesty and integrity.

He admits his helplessness as: *"I am in the movie business, darling. I can't afford these acute attacks of integrity"* (11).

Marion, Charlie's wife, has decided to separate from him because she sees that he has sacrificed his integrity and ideals in pursuit of success. His relentless hunger for success has led him away from the virtues he once cherished, transforming him from Charlie 'Cass' to Charlie 'Castle,' trapped within the confines of his own success. Now, the studio owner, Mr. Hoff, holds power over him.

Marion urges Charlie to leave Hollywood and return to the theater, hoping to salvage their marriage. She is willing to accompany him back, just as she arrived with him in a humble manner, symbolized by the reference to a *"pumpkin coach."* Marion recognizes the importance of their marriage, and Charlie has come to realize it as well. However, Charlie feels constrained by his status as a compromised figure, unable to make decisions freely.

Very helplessly he tries to convince his wife: *"Don't you think I want our marriage to work? But I have to face one horny fact: I'm Hoff's prisoner now and signing the contract is ransom feel"* (15).

The mechanization of life and art in Hollywood has left him feeling disillusioned and disgusted. The emptiness he experiences has caused a division within his personality, leaving him feeling like half of a man, incomplete and unfulfilled.

He frankly admits the fact saying to his wife, *"Marion, in the whole world I care about only three and half people : you, little Billy (his son), Hank Tagle (Marion's friend and writer) … and half a man that's me"* (15).

Despite enjoying the apparent rewards of the American Dream he has achieved, it has dulled his idealism and virtue, values he once held dear. He remains capable of distinguishing between right and wrong, but finds himself unable to act upon the good. While he recognizes that the breakdown of his marriage is the worst thing happening in his life, he feels powerless to salvage the relationship.

While focusing on Charlie's dividedness Gabriel Miller says:

"Charlie has seemingly realized the American Dream, but the painfully decided consciousness resulting from recognition of the various betrayals involved in the achievement make Charlie a tragic creature" (Miller 84).

Initially, Charlie, an idealist and someone who valued simplicity, succumbed to the allure of the American Dream and Hollywood, finding himself ensnared in the web of fate. His conflicted sense of idealism prevents him from forgetting the betrayals he has committed, yet he is drawn to the immense material temptations offered by the American Dream, fueling his obsession with success. He finds himself torn between the relentless demands of sustaining success and the nagging conscience of his past betrayals, causing him to feel restless. Charlie now feels trapped by the compromises he has made and the life that goes against his true nature.

Despite her love for Charlie, Marion issues him an ultimatum: if he signs the new contract with 'Hoff-Fedrated,' she will leave him. She understands that despite promises of financial gain, the contract could strip Charlie of his liberty and integrity. Charlie, realizing the importance of saving his marriage, decides to reject the contract. However, escaping from the business world's entanglements proves to be a challenging task.

Nat Danziger, a sympathetic business agent, is present to persuade Charlie into signing the contract. In the American business mentality, every individual is viewed merely as a consumer or client, an object to be bought or sold. Danziger emphasizes the lucrative financial aspects of the contract, attempting to convince Charlie to sign. However, Charlie highlights the restrictive nature of the agreement, which would imprison his liberty and compromise his independent identity.

An idealist in Charlie reacts *"The money factor isn't everything"* (1949:18). But Nat's view is, *"… But a million dollars is got an awful big mouth … And it's legal tender for three million, seven hundred forty-four watermelons"* (19).

Charlie does not know how to make the point clear and convince Nat. So in dire disgust he says: *"You will drive me to suicide, Nat"* (19), and finally, painfully but with concrete determination expresses his ultimate decision: *"I don't want to sign this contract"* (19).

Charlie firmly shuts down any further discussion about the contract, leaving Nat disappointed as he realizes the futility of his efforts. Shortly after, Marcus Hoff, the confident and authoritative studio owner, accompanied by his colleague, Simley Coy, arrives. Marcus, exuding power and confidence, suggests to Nat that they should make the contract more favorable for Charlie. However, Charlie makes it clear that Marion opposes him signing the contract and expresses his desire to return to the theater.

