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The Depression Years as Depicted by the
American Theatre in the 1930's

By Lois Robinson

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Preface

The purpose of this paper is to show how various plays written in the 1930's reflected the economic, political, religious, social, psychological, moral and ethical attitudes of the depression years. To achieve this end, the writer gathered material from the ten Pulitzer Prize winning plays of the 1930's, as well as other significant works of the decade as mentioned in secondary sources. No effort has been made to fit these plays into the time in which they were written. Instead, the writer has attempted to show the times as they were presented by the dramatists of the thirties.

The following is a list of the plays used as sources for this paper, arranged in alphabetical order according to last names of authors:

The Old Maid by Zoe Akins
Both Your Houses by Maxwell Anderson
Winterst by Maxwell Anderson
One-Third of a Nation by Arthur Arant
The Green Pastures by Marc Connelly
Alison's House by Susan Glaspell
You Can't Take It with You by Moss Hart and George S. Kaufman
The Children's Hour by Lillian Hellman
The Little Foxes by Lillian Hellman
I'd Rather Be Right by George S. Kaufman and Moss Hart
Of Thee I Sing by George S. Kaufman, Morrie Ryskind, and Ira Gershwin
Men in White by Sidney Kingsley
Tobacco Road by Jack Kirkland
It Can't Happen Here by Sinclair Lewis
The Fall of the City by Archibald MacLeish
Panic by Archibald MacLeish
Awake and Sing by Clifford Odets
Golden Boy by Clifford Odets
Waiting for Lefty by Clifford Odets
Mourning Becomes Electra by Eugene O'Neill
We, the People by Elmer Rice
My Heart's in the Highlands by William Saroyan
Abe Lincoln in Illinois by Robert E. Sherwood
Idiot's Delight by Robert E. Sherwood
Of Mice and Men by John Steinbeck
They Shall Not Die by John Wexley
Our Town by Thornton Wilder
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Part I: Introduction

In the nineteen decades that elapsed since the United States became an independent nation, probably no ten-year period of peace has had so great, so dramatic an impact upon the American people as the 1930’s. Also, no single event of the 1930’s was responsible for so much change in so many areas as the economic crisis, the Great Depression. During this period of confusion and hardship the American Theatre reflected and commented upon the conditions of the times.

After the crash of 1929, thousands of Americans were thrown out of work. When personal savings and credit vanished, many faced the humiliation of living on relief.¹ By the winter of 1931-32 relief resources dwindled to almost nothing.² Nineteen thirty-two was the worst year of the depression,³ when approximately 24 per cent of the national labor force was unable to find work.⁴ Evidence of poverty and unemployment appeared throughout the country in the form of breadlines, beggars, and people sleeping out-of-doors. Shantytowns, known as "Hoovervilles," rose on the outskirts of cities, and by 1933 there were one million transients drifting across the country, looking for jobs.⁵ Perhaps worse than all the signs of physical need was the demoralization that spread among the jobless as months of unemployment lengthened into years.⁶

Faced with the problems of depression, problems too big for an individual to handle, the unemployed looked to the President for hope and a solution. Little help and encouragement, however, came
from the White House. Herbert Hoover was opposed to the direct administration of federal relief to unemployed individuals, and despite his official optimism, the President's outlook was full of gloom and insecurity. When Hoover's limited programs failed to revive the economy, public opinion turned against him.

By the arrival of the presidential election in 1932, the American people were ready for a change, and elected the Democratic candidate. Franklin D. Roosevelt assumed the duties of President in 1933, and quickly initiated a new program for economic recovery known as the New Deal. Congress passed legislation concerning devaluation of the dollar, crop control, federal relief, financial reforms, the easing of unemployment and debts, the continuation of the development of the Tennessee Valley, and the creation of the National Recovery Administration. The New Deal could not, however, solve the problems of the Great Depression in one year. Recovery was gradual, and the American people did not enjoy prosperity again until war came in 1939.

The theatre of the 1930's felt the impact of the depression. Some critics felt that the drama of the period reached a low point, perhaps because few plays dealt with themes of universal appeal to all men at all times. Yet, the depression dramatists did effectively present the particular plight of their oppressed generation, often using the stage as a medium for educating and influencing the public on matters of national concern.

Of the ten plays that were awarded the Pulitzer Prize during the 1930's, six may be classified as commentary on contemporary conditions: The Green Pastures (1930), Of the I Sing (1932), Both Your Houses (1933), Men in White (1934), Idiot's Delight (1936), and You Can't Take It with You (1937). The other four prize-winning plays, Alison's House (1931), The Old Maid (1935), Our Town (1938), Abe Lincoln in Illinois (1939), used past periods of American life to give some new perspective to issues which concerned the theatre-goers of the depression years.
A study of some major products of the American Theatre in the 1930's, therefore, affords some understanding of the times, since the theatre must have some relevance for its audience in order to survive.
Part II: The Plays of the 1930's and Their Implications

Chapter 1: Economic Implications

Dramatists of the 1930's were deeply concerned with the economic changes wrought by the Great Depression. Many plays spoke of such widespread adversities as unemployment, a low stock-market, and bank closings. More specifically, many dramatists dealt with three groups of people greatly affected by the changing economic conditions—the capitalists, the city workers, and the farmers.

The depression years were extremely trying for some businessmen. Cut-throat competition and uncertainty about the direction of economic changes harassed many, and some resorted to suicide when the realization of financial ruin became too much to bear. Yet many American capitalists endured and even thrived during the 1930's perhaps because of their steadfast allegiance to their own interests.

Self-interest, often at the expense of others, was presented in the theatre of the 1930's as something of a tradition in American life. *The Little Foxes* pictured the new order of businessmen in the South around 1900 as opportunists who had taken advantage of the misfortunes of the old aristocracy in order to satisfy their ambitions for wealth and social superiority. In *Waiting for Lefty*, Dr. Barnes expressed disgust for selfish business practices that he said dated back to the American Revolution. According to the doctor, the honest working people were sold out in 1776, and the United States Constitution was written for the advantage of the rich. Such statements were perhaps exaggerated for effect, but some dramatists of the thirties must have believed that they were essentially correct.

Following the principle of self-interest, the capitalists in depression drama were completely unwilling to accept any responsibility for the national economic crisis. A typical self-centered industrialist
was Applegate in We, the People, who blamed the depression upon internationalism. He said that if the government had been looking out for the interests of the American investor instead of aiding foreign countries, industry and labor would not have been in their present predicament.

Drew, another industrialist in We, the People, professed the doctrine of self-interest. He considered the alternatives of decreasing the wages of twenty thousand workers by ten or fifteen per cent, or failing to declare a dividend on preferred stock. Drew decided upon the former course of action, obviously because he felt that his stockholders were more important to his business than his employees.

The most extreme cases of business profiteering in the 1930's involved people who were ready and willing to turn the misfortunes of others into profit for themselves. Applegate of We, the People voiced his opinions on the prospect of war, speaking only of the economic prosperity that such an event would bring. He seemed oblivious of the fact that war would mean the loss of thousands of lives.

