

## RESEARCH ARTICLE

# Structuralism, Maternal Authority, and Social Struggle in Clifford Odets' *Awake and Sing!*

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## ABSTRACT

This study deals with the representation of maternal authority in Clifford Odets' *Awake and Sing!* through the character of Bessie Berger. By applying a structuralism, alongside an analysis of maternal authority and social struggles, the study examines the binary oppositions of control versus freedom and materialism versus idealism, highlighting the tensions between Bessie's authority pursuit of financial stability and the aspirations of her children. The concern of this study is to reveal how this narrative is revolved around Bessie's maternal authority and her role as a mother that shaped by her immigrant background and the economic instability of the 1930s. Set against the backdrop of the Great Depression, *Awake and Sing!* depicts the struggles of the Berger family, a lower-middle-class Jewish household living in a small Bronx apartment in 1935. Through Bessie's dominant actions, Odets critiques the dehumanizing pressures of capitalism and its impact on the aspirations of the younger generation.

**Keywords:** Bessie Berger, Maternal Authority, Structuralism, The Great Depression.

## 1. Introduction:

Clifford Odets (1906-1963) is a pivotal figure in American theater during the 1930s, a founding member of the Group Theatre. He used his plays to give voice to the struggles and aspirations of working-class families in the midst of the Great Depression. Odets is considered an influential American playwright, raised in the Bronx, New York. A child of an impoverished Jewish immigrants struggling to survive in the Philadelphia of the early 1900s. Like his own family, the Bergers are a struggling immigrant family. By focusing on the lives of the Bergers, Odets crafted a portrait of the mother, Bessie, whose emotional and psychological hold over her family is shaped by the same social and economic forces that affected his own background. "Now I see again in myself flight, always flight...." As Odets reflects in his diary (Brenman-Gibson, 1981, p.227).

Odets creates a vivid representation of a mother whose influence, though rooted in love and protection, becomes overpowering and destructive. At the center of the narrative is Bessie Berger, the dominant matriarch, whose materialistic values and obsession with social status shape the family's dynamics. Bessie compels her husband, Myron, and her son, Ralph, to increase their earnings and forces her pregnant daughter, Hennie, into an unfulfilling marriage, all in pursuit of maintaining appearances. Through a structuralist analysis, the role of maternal authority will be scrutinized to understand the gendered power dynamics in the play, and how the familial structure both supports and undermines social resistance.

*Awake and Sing!* features "a conventional three-act structure with fully developed characters, blending traditional and modern theatrical techniques." it is a social drama which presents the Bergers as the microcosm of America, who are struggling under the economic and social conditions. All of the members have their own dreams where clash with harsh realities, and maternal authority becomes a focal point of power and conflict. Nevertheless, they are trying to make them real and endeavor to make something new in their lives. Basically, the characters are trapped in a system of conventionality, especially Bessie, whose voice dominates the family and represents the pressure to conform to societal norms. "The characters face the quiet but intense battles as they try to assert their desires against the overwhelming forces of family, class, and economic survival." (Keefer,2008, p. 31).

It could be argued that, Bessie as a strong and dominant mother, believes that her family will be a respectable one if they become rich. She is a forceful matriarch whose pursuit of social status dictates the Bergers' dynamics. Her husband, Myron, is unable to oppose her domineering nature. Yet, the grandfather, Jacob, stands out as a voice of opposition, holding onto his Marxist ideals. The family's challenges are further complicated by Hennie Berger, a daughter who is caught in the turmoil of an unwanted pregnancy. Under pressure from her mother, she faces the prospect of a marriage that offers little happiness. Ralph, her younger brother, represents the glimmer of hope, striving to carve out a better future for himself. Guided by Jacob's idealistic beliefs, Ralph is optimistic about his chances, even as Bessie attempts to damage his romantic relationship. Moe Axelrod adds another layer of tension to the household. As a realist with a sharp wit, his life experiences have left him both cynical and deeply yearning. Moe quietly admires Hennie and stands as a supporter to Ralph, encouraging him to seek freedom and self-determination. Harold Cantor comments: "it is the story of the Berger family, living in a cramped Bronx apartment, struggling with poverty as they having own dreams of social mobility and

personal aspirations, the Bergers live in economic squalor and the life-in-death of mental stupor.” (Cantor, 1978, p.131).