All his disgust is reflected in his words: *"I want to leave Hollywood…I'm tired – I want to go away"* (23).

Marcus Hoff, upon learning of Charlie's decision, reacts with displeasure. Calmly but with a hint of threat, he reminds Charlie of the assistance he has provided him in the past. Without hesitation, Marcus advises Charlie to prioritize his success over his wife, suggesting that sacrificing his marriage would lead to better opportunities for success.

His philosophy is: *"sometimes it becomes necessary to separate ourselves … from a wife who puts her petty interests before the multiplicity of great career!"* (25).

For Marcus, career and financial success take precedence over marital status and family relations. In his perspective of the American Dream, women have no place, as he believes: *"I realized an essential fact of life; the woman must stay out of her husband's work when he's making her bread and butter"* (24).

Marcus Hoff increases the offer by twenty-five thousand dollars for each release and warns Charlie that he is not in a position to negotiate; the contract will be signed regardless. Finally, in a fit of anger, Hoff gravely expresses his frustration: *"I offer you my*

hand and you spit in my face" (25). He makes it clear that he is not interested in Charlie's goodwill; as a businessman, he values only Charlie's physical presence and compliance. Hoff is deeply invested in his dream and will not allow anything or anyone to obstruct it: *"Charlie, I can't tell you how many long months of constructive dreaming are in this moment. And I will let nothing or no one stand in the way of that dream"* (26).

Despite his inner turmoil, Charlie succumbs to Hoff's pressure and signs the contract. He expresses his defeat and despair to Marion, acknowledging that he was manipulated and unable to resist*: "he twisted my head like I was a ten-cent doll! ... I lost!"* (31).

Odets demonstrates his theatrical expertise by selecting the same setting for the entire play. Throughout all three acts, the action unfolds in the playroom of Charlie Castle's house, with various characters entering and exiting while Charlie remains a constant presence. This choice of setting symbolizes Charlie's entrapment in the elaborate castle of his own making, representing the fulfillment of his American Dream but also the complex web in which he is now trapped. Despite his desire to escape this wretched state, every attempt to do so only seems to deepen his predicament.

A week later, the second act unfolds once again in Charlie Castle's playroom, this time with Buddy Bliss and his wife, Connie, present alongside Charlie and Marion. After exchanging casual hospitality, the Bliss couple departs, leaving Charlie visibly upset by Marion's decision to separate. Despite his appeals for her to remain with him, Marion stands firm in her resolve. In her eyes, Charlie has burned the bridge between them, leaving no possibility for reconciliation. Charlie attempts to justify his actions by emphasizing the importance of material prosperity in their lives, perhaps suggesting that any guilt or betrayal he may have committed was in service of providing her with a better life. However, Marion sees through this as nothing more than a feeble attempt at justification.

Charlie argues further, questioning what he has to justify, asking if making money is considered a sin (34). Marion responds with a pointed remark that forces him to introspect, stating, *"Your sin is living against your own nature. You are denatured – that's your sin!"* (34).

In Marion's eyes, despite Charlie Castle's outward success and fame, she sees through the facade to the disintegrity and betrayals beneath. She describes him as helpless, sick, and unhappy, burdened by guilt which manifests in viciousness. Marion accuses him of taking the easy way out, despite his best intentions, and labels him as a horror (35).

Marion has lost faith in Charlie, feeling insecure and ultimately deciding on abortion. She believes their love story is nearing its end and finds solace in the company of Hank Tagle, a man of affection and integrity, the antithesis of Charlie Castle. Hank represents a clear idea of success and is portrayed by Odets as a keen observer of American society, unafraid to critique its flaws. To Hank, the pursuit of success has dulled the people around him (38).

Charlie learns of Marion's plans to marry Hank, and for him, losing Marion is the final blow after sacrificing his integrity and self-respect for success. He feels an unbearable void in his life, realizing he is being punished for neglecting his marriage. His relentless pursuit of material success has led him astray, distancing him from his virtues and those who genuinely cared for him. Despite his material prosperity, Charlie finds himself undeserving of genuine affection.