Another example of the profiteering businessman presented in the plays of the thirties was the slum landlord in One-Third of a Nation. In this play fire destroyed a New York City tenement, taking several lives. A commission investigating the fire asked the owner of the building why he had allowed his property to become a fire trap. Schultz, the landlord, replied that he did not have money for repairs, that his tenement was no worse than any other on the block, and that he would be unable to get a return on his investment if he did renovate his property. Later, when confronted by a tenant who had lost his family in the fire, Schultz offered his sincere sympathy, but added that New York real estate, even in tenement districts, was too lucrative an investment to give up. So it seemed that Schultz was willing to make a profit on sub-
standard housing, although he had full knowledge of the harm that could and probably would come to those who lived on his property.

One-Third of a Nation also dealt with the special problem of exorbitant rents that Negroes had to pay for inadequate housing. The owner of a flat, for example, would charge white tenants thirty dollars a month, and black tenants forty-five.13 Such unfair practices, as well as general rent rises, did not go unnoticed. Residents of East Side New York City and Harlem went on rent strikes.14 Dramatization of these events helped alert audiences to the problems of housing and business ethics and attitudes.

The economic situation of city workers was another area of major concern in depression drama. Hard times in general seemed to encourage the development of a realistic approach to life among members of the working class. Bessie Berger in Awake and Sing voiced the feelings of many in her statement that "...here without a dollar you don't look the world in the eye...this is life in America."15 In Waiting for Lefty Irv spoke in similar terms, "Nowdays is no time to be soft. You gotta be hard as a rock or go under."16

No one could say that times were not hard during the thirties, when thousands of willing men were unable to find jobs. Unemployment became so widespread that even men like Mr. Davis in We, the People lost jobs that they had held for twenty years.17 Educated young men, such as Julian Falck in It Can't Happen Here, were also at a loss to find some honest means of support. As a last resort many of the unemployed turned to occupations such as those described in Winterset and Golden Boy—sailing apples and chestnuts, or playing street pianos and fiddles on city sidewalks.19 Others, according to Mio in Winterset whiled away their winters in the public libraries.20
With such conditions prevalent among the members of the working class, many understandably developed intense feelings of bitterness for the rich, especially when such paradoxical conditions existed as those described in We, the People. In this play Winifred Drew, the daughter of a successful industrialist, said that she was working hard on an unemployment committee, and at the same time, planning an extravagant wedding at Westminster Abbey, followed by a honeymoon on her father's yacht.²¹ Such unnecessary spending seemed rather paradoxical, since Winifred's father's employees were receiving a wage cut.²² Allen Davis, a young man in the same play, expressed his bitterness at seeing some people enjoying diamonds, furs, and limousines, when he was unable to find a job.²³

Feelings of resentment against the wealthy existed not only because of jealousy, but also because of the real or imagined crimes of industrialists against workers. Many of the unemployed felt that the captains of industry had caused the depression. A crowd of jobless workers in Panic expressed this feeling as it bitterly jeered a group of industrial leaders.²⁴

Another cause of resentment was the fact that the owners of many large concerns had driven their self-employed competitors out of business. In We, the People, Louis Volterra explained how he had lost his business:

I got my own shop on North Eleven Street.
I do ever'thing all by myself--wi' my hands. Then padrone comes along. He opens big shop wit' big machinery. Goo' night for me. I can't be my own boss no more. I gotta go work for padrone.²⁵

The final reason for bitterness against industrialists lay in the workers' feelings that their employers were taking unfair advantage of them. Wives, such as Edna in Waiting for Lefty, were sad and resentful when their husbands' paychecks were not large enough to buy healthful food for their children.²⁶ Many others shared the
anger of Lucy Wills in *They Shall Not Die* for having to pay exorbitant prices at a company store in order to keep her job. To the extent that such conditions existed, they aroused justifiable anger and discontent among the working class.

The rural population enjoyed no fewer hardships than the city workers during the depression years. According to Mr. Williamson, a country minister in *We, the People*, low prices for produce were putting farmers and storekeepers out of business and indirectly threatening the banks. In *Both Your Houses*, Allen McLean described similar conditions in a rural section of Nevada. He said that the farmers simply had no money, and that twenty-three of the thirty-eight stores in his town had gone out of business.

Perhaps the worst rural conditions of the thirties existed in the back country of the Deep South, as described in *Tobacco Road*. Such sections suffered not only from the immediate circumstances of the depression, but also from previous decades of ignorant and harmful use of the land. In addition, the physical, intellectual, and moral resources of the local inhabitants had degenerated to the point that life existed on an almost sub-human plane.

The only semblance of security that many sharecropper families had during the thirties was the promise of their landlords that they might live on the land even if they had no work. Such a family was the Lesters, who lived on a tobacco road in back country Georgia. The security of the Lester family, however, did not last long during the depression, because their landlord lost his property to a bank when he could not meet loan payments. Faced with the threat of eviction, Jeeter Lester was unwilling or unable to accept the fact that he could be put off the land that his family had worked for generations. He was stubbornly attached to the land, and he rejected the idea of working in a factory, partly on principle and partly because of his fear of the city. The future of the Lester family, therefore, seemed
bleak as the curtain fell on Tobacco Road.

In *We, the People*, Donald Collins voiced a final statement on the circumstances of the farmer during the depression years. Instead of wishing to stay on the land, Donald wanted only to leave:

...I've had all I want of farmin'!
Workin' an' sweatin' from sun-up till
after dark. An' when you're all through,
what have ya got to show for it—with
grain rottin' in the elevators and corn
keepin' the kitchen-stove a-goin'?33

Such bitter disillusionment was undoubtedly common among many American farmers during the 1930's.
Chapter 2: Political Implications

The theatre of the 1930's was the scene of a tremendous amount of political comment. With the exposure of scandals in the United States government, and the rise of alien forms of government in other countries, the American people had a great deal of food for political thought. Dramatists of the time did not fail to seize upon various aspects of politics as subjects for comment or themes for entire plays.

Many depression playwrites expressed conflicting political philosophies in their works. Two major points of contention concerned the attitudes and interests of politicians, and the attitudes and interests of the people they represented. Various authors presented different feelings about the honesty and motivation of politicians, and the genuine concern of people for self-government.

A young congressman in Both Your Houses, Allan McLean, represented the honest politicians who wished to faithfully represent their constituents. McLean felt that he had to look out for the interests of the people of his state, but he was totally unwilling to engage in the political scheming that his colleagues employed to achieve their objectives. ¹ Of the opposite opinion on political interests and motivation was another congressman in Both Your Houses, Representative Gray. A man of few words, Gray bluntly stated that "Our system is every man for himself -- and the nation be damned!"² A colleague of Gray and McLean, Solomon Fitzmaurice, presented a plausible explanation
for their extreme disagreement over the duties and motivations of politicians. Fitzmaurice explained that he had been a man of principle when he first arrived in Washington, but he had found that he could accomplish nothing without compromising his principles.

After accepting the harsh realities of political technique, Fitzmaurice's conscience had more frequently failed to detect his shortcomings, until he reached a point of hardly knowing right from wrong. Fitzgerald ended by saying that he and his colleagues were a "...bunch of crooks...", and he implied that McLean would have to become one of them if he wanted to stay in office.