It is noteworthy to mention that, Odets in 1932, originally titled his play, “*I Got the Blues*” then, in 1935, he changed it into *Awake and Sing!* so that, the play would capture “the tension between suffering and hope, and reflect both the financial hardship and the emotional turmoil that define the Berger family’s existence.” In fact, this title is drawn from a line spoken by Jacob, the grandfather in the Berger household: “*Awake and Sing, ye that dwell in dust*” (II, 2, p. 83). It evokes a sense of awakening, perhaps a realization of the oppressive structures that the characters are trapped in. The phrase “sing” can be interpreted as a form of personal expression or liberation, a dream of escape from the harsh realities of life. However, the characters are unable to fully sing or express themselves because of the dominating structures around them. The title could hint at their struggle to break free from these confines, making it thematically resonant with the binary oppositions of individualism against social obligation, or freedom versus repression.

## **2. Structuralism and Social Conflict:**

In literature, structuralism focuses on identifying patterns, binary oppositions, and the roles of characters and their relationships to reveal the deeper structures that shape a narrative. It involves analyzing a text not just for its individual parts (characters, plot, themes, and so forth), but how these elements work together within a larger cultural system. As a theoretical approach, Structuralism has been rooted in the work of Ferdinand de Saussure. Robert Scholes (1929-2016) in *Structuralism in Literature* (1974), claimed that: “meaning is created through the relationship of signs within a system, rather than from an inherent link between the word and the object it refers to.”

Odets depicts the Berger family’s small apartment as a physical metaphor for the social constraints imposed upon them and limited their opportunities and choices. One key structural element has been the tension between individual desires and the struggle for survival. Ralph, in particular, one of the younger members of the family, expresses his desire to break free from the cyclical nature of working-class existence. At the very beginning of the play, Ralph complains about the misery that he has been facing in his life and declares: “Where’s advancement down the place? Work like crazy! Think they see it? You’d drop dead first.” (I, p.41). Ralph’s line captures the conflict between individual freedom and his dream of escaping the oppressive cycle of poverty. Yet, it is also tied to his understanding of the need for societal change. Jacob, on the other hand, his grandfather, represents the counterpoint to Ralph’s idealism. Jacob’s struggles are grounded in immediate survival rather than abstract notions of revolution. For him, survival takes precedence over any political aspirations.

The structural system, represented in the form of economic hardship, restricts the freedom of the characters, mainly the younger generation, who are more eager to challenge these systems. Jacob’s pragmatic view reflects the idea that one’s value in society is determined by their ability to contribute to the capitalist system, emphasizing how economic survival becomes a dominant force. His attitude highlights the class struggle within the play, where characters are caught in a system that measures worth by labor rather than personal or emotional fulfillment. “A man don’t get nowhere unless he’s got something to sell.” (II, 2, p. 76).

### 3. The Socio-Economic Context of the Great Depression:

*Awake and Sing!* was written in 1935, during the economic collapse of the Great Depression which plays a significant role in structuring the characters' dilemma and calamity. This period revealed deep flaws in the American Dream and exposed the failure of capitalism, leaving many citizens feeling uncertain and disillusioned. Therefore, the plight of the workers during the Depression is depicted skillfully. In this respect, Odets focuses not just on the psychological and emotional complexities that define Bessie's role as the commanding matriarch of the Berger family, but also, the personal and familial conflicts faced during the Great Depression. "The great numbers of homeless and unemployed people were obvious evidence of the ugliness of the Depression era." (Ismat Safaeddin, 2012, p. 105).

Bessie referring to the bad condition of Myron's work: "What's gonna be the end? Myron's working only three days a week now, money just don't come in. I never saw conditions should be so bad." (II, 1, p.61). Jacob critiques the economic system that has caused their poverty and instability. His Marxist beliefs serve as a counterpoint to the capitalist ideals. He describes himself as: "*A man who had golden opportunities but drunk instead a glass tea.*" (II, 2, p. 78). Jacob further argues with Ralph about life encouraging him to make his own: "*Wake up! Be something, make your life something good.... Take the world in your two hands and make it like new.*" (I, p.48). In return, Ralph's longing for a better life that many young people yearning. He announces: "*All I want's a chance to get to first base!..... I mean something.*" (I, p.41).

