

Problems of Middle Class People in Clifford Odets' *Golden Boy*

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Man lives in a world of physical and psychological turmoil. He finds it very difficult to lead a normal life. Either his economic conditions or his social background block his way to future success. This article dissects the problems and troubles faced by the middle class society from the play "Golden Boy" written by an American playwright Clifford Odets. The people in this play aspire for something attractive but they do not achieve success. This leads to frustration and disappointment.

Joe Bonaparte in "Golden Boy" is an immigrant who wants to break free of the spiritual anonymity and poverty arising from this status and to take revenge on those who excluded him (Odets, Six plays, 213). He realizes himself through his destruction. He is a strong character capable of achieving success. In so doing, Joe the middle class boy leaves his father's home where he was encouraged to develop his talent of music. The old world of European values represented by his father is not enough for a boy growing up in America.

Carp, Joe's best friend, cannot convince him that the happiness he dreams of is not possible in America. The father cannot understand his son's thirst for material success. Carp counteracts this nature optimism with gloomy cynicism: World is a place where so many wants remain unfulfilled. Man's intellect and consciousness are instruments of the will while music, is the expression of the soul. It provides the means of transcending the conflict giving human life a higher significance. The transcendent impulse seems linked with a movement towards renunciation and death.

Joe is a strong, decisive character who is able to reject his father's home in his pursuit of success. This scenario is been looked up as conflict between generations – the European immigrant and his son brought up in America. The European sensibility was not able to survive in streets of America. The nurturing influence of the family showed signs of cracking under the pressure of American economic depression. This conflict between the conflicting demands of two cultures destroyed the peace of many families. Family life was torn apart and people were floundering on the waves of uncertainty and failure.

Joe becomes addicted to money and decides to get it at any cost. Hence, he takes up the profession of fighting. Joe is gradually reduced to the alluring box office ring. He is sure to get a fortune and he can buy whatever he wants. Thus he succeeds in developing his talents as a fighter and he attracts his crowds who watch and cheer him up. In his pursuit of financial success and popularity, he neglects his family's interest. He does not pay heed to the fact that as a violinist he could have won more personal rewards

Joe may have the talent of music but it is not the passport to material success. He sacrifices himself to become 'Somebody' in America. He hardly realizes that he will be surrounded by mercenary manager and his psycho pants. Joe makes his choice while faced with a spiritual dilemma. This leads him to his moral and physical destruction. He brings disaster on himself by choosing a wrong profession. Many of those around him know his true nature. Neither his broken hearted father nor his sympathetic trainer can keep him from pursuing his dream. His real aspiration is to become a musician, but his nature prevents him from being vindictive. Filled with hatred for people around him, he wants to be brutally revengeful.

Joe imposes on him a person of entirely contrary to his inner nature. He becomes a man of brutal sense. His killing instinct prompts him to murder the chocolate Drop in prize fight. His aspirations to become a musician are choked by the lack of financial gain. Having been a prize fighter he is unable to manipulate the violin strings. After he kills the chocolate Drop, he becomes a broken man. He suffers from a guilty conscience. So he races off with Lorna to die in his speeding car. Probably he would have found the elusive happiness in death.

Joe and Lorna's death is an indication of the fact that fantasy cannot sustain us for long. Pursuit of economic security sometimes leads to self destruction. Joe is the victim of profound social disharmony. He gives up the violin at the cost of material success. He finds solace in playing the violin, but it does not help him in making a career. He achieves success and financial security but loses his identity. In the world of fighting, he was a mere commodity, a pawn in the hands of men for whom this sport is a money-making business. He is no longer considered a human being.

Tom Moody, his manager, cleverly uses his girl, Lorna to hold Joe to the prize-fighting game (Odets, *Waiting for lefty*, 216). Under the pressure of sudden success, he is confused. He cannot give up boxing and he has no longer the will to strive in the field of music. Joe's desire for wealth and his fight from reality makes him a desperate man.

There is really no one like his father to show love towards him. He has no peace of mind. Joe is pursued relentlessly by the shadows of ambition and lust for wealth. He drives his car fast in his inebriated state and that is a symbol of his reckless living. He remains a victim of the conflict between his real nature and the society to which he cannot adapt himself. It is an irreconcilable fact that a fine musician should be a first-rate boxer. His hatred for people has pushed him to the boxing ring and quit violin (Miller, 58). This has led to his alienation from the people. He recognizes that musicians are not much in demand in a society that has been torn apart by depression (Reynolds, 112). What Joe wants is success through the shortcut method.