Several depression dramatists also had conflicting views concerning the political interests of the general public. Solomon Fitzmaurice spoke strongly, though with some reservations, on popular apathy in Both Your Houses:

Now it's been my firm conviction, fortified by thirty years' experience, that the people don't change -- and they seldom or never wake up. In fact, I have found no word in the English language and no simile or figure of speech that would express the complete and illimitable ignorance and incompetence of the voting population. But maybe I don't go back far enough. Maybe it's a longer cycle than I take in.

Fitzmaurice later stated that the only concern of his constituents was getting their share of the plunder gathered by corrupt government.

Idiot's Delight presented the problem of political apathy found in international circles. In this play Dr. Walderssee,
a German scientist, was too concerned with his personal work to consider the consequences of the rise of fascism in his native country. He did not realize that the Nazi control of Germany could lead to an international disaster. 8

American politicians debated the issue of apathy among their constituents, and the probability of public realization of political corruption. Two national committeemen, Lippman and Gilhooley, in Of These I Sing considered the possibility that the people might be "...getting wise..." to the unscrupulous activities of their party, but decided that they had tricked the public too long to ever be caught. 9 Representative Fitzmaurice, however, began to have very serious suspicions at the end of Both Your Houses that the voters would some day discover the dishonesty of their political leaders. Yet Fitzmaurice felt that such a day of reckoning would not come in his time. 10 Representative Allan McLean, on the other hand, felt that the American people were rapidly realizing their political responsibilities, and that they might soon effect extensive changes in the structure and workings of their government. 11

Franklin Roosevelt in I'd Rather Be Right made a final positive statement of faith in the political responsibility of the American people. As part of a Fourth of July address, Roosevelt said to his countrymen, "There's only one thing that really matters in this country, or ever will. You!" 12

Political corruption was another issue of concern in the plays of the thirties. In Abe Lincoln in Illinois the author pointed out that corruption was not a phenomenon peculiar to the political world of the 1930's. In confirmation, he had Lincoln speak of dishonest
practices employed in the presidential campaign of 1860.\textsuperscript{13} So it seemed that corruption was an established precedent, if not a proud tradition, in American political life.

Depression politicians agreed with Lincoln's appraisal of governmental corruption. In \textit{Both Your Houses} Solomon Fitzmaurice bluntly stated his opinion on the honesty of the government: "...the sole business of government is graft, special privilege and corruption..."\textsuperscript{14} He added that "Parties may come and parties may go -- administrations come in and go out, but the graft varies only in amount, not in kind."\textsuperscript{15}

In \textit{Winterset} Judge Gaunt, a man suffering from senility and the pains of a belated self-evaluation, spoke not only of corruption within a political system, but of what he thought was the natural corruption of individuals by time. He said:

> You will hear it said that an old man makes a good judge, being calm, clear-eyed, without passion. But this is not true. Only the young love truth and justice. The old are savage, wary, violent, swayed by manic desires, cynical of friendship or love, open to bribery and the temptations of lust, corrupt and dastardly to the heart.\textsuperscript{16}

Solomon Fitzmaurice in \textit{Both Your Houses} agreed with Judge Gaunt's opinion that time corrupted people, but he added that political machinery in the government speeded the process. According to Fitzmaurice, congressmen often had to compromise their principles in order to succeed. Honest men did not stay in Washington long.\textsuperscript{17}
Bus, the seasoned secretary of an experienced congressman, agreed with Fitzmaurice's description of the power of political machinery. Warning a new congressman against attacking a bill in the House of Representatives, Bus said that party machinery would prevent him from even receiving permission to speak. She added that the young representative's personal secretary was reporting his plans to his political opponents.18

Presentations of political corruption in depression drama had an obvious purpose. Dramatists of the thirties wanted to alert their audiences to the existence of various abuses so that they would take measures to correct them. Mr. Sloane, a teacher, ended We, the People with a direct plea for popular action against the evils existing in the United States. He said: "It is our house: this America. Let us cleanse it and put it in order and make it a decent place for decent people to live in!"19 Undoubtedly Mr. Sloane's statement expressed the feelings of the author of We, the People, as well as those of other playwrights who spoke less directly.

The theatre of the thirties did not limit its attacks and commentary to general problems, but sometimes placed public figures on the stage. I'd Rather Be Right, a satirical musical comedy, featured Franklin D. Roosevelt as himself in a spoof on the problems, policies, and personalities of his administration. The President spoke freely about these matters, often revealing a lack of ability and/or responsibility in carrying out his duties.
Two major problems that Roosevelt mentioned in *I'd Rather Be Right* were the country's economic plight, and the lack of understanding between labor and management. Although he was aware of these disturbing situations, the President was, however, unsuccessful in handling them. When faced with the problem of the government's deficit, he was unable to think of a satisfactory means for balancing the budget. Roosevelt was also unable to understand or implement the Wagner Act in settling the wage dispute of a carnival worker and his employer, although it was a piece of labor legislation to which he had given his presidential support.

*I'd Rather Be Right* went on to tell about Roosevelt's policies and projects. The president's major policies were pictured as the government take-over of private business, as implied by a sailor, and heavy taxation, as mentioned by a bankrupt businessman. The results of Roosevelt's extension of taxation and other governmental powers varied widely, and included the Federal Theatre, the Public Works Administration, Boulder Dam, and social security.

Several of Roosevelt's associates appeared in *I'd Rather Be Right*. The members of the presidential cabinet introduced themselves by means of a song in which they proclaimed that they were very homogeneous and rather anonymous, except for Farley, Perkins, and Hull, whom the president held in his special confidence. Farley was the subject of further comment when Roosevelt said that he owned his two successful elections to the salesmanship of campaign manager Farley. On a more negative note, the justices
of the Supreme Court usually appeared when they were spying on the chief executive. Roosevelt sensed the suspicion and animosity of the solemn men in black, but he said that he could not understand their feelings. All that he had ever done was to try to remove them from office.

*I'd Rather Be Right* treated one more area of the Roosevelt administration, the president as a man. Throughout the play the main character presented himself as something of a good-natured idiot. He radiated poise and personality in his fireside chats, and became exceedingly conceited about his popularity with the radio audience. Yet he had a great deal of sincere faith in the American people, as exemplified in a Fourth of July speech, and a real interest in the problems of ordinary people, such as a young couple whom he tried to help. Perhaps the perfect comment in this play on Roosevelt's enthusiastic pursuit of his presidential duties, and on his personality, was his own statement, "I'd rather be right than President. No, I wouldn't. I'd rather be both."

The author of *I'd Rather Be Right* may not have liked Franklin D. Roosevelt as the President of the United States, but he seemed unable to dislike him as a man.

Another satire of the thirties, *Of Thee I Sing*, dealt with political stereotypes more than real personalities. This play followed the life of John P. Wintergreen from the time of his nomination as a presidential candidate, through his election, and into his administration. Early scenes presented commentary on types of politicians. Representing the West was Senator Jones, who
managed to include veterans, motherhood, Russian Bolshevism, and Chinese labor in a statement on the political temperament of his section of the country. Another congressman, Senator Lyons, when asked to report on the feelings of the South, replied: "Gentlemen, you ask me about the South. It is the land of romance, of roses and honeysuckle, of Southern chivalry and hospitality, fried chicken and waffles, salad and coffee." Such testimony seemed to indicate that most senators felt more concern for assuring their personal popularity than anything else.