Despite each family member trying to cope with their harsh realities, Bessie, as the oppressive mother, works tirelessly to hold them together and shape their futures. She represents the force of tradition and societal norms that restrict the individuals. As a strong-willed character, Bessie makes her views known, asserting control over the family dynamics. "Here without a dollar, you don't look the world in the eye. Talk from now to next year—this is life in America." (II,1, p.66). Odets wrote in descriptive notes that precede the printed text "All of the characters in *Awake and Sing!* share a fundamental activity: a struggle for life amidst petty conditions." (Odets, 1935, p.15).

### 4. The Bergers as a Microcosm Societal Structure:

The family unit itself in this play can be seen as a microcosm of 1930s American society, where each character's role and actions are defined by the relationship to external socio-economic forces. America, the "land of opportunities, transformed into a vacuous society centered on wealth and material possessions, leaving its inhabitants devoid of affection and ethical principles." (Mohammed, 2018, p.129).

More pointedly, Bessie suggests that everyone has dreams and desires but must deal with the reality that society does not allow to fulfill them. Structuralism would view this as a critique of the hierarchical nature of both familial and societal structures, where the requirements of the individual often conflict with the needs of the larger group. Bessie elucidates her belief that society is inherently competitive and harsh. This view, shaped by the capitalist system, forces her to see her children not as individuals with desires and dreams of their own, but as instruments through which she can achieve her own goals of respectability and social ranking. Bessie asserts to her daughter that: "It's time you already had in your head a serious thought. A girl twenty-six

don't grow younger. When I was your age, it was already a big family with responsibilities." (I, p. 44).

Bessie's role as the matriarch of the family is driven by the absence of economic power and independence. She must rely on her children to escape the social limitations imposed on her as a woman in a patriarchal society. Her frustration stems from her inability to break free from this system. She sees her children, particularly Ralph and Hennie, as the only means of attaining respectability and social mobility, and thus, she tries to control their lives. This shows how societal structures, specifically those of class and patriarchy, delimit individual desires and shape the actions of characters. Bessie advises Ralph that: "You got money and money talks..... don't be so smart, Miss America! "You want to be a gentleman? In America, Ralph, you can be anything you want to be! Only you've got to pay for it." (II, 2, p. 76). Here, Bessie is pushing her son to think beyond just earning money, she sees Ralph's role as one of achieving success within a capitalist society, indicating that the structure of the family is shaped by broader economic forces. This quote also demonstrates the way in which societal expectations are ingrained in the family dynamic.

Bessie's financial control over Ralph is evident when she refuses to give him the money he needs to marry. This indicates how economic dependence sustains her dominance. Structuralism would interpret Bessie's dominance and her obsession with status and respectability not as a personal flaw, but as a structural necessity in a time of economic scarcity. In structuralist terms, the family dynamic is shaped by class struggles and the limitations of upward mobility. The whole family strives against the urgent social problems, most importantly the financial issues, in order to survive.

Ralph: "Sure, five dollars a week for expenses and the rest in the house. I can't save even for shoe laces."

Bessie: "You mean we shouldn't have food in the house, but you'll make a jig on the street corner?"

Ralph: "I mean something." ..... "I don't know. . . Every other day to sit around with the blues and mud in your mouth." (I, pp.41-42).

On the other hand, Ralph's endeavors for self-determination create a tension that illustrates how individual identity is often shaped by and constrained within the larger framework of family and social structure. "Right here in the house! My days won't be for nothing..... No! "Awake and sing" he said. We got e'm. We're glad, we're living." (III, p.100-101).

## 5. Language and Social Identity:

In structuralist theory, language typifies a key site where meanings are constructed through signs (signifiers and the signified). Structuralists pay close attention to the language used in the text. They analyze how words, symbols, and metaphors contribute to the meaning of the text. They also look at how the narrative is structured, how the plot is organized and how different elements of the story are arranged to create meaning.