Charlie comes to terms with the disillusionment of his dream, expressing his frustration in dire terms. He laments, *"It is all a bleak and bitter dream... There are only two ways to forget everything – get drunk or stick a pencil in your eye"* (38). He acknowledges the downfall of his nature and integrity, attempting to convince Marion that he did not willingly commit any wrongs. Feeling like a sold-out figure, he explains that he had no alternative but to go along with the tide. He articulates his agony, saying, *"While I'm charming the world with my light fantastic... I'm bleeding to death under my shirt"* (39).

Charlie is accountable for his own downfall and miserable state. He directs his hatred towards himself, recognizing that his deviation from his true nature led him to corruption in pursuit of fame and fortune. Dreiser aptly examines the impact of this "denaturing" process, where a man mortgages his true talent and becomes tainted by American-style success. Once this happens, he can never fully regain his humanity. Consumed by guilt and self-hatred, he may lash out at both friends and enemies (Cantor 61).

Charlie's life becomes increasingly complicated as Marion leaves with Hank, leaving him feeling desperately alone. He becomes an example of the consequences of surrendering virtues to the pursuit of success, a process that leads to self-denaturing. His success is accompanied by numerous complications, including his involvement in a hit-and-run accident resulting in a child's death, the nomination of a minor studio employee to take the blame, his failing marriage, the death of his unborn child, and the revelation that he was with a young Hollywood starlet, Dixie Evans, during the accident. This revelation becomes a tool for blackmail by Hoff and his associates, forcing Charlie to remain in Hollywood against his will.

From the outset of the play, Charlie expresses his disdain and bitterness towards Hollywood. He views it as a place characterized by falsity, deceit, shallowness, lack of integrity, and exploitation, contrasting it with his nostalgic memories of his days in the theatre. Charlie encapsulates his detest for Hollywood with the statement: *"California, think of it – a place where an honest apple tree won't grow"* (40).

Smiley Coy, Hoff's business agent, becomes alarmed by Dixie Evans' attitude towards the hit-and-run case. Dixie expects Charlie to marry her in exchange for her silence. However, Coy recognizes the potential harm this marriage could cause to Charlie's Hollywood career, his already strained marital relationship, and the studio's reputation. To avoid these complications, Coy believes that "removing" Dixie permanently is the only solution. Charlie is appalled by this suggestion and refuses to commit another crime to cover up his past betrayals. Coy proposes alternative methods to deal with Dixie, such as buying her silence.

Late at night, Charlie calls Dixie to his home and delicately tries to persuade her. However, Dixie is uninterested in money and instead desires revenge against the studio executives who exploited her. She expresses her anger and bitterness in strong terms, highlighting the inhumane treatment she received in Hollywood. This treatment underscores the unethical practices of Hollywood, where artistic aspirations are overshadowed by material gain. Despite achieving practical success, artists are forced to compromise

their values. In the end, if their conscience remains intact, the dream they thought they realized ultimately falls apart, turning life into a sleepless night of regret instead of a paradise of rewards.

Marion returns to Charlie, albeit at an awkward moment with Dixie present, causing her to be more suspicious of Charlie's character. Charlie finds himself once again trying to justify his actions. He passionately argues his case, hoping to make Marion reconsider her decision to separate from him. He acknowledges his guilt in compromising his integrity and appeals to Marion to remain true to herself. Charlie admits to being denatured, his integrity compromised, but he promises to change and begs Marion to join him in escaping the trap they find themselves in. Marion is moved by his emotional plea, and for the moment, their differences are set aside as they embrace in a reconciliatory moment.

Charlie Castle's compromised integrity and betrayals, stemming from his pursuit of 'success,' have negatively impacted his family life. He painfully recognizes that his success is tainted by these betrayals, making it a heavy burden for him to choose between sustaining his success or regaining the paradise of his marital life.

In the final act of the play, the scene shifts back to Charlie Castle's house. Marion, rejuvenated by their reconciliation, is now enthusiastically embracing her domestic responsibilities, bustling about the house with newfound energy. After giving Charlie some instructions, she hurries off for shopping, leaving Charlie alone.