Of Thee I Sing also made fun of campaign gimmicks. Absurd parodies on campaign slogans, such as "Vote for Prosperity and See What You Get," "Turn the Reformers Out," "The Full Dinner Jacket," and "He's the man the people choose -- Loves the Irish and the Jews," appeared in a campaign scene. The most ridiculous device, however, was the whole platform of Candidate Wintergreen. He and his associates decided to have a beauty contest to pick Miss White House. Wintergreen would marry the winner and run for the presidency on the issue of love. As for the vice-presidential candidate, campaigning was no problem since everyone insisted that he should not make public appearances. This consensus was an obvious indication that no one regarded the vice-presidency as a position worthy of notice.

The Miss White House contest did not come off according to plan because Wintergreen fell in love with its manager, Mary Turner, instead of its winner, Diana Devereaux. Yet the rest of the campaign scheme went smoothly, culminating in a pre-election rally in Madison Square Garden. At this time the introduction of John and
Mary to their audience demonstrated the absurdity of political campaigns aimed at personality. Mr. Fulton, the master of ceremonies, said:

My friends, the issue of this campaign is a simple one. We do not talk to you about war debts or wheat or immigration -- we appeal to your hearts, not to your intelligence. It is the old, old story, yet ever new -- the sweetest story ever told. John P. Wintergreen, candidate for President of the United States of America, loves Mary Turner. Mary Turner, the most beautiful, the loveliest example of typical American womanhood -- and I defy my opponents to say otherwise -- loves John P. Wintergreen. He has proposed to her in 47 States of the Union, and in 47 States she has accepted him; tonight she will give him her answer in the great State of New York! John and Mary, stand up! Can you look at them and not be thrilled by their youth, their charm, their passion? Ladies and gentlemen, I give you John P. Wintergreen and Mary Turner!

Following Wintergreen's election to the presidency, *Of Thee I Sing* went on to deal with the business of the chief executive. In a typical morning's work, President Wintergreen handled disarmament by scrapping two battleships and building four, renewed a bet with a South American president that he would soon suffer a coup d'etat, and declined an invitation to appear in a minstrel show because of racial tension in the South. The author of *Of Thee I Sing* obviously felt that the job of the president was not free from ridiculous little tasks or ridiculous little men. Also, the distribution of political favors was evident in Wintergreen's administration when his three major campaigners appeared as members of the cabinet.

As for the general state of the nation during Wintergreen's presidency, the Senate reported that depression was plaguing...
the country, and added that the efforts of Congress would make conditions worse instead of better.\textsuperscript{44} The Committee on Unemployment gave a similar report: "The Committee on Unemployment is gratified to report that due to its unremitting efforts there is now more unemployment in the United States than ever before."\textsuperscript{45} The author of \textit{Of Thee I Sing} had come to the conclusion that government agencies were perhaps more harmful than helpful during the depression years.

In the final scene of \textit{Of Thee I Sing}, there was a comment on the subject of foreign bars. The French Ambassador was protesting Wintergreen's marriage to Mary Turner instead of Miss Devereaux, the winner of the Miss White House Contest. President Wintergreen mentioned the fact that France had failed to pay back American loans, to which the Ambassador replied that he wished to talk about a serious matter, not a promise to pay.\textsuperscript{46} So it seemed that the extension of credit during time of war had failed to win the respect or friendship of other countries for the United States.

Depression dramatists went beyond evaluating the existing political institutions and conditions in the United States. Several writers dealt with the possibility of change in our ideological values and governmental structure. According to Lincoln in \textit{Abe Lincoln in Illinois}, the prerogative of the American people to protest and effect changes in their government was an important, basic right.\textsuperscript{47} Mr. Sloane, a teacher in
We, the People, expressed similar feelings when he told a group of student leaders that they must voice their opinions in order to promote progress. Also in agreement with the idea of change was Representative McLean in Both Your Houses. At the end of the play McLean warned his political adversaries that the American people would not stand for corrupt politics, and that they could easily decide to alter their form of government if the present system did not function satisfactorily.

To some dramatists, any change in the form of government in the United States in the 1930's would probably lead to communism or fascism, since those political forms were becoming dominant in parts of Europe during the period. Authors presented varying opinions on the virtues and vices of these ideologies, generally favoring communism over fascism. Plays dealing with these themes included The Fall of the City, It Can't Happen Here, Idiot's Delight, Winterset, Waiting for Lefty, and We the People.

The Fall of the City made an eloquent statement on the reason for people turning to dictators. According to a prophecy at the beginning of the play, masterless men must take a master. In subsequent action, the people of the city fulfilled the prediction by falling before a conqueror who was nothing but an empty suit of armor, simply because they wanted to believe that he was a powerful master.

It Can't Happen Here applied the principles of European dictatorship to the American scene as it portrayed the rise of American fascism under the administration of President Buz Windrip.
As a candidate for the presidency, Windrip had conducted his campaign with the help of a militant party, the Corpos. Many Corpos were worthless dead beats or young men who could not find jobs because of the depression. Corpo officers, however, were sleek, capable, and ruthless. Employing techniques of brutality and deceit, the Corpos conducted their campaign. Before the election took place an old man died at the hands of the Corpos for airing his independent views, and the voters were deluged with impossible promises to cure all the country's ills. Finally, Buz Windrip won the presidency on a platform of dictatorship:

The President shall determine the size of all courts. He shall enlist all workers in one union, and all business in scientific divisions. The present political parties and the entire party system shall be abolished, because it's absurd to have rival gangs in a civil state as in an army at war. AND THIS IS WAR, against all the degenerate countries of Europe, and the Corporative discipline shall not be for the purpose of joining but of opposing All forms of dictatorships. And lest any President be tempted, the power of Congress to impeach him shall be facilitated. One army under one leader! Oh, individualism is a glorious word, and if for the moment we give up a few individual luxuries, it is only so that in the long run we may starve ourselves to greatness.

Once in power, however, Windrip seemed to forget his words against dictatorship as he began to regulate all areas of the nation's life, both public and private. The Corporative government arrested members of Congress, established one national labor union, instituted censorship, established martial
law,\textsuperscript{59} conducted book burnings,\textsuperscript{60} and perpetrated other crimes against the people. Eventually the flagrant injustice of the Corpora caused the people to revolt, but only after suffering degradation and humiliation similar to or worse than that of the people of fascist countries in Europe.

\textit{Idiot's Delight} gave a more realistic account of fascism in the thirties. The setting of the play was a hotel on the Italian frontier, near the borders of Switzerland and Austria; the time was the first two days of a second World War; and the characters were of several nationalities. Perhaps the most important theme in \textit{Idiot's Delight} was the people's blindness to the consequences of the rise of fascism in Germany and Italy. Dr. Waldersen, for example, did not take time to realize that his scientific knowledge could be turned to the destruction of mankind until after his native Germany had committed herself to war.\textsuperscript{61} Harry Van, an American entertainment agent, was also blind to the possibility of a war initiated by the fascists. When told that Italy was on the verge of a war against the world, Harry replied: "I don't believe it. I don't believe that people like that would take on the job of licking the world. They're too romantic."\textsuperscript{62} It seemed, therefore, that dramatists in the 1930's saw the whole world as being too blind or self-centered to properly appreciate and fear the calamities that the rise of fascism could bring.