It is significant to remember that the family's language is influenced by their economic position. Bessie's frequent references to money functions as part of a larger system of economic and social norms that shapes her perception of success. In the play, the language symbolizes the characters'

social status, aspirations, and inner conflicts. The Yiddish-American family's colloquial language emphasizes the immigrant experience and the tension between the old world (represented by characters like Jacob and Bessie) and the new world (denoted by characters like Hennie and Ralph). The way these characters speak can be seen as a reflection of their place within the broader structure of American society during the Great Depression.

Therefore, from a structuralist perspective, language is not just a means of communication but a system of signs that reinforces the power structures in society. Bessie's language is consistently manipulative, using words as tools to control her children's actions. She tries to make Hennie marry Sam to fit into a socially acceptable role. This shows how language, in this case, is a tool of social and familial regulation that reflects the structure of society. Bessie's dialogues often mirror her authoritarian and controlling nature. She uses language to assert her dominance and impose her will on others, especially, Ralph and Hennie. Her repeated use of phrases like "*You have to do this*" or "*This is the only way*" shows how she enforces the social expectations placed on her family members. Language here functions as a system of control that dictates the characters' roles within the social order. Bessie's speech acts as a signifier of her desire for control, and the family's response to her speech is part of the signified; the cultural and familial roles she attempts to impose.

Bessie (to Ralph): "*You got to marry a girl ..... You got to marry up, Ralph.*"

Bessie (to Hennie): "*Listen to me! You'll marry Sam and be respectable. You'll do it, my fine beauty, you'll do it.*" (I, p. 55).

Bessie's use of language presented in the aforementioned quotes, is not just about arranging a marriage; but also, the desire for social mobility. It shows how the structural forces of class and gender shape her worldview, and in turn, she forces her children to conform to these structures. When Bessie talks about the need for Ralph to "marry up" or Hennie to "be respectable," her language elucidates the broader social structure of class, gender, and marriage in a capitalist society. In this sense, language becomes a vehicle for social reproduction, maintaining the position by prescribing specific roles and behaviors for each member of the family. Bessie's vocabulary always contains commands and orders, she never cares about feelings. Her only concern is to protect the respect of the family. Hennie, restricted by her mother's dominance and her unhappy marriage, cannot have a positive sense of self and motherhood. She turns into a terrible mother herself. Hennie complains about her mother's authoritarian manners by saying;

"*Day in and day out pestering. Why are you always right and no one else can say a word?*" (I, p.45). Moreover, she prevents Ralph from getting his beloved's telephone call crudely saying:

"*Before she'd ruin a nice boy's life, I would first go to prison. Miss Nobody should step in the picture and I'll stand by with my mouth shut.*" (II, 1, p.65).

Bessie's commanding speech and her interactions with the family members, particularly with Ralph and Hennie, are shaped by the mother desire for control and material security. When she urges Ralph to give up his dreams of leaving home and becoming financially independent, her language conveys the ideological structure of traditional familial roles placed on women in her era. Her discourse about financial success, marriage, and respectability uncovers societal values that limit individual agency. In her final speech, Bessie defends her moral concepts and devotion

to make her children's future better. Through her speech, she requests her son to understand her as she has no choice.

“Ralphie, I worked too hard all my years to be treated like a dirt. . . . . Here I'm not only the mother, but also the father. The first two years I worked in a stocking factory for six dollars while Myron Berger went to law school. If I didn't worry about the family who would? On the calendar it's a different place, but here without a dollar you don't look the world in the eye. Talk from now to next year--this is life in America.” (III, p.95).

Indeed, Ralph understands his mother: “*I'm not blaming you, Mom*” he adds, “*Sink or swim--I see it. But it can't stay like this,*” (III, p.95). But Bessie is not affected by his speech and she leaves him to contemplate his new perspective. The clash of discourses between Ralph's youthful aspirations and Bessie's maternal authority creates an ideological battle within the family. Ralph's desire for freedom (seen in his language and rebellious actions) contrasts sharply with Bessie's language, which is focused on financial success, survival, and respectability. Ralph's speech acts as a signifier of youthful rebellion and discontent with societal norms. By analyzing his language in relation to Bessie's, one can explore how conflicting ideologies are represented through their verbal exchanges.