Nat Danziger, the business agent, arrives seeking Charlie's approval on a script, as per Marcus Hoff's insistence. However, Charlie refuses, as he and Marion are contemplating a second honeymoon cruise instead. Nat is pleased to hear about Marion's return, hoping it will bring more liveliness to Charlie's life, and he leaves, wishing Marion well.

Upon learning of the reconciliation, Hank Teagle pays Marion a visit. Their conversation with Charlie highlights the shifting attitudes within materialistic American society. They reflect on how the relentless pursuit of dreams has often led to wasted lives, despite being part of the same society.

Hank Teagle very sensibly comments:

"I don't want Marion joining the lonely junked people of our world – millions of wasted by the dreams of life they were promised and the swill they received ... I think lot of us are in for big shot of Vitamin D : defeat, decay, depression and despair" (57).

To him, America has lost her past glory. In the course of success, the religious conviction and ethical values are subdued. *"Eagle is no more American symbol, it is Cocker Spaniel, paws up saying, Like me, Like me, I am a good dog, Like me !"* (56).

"You've sold out! … Charlie, … don't resist! Your wild, native idealism is a fatal flaw in the context of your life and here. Half-idealism is the peritonitis of the soul … America is full of it !" (58)

Hank encourages Charlie to recognize Marion as a symbol of the idealism he has lost amidst the cutthroat pursuit of so-called success. He points out Charlie's struggle with his compromised integrity and half-hearted idealism, urging him to make a choice. Hank advises Charlie to embrace the path of least resistance, suggesting that his innate idealism is a weakness in the world he inhabits. He metaphorically likens Charlie's compromised idealism to a soul afflicted with peritonitis, a condition that infects the essence of one's being. Hank suggests that America is rife with such compromised idealism, emphasizing the prevalence of this struggle within society.

Hank staunchly upholds his belief that embracing "failure" to uphold moral ethics and integrity is preferable to achieving "success" at the expense of one's values. However, he acknowledges that American society is largely ensnared by the allure of practical success, which only serves to exacerbate their misery.

Following Hank Teagle's departure, Simley Coy arrives, introducing a new twist to the unfolding drama. He reveals that Dixie Evans, under the influence of alcohol, is on the brink of divulging the hit-and-run incident to the press. Marcus Hoff has violently assaulted her in an attempt to silence her, but now there are discussions of more extreme measures. Charlie, torn by his conscience, refuses to entertain the idea of another crime.

Shortly after, Marcus Hoff and Simley Coy arrive to address the escalating situation. Concerned about the potential damage to the reputation of "Hoff-Fedrated," they seek to protect Charlie from public scrutiny. Hoff proposes a shocking solution: instead of killing Dixie, Charlie should marry her. He dismisses Charlie's concerns about integrity, citing evidence of Marion's disloyalty as justification. Enraged by Hoff's audacity, Charlie reacts impulsively, slapping him in a fit of anger. After a heated exchange, Marcus storms off, leaving Charlie emotionally and physically drained, retreating upstairs for a moment of respite.

Coincidentally, Coy receives word that Dixie Evans has been struck by a police car and killed. With her death, the secret of Charlie's involvement in the hit-and-run incident dies with her, bringing relief to everyone involved. Unaware of Dixie's demise, Charlie remains oblivious to this turn of events. Both Coy and Marion find solace in the news of Dixie's death, seeing it as a resolution to their troubles.

Coy now focuses on reconciling Charlie's relationship with Hoff, discussing ways to mend their fractured ties. However, their conversation is interrupted when Marion notices water dripping from the ceiling. Concerned, she calls for Russel, the butler, to investigate. Russel attempts to open the bathroom door, but it's locked from the inside, and Charlie doesn't respond to their calls. Sensing something ominous, Marion urgently summons Dr. Frary, their neighbor. As Russel and Coy attempt to break down the bathroom door, they discover Charlie has taken his own life.

For Charlie, suicide becomes the only means of escaping the burdens that weighed heavily on him throughout his life. His story marked by the relentless pursuit of success and compromised ideals, ends tragically. Even in death, Charlie is denied genuine treatment by the commercialized Hollywood industry, which seeks to conceal the truth about his demise. They prepare a press release attributing Charlie's death to a heart attack, but Hank refuses to allow Charlie's integrity to be further besmirched. With unwavering resolve, he insists on telling the truth, proclaiming Charlie's suicide as a final act of faith in himself.