Another ascendant ideology of the thirties was communism. Many depression dramatists presented communism as a new saviour that was being crucified by the world. In \textit{Winterset} a young
radical tried to defend a group of people dancing on the sidewalk from the bullying of a policeman. The young man spoke eloquently for American rights and against oppression, but received nothing for his efforts but insults and threats from the policeman.63

Waiting for Lefty presented more violent characterizations of righteous radicals. One in particular dealt with Agate, a union man trying to arouse his fellow workers against their corrupt leaders. In a direct appeal Agate spoke against union leadership and for the virtues of the communist brotherhood:

These slick slobs stand here telling us about bogeymen. That's a new one for the kids -- the reds is bogeymen! But the man who got me food in 1932, he called me Comrade! The one who picked me up where I bled -- he called me Comrade too!64

Popular feeling against leftists was presented in We, the People, in which ordinary men like Mr. Davis associated foreigners with communists, and communists with troublemakers.65 Mr. Fatt, a union organizer in Waiting for Lefty, encouraged such stereotyped thought among workers. Fatt was afraid of leftist elements in the labor movement, so he told his men of atrocities in Soviet Russia in order to frighten them away from red influence.66

Finally, Garth Esdras in Winterset summed up public opinion on the unjust conviction of a radical for murder, and the possibility of reopening the case:

...who wants to go to trial again except the radicals?...let the radicals go on howling about getting a dirty deal. They always howl and nobody gives a damn.67
The last topic of political nature dealt with by depression dramatists was war. The world situation in the thirties was highly explosive, according to people in several plays. Fay commented in Waiting for Lefky that "The world is an armed camp today. One match sets the whole world blazing in forty-eight hours." Frank Bonaparte looked at newspapers in Golden Boy, then said, "Read 'em and weep. March first tomorrow -- spring on the way. Flowers soon budding, birds twittering -- south wind...Cannons, bombs and airplane raids!" Captain Locicero warned Dr. Waldenses of approaching war in Idiot's Delight, but said that he was not sure just who Italy's enemy would be.

Most people in the plays of the thirties were strongly opposed to war. Louis Volterra in We, the People said that he had left his native Italy in 1914 because he had not wanted to be a soldier. In the same play Allen Davis, a college student, encouraged his friends to protest against military training at the state university.

Reluctance of the people to fight, however, stopped few wars. When world war finally broke out in Idiot's Delight, Harry Van wondered how such a thing could have happened. Captain Locicero tried to tell Harry that war was just an unfortunate thing that sometimes happened, like an avalanche. His explanation, however, was not good enough for Harry. War, he said, involved too much flesh and blood and too many brains to be an accident. Harry's inability to find an answer to the riddle of war seemed to reflect
the frustration and impotence of mankind in general, and the
depression generation in particular, when faced with problems
too large and complex for them to solve. Perhaps for anyone to solve.
Chapter 3: Religious Implications

Many dramatists in the 1930's presented the American people as religiously apathetic. Economic problems seemed to dominate the public conscience to the exclusion of spiritual matters. Church attendance dwindled year by year until ministers like Mr. Williamson in We, the People were preaching to empty pews.1 Dude Lester of Tobacco Road probably spoke for many religiously alienated or apathetic Americans when he said, "I ain't afraid of the Lord. He ain't never done nothing for me one way or the other...."2

Economic adversity was the major, but not the only cause for religious disaffection presented by depression dramatists. In Abe Lincoln in Illinois, the title character, a good and godly man, turned from his faith when the woman he loved died. Lincoln could not understand or accept God's seemingly unjust decision to let a good young person die. His resentment and sense of personal suffering were so great that he was unable to pray for his loved one.3 Perhaps Lincoln's particular hardships were especially meaningful to depression audiences, since so many people in the thirties were plagued by personal troubles that had resulted from conditions that they could not control.

Another example of God's seemingly callous ways was presented in The Fall of the City. In this radio drama a city was threatened by the approach of an invincible conqueror. The citizens grew more and more hysterical as messengers arrived with reports of
the conqueror's progress. Various leaders attempted to allay the fears of the people, including the priests of the city, who told the people to turn to their gods. This advice, however, proved to be of little value, because the gods did not come to the aid of the city, and the people submitted to their new master.

The insincerity of man in religion, as opposed to the falseness of God, was a problem extensively dealt with in Tobacco Road. Of the three religious hypocrites presented in this play, the worst by far was Sister Bessie, the self-ordained, profiteering preacher who lived on the tobacco road. Though a woman with a dubious past, Sister Bessie was utterly self-righteous in her pretense to piety and her condemnation of others. Sister Bessie demonstrated her attitudes in an episode in which she chastised a neighbor, Jeeter Lester, for stealing turnips, then happily proceeded to help him in the consumption of the stolen goods.

Tobacco Road's second religious hypocrite was the abovementioned Jeeter Lester, an unemployed sharecropper and the future father-in-law of Sister Bessie. Jeeter's hypocrisy was evident when his frequent fits of penitence for his frequent sins had no real effect upon his subsequent actions. Dude Lester, Jeeter's son, correctly judged his father's religious sincerity in the blunt accusation, "You're always praying and shouting after you been stealing something, but that ain't never stopped you from doing it."
The third religious hypocrite of *Tobacco Road* was not as bold as Jeeter and Bessie, but still one of their kind. Lov Bensey, the husband of Jeeter's daughter, voiced his ideas on religious generosity when his needy in-laws asked him for help, "The Lord looks at us with equal favor, they say. He gives me mine and if you don't get yours you better go talk to him about it."\(^9\)

Another religious problem presented in the theatre of the 1930's was the controversy over the opposition of complex dogma to a simple religious creed. Lincoln, in *Abe Lincoln in Illinois*, supported the side of religious simplicity when speaking of his personal faith. He said that he was not a member of a church because he had never found one whose qualification for membership was obedience to Christ's commandments, "...'Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart and with all thy soul and with all thy mind, and thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself.'"\(^10\) Instead of "...long, complicated statements of Christian doctrine...."\(^11\)

Totally different in religious attitude from most plays of the thirties were *You Can't Take It with You* and *The Green Pastures*. Both plays reflected a peaceful and happy attitude about religion. Perhaps this serene outlook existed because the particular circumstances of the two plays were far removed from the harsh realities of the depression years.

The Sycamore family of *You Can't Take It with You* was a collection of slightly eccentric people whose primary concern was living life as happily as possible. As head of the family, Grandpa Sycamore spoke for them all as he thanked the Lord at
mealtime for their simple happiness, and offered their trust in His wisdom to guide their future. Such faith was charming and heart-warming, but perhaps exceptional since the Sycamores had the unusual blessing of a secure income during the difficult years of the depression.