## **6. Bessie's Maternal Authority:**

Maternal authority has long been a recurring theme in literature, serving as a complex symbol of love, nurture, control, emotional support, stability and sacrifice. Traditionally, the mother figure has been idealized as the primary caregiver, embodying emotional warmth and selflessness. In many families, mothers assumed greater control, managing household finances and making critical decisions to ensure survival. However, the reason behind turning these mother characters into a negative force, is the patriarchal oppression. This shift often challenged traditional patriarchal norms, leading to tensions within the family. “As a consequence, the patriarchal figure became impotent or comic or defeated.” (Woolf, 1995, p.52).

Maternal authority is depicted as a source of control in many literary works, specifically in situations where mothers bear the burden of ensuring the family's survival. The dominant mothers emerged as the central destructive figures in most of the plays in American drama. The dramatists disclose the role of mother's domination which has bad effect upon the children and often leads to the collapse of the family. “Many plays in the twentieth century, there is a focus on how certain actions like revolt and repression, are repeated throughout history, and whether they can be changed or stopped in the present or future.” (Mhayyal, Basaad and Saleh, Asmaa, 2023, p. 323).

Odets' *Awake and Sing!* critiques the domestic role assigned to women like Bessie. She is restricted to the home, raising children and trying to keep the family together. The mother exercises control over her family with an iron hand. She sees herself as the protector and provider, stating that: “I'm not only the mother in this home but also the father.” (III, p.95). Although portrayed as a dominant figure, it is important to bear in mind that she, too, is confined within a system of patriarchal oppression. Bessie, socially and economically has been marginalized, with no access to independence or power outside the domestic realm. Her role as a mother becomes a structural function, as she seeks to reproduce the same morals in her children. Odets himself describes her as: “a strong, dominant woman in the family.” This depiction

challenges traditional notions of motherhood, presenting a maternal figure who is both a source of strength and a catalyst for conflict. (Odets, 1993, p. 224).

Bessie's role as a mother is defined by the gendered expectations of her time. Her oppressive and controlling behavior is driven by the structural position of women in society during the 1930s, where women were expected to fulfill traditional roles as mothers and wives, without opportunities for personal fulfillment outside the home. Bessie's actions can be seen as a result of these societal structures that dictate how women should behave. Yet, the internalized gender roles complicate her authority. The insistence on keeping her children close to home, whether out of love or necessity, proves her struggle to hold onto a sense of power in a world that offers few opportunities for women to wield meaningful control over their own lives. Her longing to avoid conflict and preserve the family structure shows how she asserts her dominance by prioritizing stability over the individual desires of her children or husband. "I'm a woman. I'm the one who runs this house. Not you, not your father—me!" (III, p. 89). This quote directly highlights Bessie's dominance within the household. By explicitly stating that she "*runs this house*," Bessie asserts control over the physical and emotional environment. The repetitive phrase "*not you, not your father*" illustrates her refusal to be undermined by either her husband Myron or her son, Ralph.

The mother-son relationship has marked by conflict and emotional manipulation. Bessie thinks that she knows the best for her children because they are not experienced enough to deal with their own life. This is a classical feature of the overprotective, dominant mothers. They never accept that their children have grown up and they are not children anymore. For example, when Ralph says that he wants to take care of his own life, his mother answers; "You take care? Excuse my expression, you can't even wipe your nose yet!" (III, p.95).

Furthermore, she places herself in a maternal position of authority, as she the decision-maker within the home, regardless of external pressures. She often makes the final call on matters that affect the entire household. "You're not going to make the same mistake I made. I won't let you. I'm your mother, I know what's best." .... "I've worked all my life to keep you children safe. I wanted to go away too, but with children a woman stays home." (I, p. 55). Here it is apparent that Bessie's determination to control her children's choices and protect them from what she perceives as the dangers of making the wrong decisions. By invoking her role as mother, she proclaims that her life experience qualifies her to dictate what is best for Hennie. The idea of "*mistake*" reflects Bessie's views that the choices should be made under her guidance.