Throughout his entire life, Charlie betrayed his idealism, and his tragic suicide ultimately proved to be the only faithful act he committed. His death served as a means of breaking free from the existential trap imposed by external forces that made both individual and social life miserable. Harold Cantor aptly assesses Charlie's death as a way of transcending the intolerable pain of selling out to soul-destroying materialism.

Charlie's choice to commit suicide holds spiritual significance, symbolizing a release from the burdens of worldly success tainted by crime and betrayal. Gabriel Miller attributes Charlie's tragic death to the American business-minded mentality, which values success at any cost. Charlie himself compares his actions to those of Macbeth, recognizing the emptiness of his achievements.

Critics have varied opinions about Odets' portrayal of Hollywood in the play. Some, like the Daily Mirror, criticize Odets for biting the hand that fed him, while others, such as John Mason Brown, label Odets as unrealistic and ungrateful for his extreme portrayal of Hollywood. Clurman, writing in The New Republic, notes the emotional confusion in Odets' portrayal of Charlie Castle, suggesting that Odets' self-loathing stems from a desire to punish himself for his perceived sins.

The play *"The Big Knife"* has garnered appreciation for its bold treatment of the theme of success and the degeneration of the American Dream. Variety commends the play for its authenticity and philosophical realism, while The New York Times praises its dynamic dialogue and depiction of the protagonist's struggles with compromise and personal destruction.

The Hollywood setting serves as a backdrop that highlights the exaggerated fiscal rewards and personal vulnerabilities inherent in the pursuit of success. Odets' vision is clear in his dedication to presenting truth in a dramatic and entertaining manner, despite criticism.

The thematic significance of the play's setting is akin to Ibsen's *"A Doll's House,"* with the protagonist confined to a limited world of their own making. Like Nora in Ibsen's play, Charlie remains trapped in his Hollywood Castle, symbolizing his imprisonment to a world of his own creation.

Odets demonstrates versatility and thematic excellence, addressing timeless concerns about moral obligations and the influence of external forces on individual character. Critics analyze the play within the context of the myth of success, highlighting the inevitable corruption of personality within the American system that glorifies material success.

The protagonist, Charlie Castle, attains money, prestige, and fame but loses sight of his ethical principles, leading to a life filled with betrayal and sin. His journey from fame to tragic suicide reflects a failure to distinguish between success and happiness, echoing the fate of characters like Joe Bonaparte in *"Golden Boy."*

Ultimately, the play serves as a critique of the false belief that material success should bring fulfillment, highlighting the destructive consequences of compromising one's moral integrity in pursuit of the American Dream.

Conclusion

In conclusion, Clifford Odets' *"The Big Knife"* offers a poignant exploration of the moral dilemmas inherent in the pursuit of success. Through the character of Charlie Castle, Odets vividly depicts the corrosive effects of compromising one's integrity in the relentless pursuit of fame and fortune, particularly within the context of Hollywood's glamorous yet superficial world. As Charlie grapples with the consequences of his actions and the erosion of his values, the play serves as a cautionary tale about the pitfalls of sacrificing personal ethics for material gain.

Moreover, *"The Big Knife"* delves into broader themes such as the nature of the American Dream, the cult of celebrity, and the existential struggle between individual conscience and external pressures. Odets skillfully weaves these themes together, using dynamic dialogue and compelling characters to shed light on the complexities of human nature and the societal forces that shape it.

Critics have lauded the play for its boldness, authenticity, and philosophical depth, recognizing its enduring relevance in probing the tensions between success and morality in contemporary society. Through its exploration of Charlie Castle's tragic descent into despair and eventual demise, "The Big Knife" offers a powerful commentary on the perils of selling one's soul for worldly gain. In essence, Odets' masterpiece serves as a sobering reminder of the importance of staying true to one's principles in the face of temptation and adversity, urging audiences to reflect on the true meaning of success and the values that define a life well-lived.

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