The Green Pastures also presented religion to depression audiences in a favorable light. The purpose of the work was to attempt to present the simple, humble, yet strong religious faith of the Negroes of the deep South in the simple terms of the people who believed it. To accomplish this purpose, The Green Pastures presented scenes from the Old Testament in terms of the idealized life of the Southern Negro. Though a far cry from the reality of the thirties, audiences and critics received The Green Pastures so well, that it was called "...the divine comedy of the modern theatre." 14

Although depression dramatists seemed to present the failings of religion more than its triumphs, at least one play of the period expressed the feeling that religious prerogative was still important to the American people. It Can't Happen Here showed how the fundamental rights of all Americans could be undermined if a fascist party gained control of the United States government. In such a situation, one of the first acts of suppression was the closing of churches and synagogues in one locality. Because of this and other violations of constitutional rights in It Can't Happen Here, many Americans joined a daring resistance movement which eventually led to an open military offensive.
against the fascist party. Perhaps such dramatic action seemed an overstatement of public concern for freedom, but obviously the author of *It Can't Happen Here* felt that American rights, including the right to freedom of worship, were still important during the depression years, even though people often forgot to appreciate and exercise them.
Chapter 4: Social Implications

The theatre of the 1930's often presented social commentary to its audiences. During the depression years, as at other times, people felt personal concern for the goals and problems of their society. The unusual economic conditions of the thirties presented extraordinarily severe problems to the American people. Yet their basic goals, health, and happiness, and security, remained fundamentally unchanged.

The depression years were especially hard on young people, who had never enjoyed better times but who had little hope for the future. According to Louis Volterra in We, the People, a young boy could look forward to quitting school at age fourteen and working for the rest of his life. A girl could look forward to marrying, losing her children to malnutrition and disease, and working so hard that she would look like an old woman at age thirty. ¹ Mio, a wandering youth in Winterset, spoke of himself as the lost generation. Orphaned by injustice, hounded by prejudice, Mio could not feel hopeful about his future.² He said that the only certain things in life were that "...it gets cold in winter... [and] you die sometime."³ A friend of Mio, a boy named Carr, expressed his cynicism about life in terms of money. He said that experience had taught him that anything could be bought with money, and that nothing could be obtained without money.⁴ Such words were especially bitter coming from a youth of seventeen.
The cynical speeches of youth, however, did not indicate that they lacked a will to live. On the contrary, some young people like Joe Bonaparte in Golden Boy possessed a fierce determination to better their lives. On the eve of his twenty-first birthday Joe announced to his family that he was going to change his life because he did not like himself, "...past, present, and future." 

Ralph Berger in Awake and Sing was also searching for a better life. He said that he was tired of everyone hating everyone else, and the idea that money was the only key to happiness. Voicing a similar desire for a happy life was Florence in Waiting for Lefty. Tired of her drab existence, Florence said to her practical brother, "Don't you see I want something else out of life. Sure I want romance, love, babies. I want anything in life I can get."

Joe Bonaparte and Lorna Moon found happiness and love for a few brief minutes in the last act of Golden Boy. Full of feverish hope for a happy life with Joe, Lorna said, "Somewhere there must be happy boys and girls who can teach us the way of life! We'll find some city where poverty's no shame -- where music is no crime! -- where there's no war in the streets -- where a man is glad to be himself, to live and make his woman herself!" Lorna's dream, however, did not come true, because she and Joe died a few hours after her speech in an automobile accident.
Another episode of passionate, but hopeless love of the young involved Mio and Miriamne. Both were social outcasts, Mio because his father was unjustly executed for murder, Miriamne because she was Jewish. Mio and Miriamne met and fell in love by accident, but Mio knew that they could never live happily together. He said that he was socially and economically unfit, that he could never marry and have a home. Society had marked him as a misfit.\(^9\) Fate proved Mio correct in his prediction, because he was soon killed by a gangster. Miriamne, seeing Mio mortally wounded, decided to follow him in death. The father of Miriamne, Mr. Esdras, said of the death of the couple that they were fortunate to have died young, before their characters and their lives had been corrupted by the evils of life.\(^{10}\) Esdras' words were pessimistic, but the author of *Winterset* must have thought they contained truth.

Aside from the special problems of youth, society was concerned in the thirties with such basic matters as health, security, and happiness. In the area of health, Mary Klobutsko of *We, the People* stated that her father had come to the United States from Poland in order to secure the health and happiness of his family. His effort proved worthless, however, because he died from working under sweat-shop conditions and living in the slums.\(^{11}\)

One-Third of a Nation presented statistics that confirmed Mary's implication about the unhealthiness of slum life. From 1919 to 1934 slum death rates from tuberculosis, diphtheria, spinal meningitis were more or less double the average.\(^{12}\) Another special health problem for slum-dwellers was the closing of many hospital
charity wards. Such a situation existed in *Men in White*.

Considering the unhealthy living conditions and inadequate medical facilities prevalent among the working classes, some women were understandably afraid or unwilling to have children. A woman in *One-Third of a Nation* blamed the loss of her first child on its unhealthy environment, and told her husband that she would not attempt to have any more children.

The social quest for security during the thirties involved several related problems and groups. Perhaps the major threat to public security was crime. According to statistics offered in *One-Third of a Nation*, crime flourished even more in city slums than did physical disease.

The problem of crime brought up the related areas of law enforcement and penology. Comment on police officers was unfavorable in *Winterset* and *We, the People*. In the former play Mio criticized policemen, saying that they were nothing but stupid, corrupt, Irishmen. In the latter play Mary Klobutsko accused the police of framing Allen Davis for killing a policeman. According to Mary, the guardians of the law cared nothing for justice. She said that "...when a policeman is killed, somebody must be punished. If they cannot find the one who did it, then they must punish someone else."

Unfavorable comment on penal methods and goals was also made in *Winterset*. Trock, a man who had just left prison, bitterly denounced the treatment he had received there. He said that he was dying from a disease he had contracted in prison, and that he
wished to take some of those responsible for his confinement to
the grave with him.18 In reply to Trock's statement, Shadow,
another underworld figure, said:

...you're supposed to leave the pen full of
high thought,
kind of noble-like, loving toward all mankind,
ready to kiss their feet—or whatever parts
they stick out toward you.19

Obviously neither Shadow nor Trock had been socially rehabilitated
by a stay in a penitentiary.

Another threat to security that depression dramatists treated
was prejudice against various groups and individuals. Four period
plays written in the 1930's indicated that the elements of prejudice
had existed in earlier times. The Old Maid gave an account of
racial prejudice, as well as upper class snobbery as it existed
in the second quarter of the nineteenth century.20 Louise Stanhope
of Alison's House spoke in 1899 of not wanting to be thought
"different" from others. In The Little Foxes Ben Hubbard and his
sister Regina wished to use their newly acquired wealth to make
themselves acceptable to the proper social circles of the 1900's.
Even Lincoln in Abe Lincoln in Illinois recognized that he was
somewhat socially prejudiced against Negroes, though he believed
that their human rights were equal to his.

Dramatists of the thirties depicted various effects that
prejudice had on groups and individuals. In The Children's Hour
the effects of unfounded rumors implying an unhealthy relationship
between two young women proved to be disastrous. One of the
persecuted, Karen Wright, said in a bewildered manner that her
whole life had been altered, although she thought that she herself had not actually changed. In a similar situation, Mio in Winterset spoke of indictment by public opinion. He said that his father's trial for murder had been a farce because the jury and the judge were prejudiced against the defendant's political and national background.