Besides, she believes that she is the only one who directs Hennie's life, especially in the romantic relationships. "You think you can just go out and live like some kind of free woman? No one in this family does that. You're not going to ruin your life, not while I'm alive. (I, p.44). This exchange emphasizes that Hennie's desire for freedom is not only a threat to family stability but also a personal insult to her role as the dominant maternal figure. The use of the word "*ruin*" points up the paternalistic approach she has toward Hennie's independence. Her daughter's choices have been regarded as faulty without her guidance.

Bessie (to Hennie): "Don't you see? I only want what's best for you. I'm the only one who really knows what that is." (I, p.44).



Bessie's manipulation continues as she presents herself as the sole authority on what is "best" for Hennie. This quotation further demonstrates how her dominance has been rooted not just in practical control but also in the belief that her emotional investment and experience give her the right to make decisions for others, where her judgment is unquestionable. Thus, one can observe how the maternal authority is multifaceted: it is not only physical and verbal but also emotional and psychological

## 7. Binary Oppositions and Character Relationships:

It is worth noting that the play's world is constructed around a set of binary oppositions (contrasts) and relationships that define thought, meaning, and the characters' roles, focusing on how the family structure, language, and societal forces create meaning. Accordingly, the term, binary opposition, becomes one of the most substantial concepts of structuralism that is initiated by de Saussure who employs it for the sake of getting better understanding of how language works. Literary critics often use binaries to determine the way through which the text's world is structured and to decipher the writer's ideas are shaped in a literary text. Likewise, the reader utilizes the oppositions to classify the thematic elements of the text as well as, figure out the ideas that the writer is trying to convey. In other words, the term has been widely applied to exemplify "the interrelationship between two related linguistic units that are opposite in their denotation." (Chasib Furaih, 2012, pp.87-88).

In addition, the anthropologist, Claude Lévi-Strauss (1908-2009) was highly influenced by the Saussure concept about language as being a system of signs that are dominated by differences. He applied structuralist principles to the study of myths, kinship systems, and other cultural phenomena in his work *"The Structural Study of Myths"* (1955). He proposed a theory of 'binary opposites' which entails that "the majority of narratives in media forms such as books and film contain opposing main characters. These binary opposites help to thicken the plot and further the narrative. Moreover, he claimed that, "all human cultures share certain universal structures of thought based on binary oppositions that form the basis of human thought and culture." (Cited in Bressler, 2011, p. 100). Alongside with Lévi-Strauss, Roland Barthes (1915-1980), is another French literary theorist who expanded upon structuralism, especially in his analysis of literature and culture. He argued in his famous essay, *"Death of the Author"* that, "a text should be understood as a self-contained structure, independent of the author's intentions." Barthes also declares that "all language is its own self-enclosed system based on binary operations (i.e., difference)." (Barthes, 1977, pp. 142-148).

All in all, *Awake and Sing!* has broadly loaded with several contradictions or binaries, that drive the narrative and illustrate the conflicts within the Bergers. These oppositions can be used to examine the relationships between the characters and exhibit underlying tensions. Many characters have their dreams to be fulfilled. Ralph's aspirations to escape the confines of his working-class life and Hennie's desires for a better life contrast with the harsh realities of their existence. Structuralism would present how these opposing forces create the conflicts in the play. Central to the drama is Bessie Berger whose dominance perpetuates binary oppositions and mirrors societal tensions during the Great Depression. Her influence and aggressive control over Myron, Hennie and Ralph, shapes the family's decisions and relationships. By positioning herself as the giver of life, she framing their dependence on her as a societal structure in which she holds authority.

The most important binary opposition in the play is the conflict between mother and son. It often arises between a controlling mother figure and a son who seeks independence. Bessie's yearning to achieve financial success and social status clashes with Ralph's longing for freedom and self-determination. "You listen to me, Ralph. You listen to me and you'll get somewhere. You'll have what you want." (I, p.53). According to structuralism, this opposition underscores the tension between individual desire (as represented by Ralph), and tradition (as symbolized by Bessie), a key structural theme in the play. This conflict can be read as binaries that define the family structure. Ralph's quest for personal freedom and emotional fulfillment contrasts with his mother's practical approach of survival and status. His yearning for freedom opposes sharply with Bessie's need to maintain control and uphold traditional family roles. Bessie is strict and economically driven, while Ralph is "romantic, sensitive, and dreamer of a life outside of materialism." (Odets,1993, p.38).