Joe's boxing talent does not stem from his physical strength. He is able to lay his anger on the opponents' weakness and exploit it. Moody quickly recognizes his talent, encourages him.

Joe's thirst for reaching the pinnacle becomes deeper as he fights with more and more zeal. At last he loses his touch with the violin. He kills his opponent in a prize-fight. This feeling of guilt leads him to death which makes the viewer to ponder whether it is a suicide or an accident (Weales, 126).

Odets combines many of the ideals and dreams of the previous young characters in Joe Bonaparte. He has intellectual and artistic gifts, but he knows the social situation of the time will not permit him to exploit them, and like them, he is doomed. Joe's decision to become a prize-fighter has a deeper motivation. He tells Lorna that he wants to get even with the people. By playing the fiddle he cannot do it.

Lorna is possibly the most pathetic figure in the play. She is being used by Moody to woo Joe. But she soon falls in love with him as hard as the young boxer falls for her. Even though she truly loves the incorrigible Moody, she stays with the manager only because she senses that she is not good enough for Joe. When she resolves to live with Joe, she is destroyed along with Joe.

Fuseli's interest in Joe stems from a desire for a source of income from illegal gambling, the main distraction for Joe caused by Fuseli, the gangster (Hayes). Really Fuseli cares little for Joe's physical welfare. He encourages him to fight more and more. Joe's interest in cars, fancy clothes, and a better life is kindled by Fuseli. Fuseli represents a sinister evil. Here is a middle class hero who struggles against the frustration of not being able to improve his living condition.

Joe is a representative of modern American man. In a fight between 'music versus boxer', boxer Joe wins. In reality he killed his musical self before he came to the fighting field. One cannot say that Joe has achieved success in the real sense of the term. The successful boxer dies in the car crash. Ironically neither as a boxer nor as a musician he had lived to his expectations.

Social pressure had turned him into a pathetic figure. Joe's meteoric rise from an unknown musician to a famous boxer is not emotionally fulfilling. He seems to be a loser all the time. He is a mere pawn in the societal game. Joe a disillusioned man completely confused and lost. He reaches the peak of his success but from there he begins his downfall. He is not satisfied with what he has and where he belongs. When he enters the fighting ring, he keeps on climbing to the utmost pinnacle. But he hardly realizes that the very thing he regards as the epitome of his accomplishments, is going to destroy him.

Joe finds two surrogate fathers – Tom Moody, his manager and rival for Lorna and Eddie Fuseli, the gangster. Moody needs someone who will be able to revitalize his career. He exploits Joe and Lorna. Jealous of Moody's hold on Lorna, Joe adopts Fuseli as his manager. This man is a villain without any redeeming features. Joe, the child-dreamer is the central figure and the play throws light on the plight of the middle class family. The "Golden Boy" is a modern allegory. "What the golden boy of this allegory is fighting for is a place in the world as an individual; what he wants to free his ego from the scorn that attaches to 'nobodies' in a society in which every activity is viewed in the light of competition" (Reynolds 116).

Boxing represents life's struggle, the attempt of a frustrated artist to punch his way into the world and make peace with it. Moody represents the capitalist's greed. He exploits Joe just as capitalist squeezes out every penny from his investments. He wants to derive maximum profits from Joe's potential.

Fuseli's interest in Joe stems from a desire for income from illegal gambling. Fuseli is a homosexual and does not approve of Joe's interest in Lorna. What is disturbing about the whole thing is that Fuseli is not a mere gangster. He symbolizes the force and oppression of the capitalistic system. He pushes Joe too far and is disappointed when he dies.

The gangster seems to have allegorical relationship to Nazism. Just a people of Germany were indifferent to Hitler's methods, Joe accepts Fuseli's partnership with Moody, on one condition that he should not interfere with the Boxer's private life. The social struggle is not against capitalism, it is against fascism for the control of a middle class boy who looks to both as the way to success. Two different struggles are dealt in this play: A middle class hero who struggles against the frustration of trying to improve his life, and a capitalist struggling against forces of fascism which forces him to exploit the hero.

Krutch identifies the play's main theme as "The lonely agony of souls imprisoned in private halls of frustrated desire and inarticulate desire" (Reynolds, 120). Joe's struggle symbolizes his struggle with over whelming social forces. He is a tool used by and discarded by society. His death is an automobile crash symbolizes attempt to runaway with "Speed" from who he is and what he has become in his struggle to succeed.

Dreams help man to achieve something in life. This is not possible always. They can lead people astray and to their down. Frustrated individual seeks ways and means of overcoming hurdles.

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