Prejudice by and against Jews were brought out respectively in Men in White and Waiting for Lefty. In the former play, Dr. Levine spoke of his mother's reaction to his marriage with a gentile. He said simply that she had disowned him. Another Jewish doctor suffered prejudice from outside his ethnic group in Waiting for Lefty. Though a capable physician with seniority, Dr. Benjamin was the first to leave when his hospital's staff had to be cut.

The largest group that suffered from prejudice, however, was the Negroes. The intensity of anti-Negro feeling varied in different regions of the country, significantly affecting the type of treatment they received. In the North, Mr. Williamson of We, the People said that economic rivalry had created hard feelings between the races. Yet Steve, a young Negro, felt that he was being persecuted when Mr. Williamson reproved him for speaking strongly against American intervention in Haiti. He said resentfully:

I thought this was supposed to be a free country ... with everybody havin' the right to express his own opinion about things. But I guess I've been on the wrong track. I guess if your skin don't happen to be white an' you've got nothin' in your pockets but holes, about all you're free to do is keep your mouth shut.
Of Mice and Men commented on the treatment of a Negro on a Western ranch. Although Crooks, the stable buck, was considered a nice fellow, he was not allowed to live in the bunkhouse with the white hands. Because of this prejudiced treatment, Crooks was very lonely and bitter.

The worst abuse of Negroes occurred in the South, as presented in They Shall Not Die. This play dealt with the unjust accusation, trial, and conviction of seven young Negroes for the supposed rape of two white girls. The action of the play presented many phases of Southern prejudice against Negroes, from the assumption that all Negroes want to rape white women, to the beating of Negro prisoners, to the inflammatory summation of the prosecutor at the trial. The core of white Southern sentiment, however, was best expressed in these words, "We jest gotta keep them black bastards in their place." Rokoff, the defense lawyer, added his evaluation of the importance of the trial. He said, "This is not merely a rape case... it's bigger than that. It's the Southern ruling class on trial...."

The last social goal treated by the dramatists of the 1930's was the pursuit of happiness. Although characters in various plays expressed ideas differently, most felt that a secure home and someone to love would make them ideally happy. Candy in Of Mice and Men would have been content with just a small farm and a friend or two. Moody of Golden Boy saw no purpose in life unless he could have a wife and a home. In Men in White Laura's concept of an ideal life was many years of marriage to the man she loved, provided that he did not work too much or too hard.
On a higher, more spiritual plane was the ideal of happiness expressed by Johnny's father in *My Heart's in the Highlands*. According to him the human heart is never satisfied until after death, when it finds its resting place.

*Our Town* expressed a final idea on human happiness. According to this play mortal men were too insensitive to realize the tremendous beauty and wonder of life. Instead, they moved in ignorance, hurting feelings and wasting precious time. Except for saints and poets, men never realized the wonders of earth and life before death. These ideas may have given depression audiences special reason to pause and evaluate their attitudes toward life. Certainly times were hard, but life had to go on. Yet to the 1930's the most logical rule for living seemed to be "live and let live."
Chapter 5: Psychological Implications

The effect of adversity upon the human mind was a matter of interest to some playwrights during the thirties, since the extraordinarily widespread hardships of the Great Depression provided special cause for psychological maladjustment. According to Harry Van in *Idiot's Delight*, the whole world was mentally diseased during the 1930's. He said that everyone had "become like a dope addict... hopped up with false beliefs -- false fears -- false enthusiasm."¹ In a world plagued by economic depression and the threat of war, such extreme psychological reactions were plausible. Slim in *Of Mice and Men* expressed a similar evaluation of the mental state of society. Slim sensed that most people were full of anxiety and suspicion. He said, "Maybe everybody in the whole damn world is scared of each other."²

The author of *Tobacco Road* gave a very extensive presentation of the de-humanization that occurred within a family of destitute sharecroppers in the thirties. Throughout the play, various characters revealed their extreme callousness and insensitivity toward the feelings and fortunes of others. Especially unfeeling were Jeeter Lester, the head of the family, and his son Dude. Jeeter often displayed casual cruelty in his encounters with his daughter Ellie May, who was extremely self-conscious about the slit lip which marred her face. In one episode Jeeter told Ellie May that she must find someone to marry, even though
her face was terribly deformed. When Ellie May burst into tears and ran from him, Jeeter could not understand her behavior. To him her slit lip was a cold, unemotional fact of life.

Dude Lester displayed his callousness in an even more shocking manner. After mortally wounding his mother with his irresponsible driving, Dude calmly explained the accident: "We was backing on the road and she got in the way. I guess the wheels ran over her."

The only feelings of mutual concern and love in Tobacco Road were shared by Ada Lester and her daughter Pearl. When Ada lay dying from wounds carelessly inflicted upon her by her son Dude, Pearl was the only one who displayed any signs of grief. Ada likewise demonstrated her motherly love for Pearl when, in a last dying effort, she helped Pearl escape from a man and a life that she hated. It seemed therefore, that poverty did not take all humanity from the members of the Lester family in Tobacco Road.

The Little Foxes presented the proposition that material wealth did not necessarily insure the preservation of the human sensibilities. In one episode Leo Hubbard, the son of a wealthy businessman, was bewildered and baffled because his uncle kept personal mementos in a safe with valuable securities. Leo could not understand why his uncle placed so much value on what he himself considered junk. Perhaps Leo's lack of understanding stemmed from emotional rather than material poverty.
War was another cause mentioned by depression dramatists for psychological change. In *Mourning Becomes Electra*, a tragedy set in New England in 1865, Orin Mannon returned from fighting in the Civil War. Combat, however, had scarred his mind as well as his body. His temperament and manner were greatly altered. Orin tried to explain the effect of the war on his mind, saying, "I had a queer feeling that war meant murdering the same man over and over, and that in the end I would discover the man was myself."7

War also had an adverse effect upon Larry Collins in *We, The People*. A veteran of the Great War, Larry had become a bitter alcoholic. According to his brother, Bert, the war had ruined Larry. It had made him lose his manhood and his nerve.8

At least three plays written in the thirties commented on escapism as a psychological defense mechanism. In *We, the People*, Mr. Davis tried to escape the harsh reality of depression conditions by simply not thinking about them. As long as his home and family were secure, Davis did not want to worry about the problems of others.9

Moody in *Golden Boy* used a different technique to escape the hard times of the thirties; if only momentarily. When beset by problems, Moody thought of the good old days before the Great Depression, when business was good and life exciting.10

Birdie Hubbard of *The Little Foxes* did not belong to the 1930's, but to the South of 1900. Yet she also looked back to happier times, i.e., the days before the Civil War, when her
family had been happy and prosperous. When asked what she would do if she had a great deal of money, Birdie replied that she would restore her family's plantation to its former grandeur. What Birdie really meant, however, was that her only happy years had been those on the plantation, and that her only hope for happiness was returning to the one place where she had found it. Birdie used alcohol as a substitute for happiness and a means of escape from her miserable life.

It seemed, therefore, that playwrights in the thirties felt that most psychological disturbances caused by the depression years were not unique in kind, but only in degree. Neither war, poverty, mental illness, nor alcoholism owed their origins to the depression.
Chapter 6: Ethical and Moral Implications

Another major topic which deeply concerned the theatre of the thirties was ethics. Various dramatists explored the interrelation of moral and ethical codes with the circumstances of life.