Ralph complains about the material things he does not have, such as skates and tap shoes. His frustration with being unable to marry because of economic constraints is directly tied to Bessie's refusal to support his independence. He persuasively states: "it's crazy- all my life I want a pair of black and white shoes and can't get them." (I, p.42). Additionally, in his last conversation with Bessie, Ralph recognizes the gap between the real and the ideal trying to transform the ideal into action that Jacob never did as the following exchange indicates:

Bessie: "So go out and change the world if you don't like it."

Ralph: "I will! And why? Cause life's different in my head. Gimme the earth in two hands. I'm strong. "There ... hear him? The air mail off to Boston. Day or night, he flies away, a job to do. That's us and it's no time to die." (III, p.95).

Another significant opposition is between mother and daughter. Bessie as the dominant mother, is pragmatic and tied to traditional values, control, security, and the constraints of materialism. On contrary, Hennie represents rebellion and an individual desire for independence as she seeks romantic love and emotional fulfillment. This is a key opposition creates a layered tension in the family. Thus, Hennie's desire for personal freedom challenges those constraints. Odets describes Hennie as "is a girl... She is proud of her body. She won't ask favors. She travels alone. She is fatalistic about being trapped, but will escape if possible. (Odets,1993, p. 37). It is obvious that the contrast here is between Control and Freedom. The opposition mirrors the generational and ideological between the older and younger generations, and can be framed as a conflict between patriarchal conformity and specific yearning. Bessie's control over her children stands in stark opposition to the aspirations of her children, particularly Ralph. Bessie's character displays the archetype of the family, a mother who prioritizes survival over emotional connections.

The play correspondingly critiques the role of men in the family, particularly through the character of Myron, Bessie's husband. His inability to provide leadership or support, leaves his wife with the sole responsibility of maintaining the family's structure. This imbalance places a huge burden on Bessie, which she tries to overcome by dominating her children's lives. This dynamic reflects how patriarchal systems not only restrict women but also diminish men's ability to fulfill their roles within the family, leading to dysfunction and instability. This binary opposition between strength and weakness, dominance and submission, is symbolized in the relationship between wife and husband. Bessie's dominance in the family contrasts apparently with Myron's passivity. "You'll excuse my expression, You 're bughouse! You're a nothing,

Myron, a nothing. You don't see it, do you? You never see anything. You're a follower, a nothing." (*I*, p.43).

As it is noted here, this quote exposes the lack of an ideal father figure and highlights the weakness of Myron's character in comparison to Bessie's dominance. This is a vital moment in the play that demonstrates the gendered division of labor in the family. Myron is submissive, and Bessie, as a woman without economic power, must take on the role of the authoritative figure. The structure of patriarchy forces both characters into these roles. Myron as (obedient, passive, and weak father) and Bessie as (dominant, strong, and overbearing mother). The contrast here underscores the inequity of power within the family. Bessie becomes the family's dominant force, whereas Myron is depicted as an ineffective and emotionally absent father figure. "Her husband, is a born follower. He would like to be a leader." (Odets, 1993, p. 37). The generational conflict between the younger characters (like Ralph and Hennie) and the older characters (like Jacob and Bessie) is central to the play. The older generation clings to traditional values, while the younger generation seeks new ways of thinking and being. Jacob wants Ralph to be different from him to avoid repeating his mistake:

Jacob "Me, I'm the ideal! Don't make a mistake!"

Ralph: "I've got dreams! I want to go out and find something, see things, make something of myself." (*I*, p.48).

Ralph's dialogue exemplifies the youthful aspiration to break free from the constraining societal structures. Ralph's idealism is in direct opposition to his family's more pragmatic approach to life. While Jacob's harshness here highlights the generational divide. Ralph dreams of escape, but Jacob believes that dreams are futile because the social system traps individuals based on their economic and social class. This reinforces the structuralist view that social forces like class and age, create opposing ideological systems that shape the characters' worldview. "If this life leads to a revolution, it's a good life. Otherwise, it's for nothing." (*I*, p. 42).

Bessie's practical obsession with money and survival conflicts with Jacob's Marxist idealism. Jacob's belief in Marxist principles, emphasized when he says, "Let the world be a better place!" contrasts sharply with Bessie's materialistic and survival-driven outlook. Jacob as the visionary dreamer, his idealism functions as a symbolic foil to Bessie's practicality, creating a balance within the family structure. His dreams of a better world, symbolized by his Marxist leanings, contrast with Bessie's immediate focus on survival, creating a structural tension that drives the play's ideological debates. Jacob dies for the sake of his grandson who hopefully may lead a life that "is not printed on dollar bills."

Bessie's identity is shaped by her role in society as mother and homemaker is contrasted with her private struggles, unfulfilled ambitions, and frustrations. The binary between public respectability and personal sacrifice could be explored to show how Bessie's character is defined by societal structures that restrict women's independence. Bessie's conflict with Ralph and Hennie is not only personal; but it is also a reflection of the larger societal structures that shape family dynamics. The binary opposition between the home (private life) and the public world (society at large) is reflected in Bessie's obsession with maintaining a respectable family unit and her efforts to secure financial stability. This opposition echoes the societal structures of the Great Depression, where families were struggling to survive, and economic survival became the most

important concern. The play also structures itself around the opposition between the working class and the economic pressures they face within a capitalist system. Bessie, as a mother, pushes her children to fulfill capitalist ideals, wealth and marriage to escape poverty. Ultimately, These binary oppositions are not necessarily equal but represent a conflict that drives the narrative or the social structure.

## 8. Conclusion:

Through Bessie's portrayal, Clifford Odets' *Awake and Sing!* offers an account of the expectations placed on women in a patriarchal society, especially in their roles as mothers, wives, and caretakers. Bessie embodies the dominant mother figure, emotionally distant and self-serving, shaped by the social and economic constraints of her time. Her failure to achieve her dreams and her overbearing control over her children, elucidate the destructive impact of patriarchal structures.

To effectively apply structuralism, one might concentrate on how the text of the play itself operates as a structure, emphasizing the relationships between characters, symbols, language, and societal structures. Structuralism involves examining how these elements work together within a text to construct meaning, rather than focusing solely on character psychology or individual motivation. The play can be understood as a complex interplay of societal structures, class, gender, and family roles, that shape the characters' identities and actions. By examining the binary oppositions, cultural codes, and class struggles, a structuralist approach helps us understand how Odets critiques the social order and illuminates the deep ideological systems that govern the lives of his characters. Additionally, the play underscores the social struggles of working-class families. The characters' dialogues and relationships are not simply individual struggles but also reflections of the larger societal forces that shape their lives. From generational conflict to class struggles and gender roles, Odets' play utilizes the family as a microcosm of the interrelated structures of American society during the Great Depression.

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المدرسة البنيوية، سلطة الأم ، والصراع الاجتماعي في مسرحية استيقظ وغي! للكاتب كليفورد أوديتس

#### الملخص:

تتناول هذه الدراسة تمثيل سلطة الأم في مسرحية استيقظ وغي! للكاتب كليفورد أوديتس، وذلك من خلال شخصية بيبي بيرغر. وعن طريق تطبيق النظرية البنيوية، فإن هذه الدراسة توضح المتناقضات الثنائية بين السيطرة والحرية، وبين المادية والمثالية، مسيطرة الضوء على سعي بيبي للسلطة والاستقرار المالي وطموحات أبنائها. تعنى هذه الدراسة بالكشف عن كيفية تمحور السردية حول دور بيبي، الام المتسلطة، حال كونها مهاجرة في ثلاثينيات القرن العشرين "استيقظ وغي!" وهي المسرحية التي تصور الصراعات لعائلة بيرغر، وهي أسرة يهودية من الطبقة المتوسطة، تعيش في شقة صغيرة في حي برونكس عام 1935، في ظل أزمة الكساد الكبير. ومن خلال أفعال بيبي المتسلطة، ينتقد أوديتس الضغوط غير الإنسانية للرأسمالية وتأثيرها على تطلعات الجيل الأصغر.

الكلمات المفتاحية: بيبي بيرغر، سيطرة الأم، المدرسة البنيوية، الكساد الكبير.