The problem of business ethics, or the lack of them, appeared in *The Little Foxes*. Ben and Oscar Hubbard were successful Southern businessmen who were entirely without scruples. According to their brother-in-law Horace, the Hubbards earned their wealth through cheating and treachery. They exploited everyone and everything with which they came in contact. Ben Hubbard had even married for the sole purpose of financial and social gain. Certainly such men were not to be trusted.

Business ethics in time of war was an issue in *Waiting for Lefty* and *Idiot's Delight*. In the former play an industrialist named Fay spoke of developing a "New type gas for modern warfare." When asked how he could do such a thing in good conscience, Fay replied, "If big business went sentimental over human life there wouldn't be big business of any sort!" Achille Weber, a munitions manufacturer in *Idiot's Delight*, took a more philosophical approach to the question of supplying the weapons of war. Weber felt that wars started because people wanted to kill one another, and that it was merciful on his part to help make the killing as speedy and painless as possible.

Comment was made in the area of legal ethics in *Winterset* and *They Shall Not Die*. In the former play Judge Gaunt spoke of
the value of justice, saying that it was often better to let judicial mistakes go uncorrected than to shake the public confidence by admitting that courts were fallible. The particular case to which the judge was referring in his comment was very much like the celebrated Sacco-Vanzetti case of 1927.

In *They Shall Not Die* racial prejudice overpowered any ethical sense that may have existed in the courts of the Deep South. Mr. Rokoff, the lawyer for seven Negro boys accused of raping two white girls, told his clients that they could not possibly get a fair trial in the South. Rokoff's prediction proved correct, because the boy's trial became an absurd mockery of justice.

Medicine was another area in which ethical questions rose. In *They Shall Not Die*, one of the few ethical white men to testify at the rape trial was a doctor. Although he was racially prejudiced, he refused to lie about medical findings which supported the story of the Negro defendants. Dr. Barnes in *Waiting for Lefty* was less courageous when faced with a question of ethics. Barnes knew that one of his subordinates was incompetent, but refused to prevent him from practicing because his uncle was an influential senator.

A final dilemma involving medical ethics confronted Dr. Waldersee in *Idiot's Delight*. The doctor had been working on a cure for cancer before his native Germany declared war on the world. With the Nazis in power, Dr. Waldersee realized
that his scientific knowledge might be used to destroy life. Torn between his homeland and his ethical sense, the doctor eventually decided to return to Germany.

A final statement on personal ethics was made by Johnny's Father in *My Heart's in the Highlands*. When asked what stealing was, he answered, "The way I see it, Johnny, stealing is where there's unnecessary damage or cruelty to an innocent one, so that there may be undeserved profit or power to one who is not innocent." Johnny's Father apparently condoned stealing when desperate need inspired the action, and when the party suffering the loss could afford it. Such actions would provide an even, more ethical distribution of income than that provided by capitalism.

Depression dramatists explored the question of morality as it concerned people in various times. Helen Davis and Bert Collins, a young couple in *We, the People*, found themselves in a situation common to many young people in times of depression. With their marriage indefinitely postponed by economic circumstances, Helen and Bert set aside their traditional codes of morality and indulged in premarital sex. Although they were not entirely happy with such an arrangement, Bert and Helen did not feel that it was morally wrong. Rather, it was an extraordinary solution for an extraordinary problem.

Poverty wrought more drastic effects upon the morals of other dramatic characters. Lucy Wills in *They Shall Not*
Die resorted to prostitution when her earnings from a mill job failed to support her. The characters in Tobacco Road, however, were more used to immorality since poverty had stripped them of moral sense long ago. For that reason, such incidents as Ellie Mayb attempted seduction of her brother-in-law were regarded with curiosity rather than moral indignation.

High levels of morality, however, were not necessarily equated with wealth and social prestige. Oscar Hubbard, a wealthy businessman in The Little Foxes, approved of his son's association with prostitutes, as long as they were discreet and did not interfere with his responsibilities.

Comments on morality and its relationship to happiness were made in Alison's House and We, the People. In the former play Elsa Stanhope spoke of the moral philosophy of her poetess aunt, Alison Stanhope. Elsa said that Alison would not have disapproved of a man and woman living together out of wedlock, as long as they were in love. Alison knew, she added, that public approval was not always worth the price of loneliness.

Mr. Williamson in We, the People seemed to share, or at least appreciate Alison Stanhope's concept of morality. On the occasion of Stella Collins' leaving her unhappy home for a new life with a man she cared for, Mr. Williamson displayed uncommon human understanding and sympathy. Instead of condemning Stella, Mr. Williamson said, "Perhaps if we could look into her heart, we would find not evil but a
longing for happiness. We cannot excuse her but we can pity and forgive."\textsuperscript{17} Such compassion was fortunate, because many people living in the unusually trying times of the thirties felt compelled to adopt unusual moral codes.
Part III: Evaluation

Through the years men have used the theatre for three major purposes -- to entertain, to educate, and to influence the public. Playwrights of different periods have placed varying degrees of importance upon these objectives, so that different moods have dominated the theatre at different times. From an examination of the various aspects of some twenty-seven plays written in the 1930's, it seems that the drama of that period was primarily aimed at educating and influencing the public on matters of immediate importance. Indeed, most playwrights of the thirties seemed to reflect the feelings and conditions of their time, either in a realistic manner as a record for posterity, or in exaggerated form as a stimulus for public opinion and the forces of change.

The 1930's were chaotic, unsettling, and even alarming years. The economic, social, and psychological security of the American people was gravely threatened, and solutions to the problems of the times were difficult to find. Individuals reacted to these circumstances in various ways, ranging from panic to resignation to apathy. The playwrights of the time also responded to the challenge of the depression years in different ways, though one mode of response seemed to be favored above all others. Many dramatists used ridicule as a gadfly to awaken the people to the problems they had to face, and to spur them on to constructive efforts for their solution. Few writers offered workable plans for effecting the nation's recovery, though some suggested reforms such as
communism, strong labor unions, and federal housing projects.

Solving the nation's problem on stage, however, was not the purpose of the dramatists, and perhaps it was beyond their grasp. Instead, the playwrights of the 1930's endeavored to stimulate their audiences to seek and find solutions themselves for the pressing problems of their times.
NOTES

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3. Frederick Lewis Allen, Since Yesterday (N. Y., 1939), 57.
5. Allen, 60.
6. Ibid., 63.
7. Schlesinger, I, 170.
8. Ibid., 244.

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2. Elmer Rice, We, the People (N. Y., 1933), 127.
8. Rice, 159-60.
9. Ibid., 212.
10. Ibid., 212.
12. Ibid., 23.
13. Ibid., 90.
17. Rice, 149.
18. Lewis, 29, 55.
22. Ibid., 39-40.
23. Ibid., 150.
27. John Wexley, They Shall Not Die (N. Y., 1934), 71.
28. Rice, 56.
29. Maxwell Anderson, Both Your Houses (N. Y., 1933), 48-49.
31. Ibid., 631-632.
32. Rice, 111.

Chapter 2

1. Anderson, Both Your Houses, 49, 54.
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