

SIDNEY HOWARD'S HEROINES: A VIEW OF THE
MODERN AMERICAN WOMAN OF THE 1920s

THESIS

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This work is dedicated to
J. Peter Coulson
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INTRODUCTION

The decade of the 1920s found American society re-examining its values and beliefs after emerging from World War I. The twenties were years marked by radical changes: the moral pendulum swung to extremes; the political scene widened its sphere of influence to include women and the 19th amendment; industry was rapidly expanding; and "prosperity" seemed to be the one word which designated the economic scene.

Change was also witnessed on the American theatrical front. For decades foreign plays had dominated the American stage and superior native playwrights were few. During the twenties, however, American audiences witnessed a new and exciting generation of native talent; playwrights such as Eugene O'Neill, Elmer Rice, and Maxwell Anderson electrified the American stage with their themes and experimental styles. Although realism was the dominant mode of the period, this new generation of playwrights attacked realism with unprecedented enthusiasm. They began to explore, with a straightforward honesty, the intricate problems of the individual existing in a complex society. Their plays explored socially controversial subjects with a frankness that frequently stunned and embarrassed some audience members. These startling plays were later called the Social Dramas of the

twenties, and Sidney Howard's name springs forth as one of the most important and prolific playwrights of this genre.

During his eighteen-year career, Sidney Howard produced twenty-eight works in all: eleven original plays, fourteen translations and adaptations, and three collaborations. His subjects varied as widely as the current social conscience: prohibition, the underworld, psychology, sex, and immorality. Howard's best work lies within his characterizations; his female characters are particularly fascinating studies.

Sidney Howard possessed a remarkable ability for adapting novels into plays, and this talent was quickly recognized by Hollywood movie moguls. Howard became an extremely successful screenwriter, winning two Academy Awards; however, he never deserted the New York stage for any great length of time. He was always actively involved in the political issues and was forever working on another play meant for Broadway.

Sidney Howard died in a tractor accident in 1939, at the age of forty-eight. Considering his limitless zeal and energy, one can only imagine what further contributions to American drama and the New York stage he might have made had he only lived longer.

Purpose

The most appealing elements of Sidney Howard's plays are his characters; his heroines are some of the brightest

portraits of his time. These courageous and decisive heroines are women calmly in charge of their own fates. Each emancipated and independent heroine is a direct product of her time.

The purpose of this thesis will be to gain insights into a major playwright's view of the modern American woman of the twenties. In order to accomplish this purpose, the thesis will examine three of Howard's representative heroines: Amy, from They Knew What They Wanted; Christina, from The Silver Cord; and Carlotta, from Lucky Sam McCarver. Each of these three characters represents different aspects of the Howard heroine, and for this reason, they will be evaluated according to those attitudes and beliefs they have in common. Particular emphasis will be placed upon those characteristics which serve to make them modern women of the twenties, and the difficulties they share in fulfilling their roles as modern women.

I selected this topic for three major reasons. First, I enjoy reading and working with Sidney Howard's plays; his technique of employing melodramatic and realistic elements in attacking social issues is of particular interest to me. Second, I find the 1920s to be one of the most exciting decades this century has seen, especially in view of the advancements made in the area of women's rights. Third, I feel that the women of the 1920s and the women of the 1980s fight a common predicament: the difficulties of achieving goals in a changing society. The women of the twenties were

faced with the opportunity of working in either the home or in a career outside the home. Women of the eighties face a similar problem; but more often they must find a way in which they can achieve the goals of both home and career.

Organization

The plan of this study is to illuminate Howard's view of the modern American woman of the twenties. In order to accomplish this purpose, the thesis will examine Howard's life and career, the plays in which the three characters appear, and Howard's view of the modern woman drawn from his heroines' portraits.

In keeping with this plan, chapter one will provide an overview of Sidney Howard's life and career, with special emphasis upon facts concerning They Knew What They Wanted, The Silver Cord, and Lucky Sam McCarver. Attention will also be drawn to other plays containing details relevant to Howard's views on women.

Chapters two, three, and four will be comprised of discussions of They Knew What They Wanted, The Silver Cord, and Lucky Sam McCarver, respectively. Each discussion will include plot synopsis, analysis of the ideas and themes of the play, and characterization studies. Particular emphasis will be placed upon the study of each heroine as a modern woman and those aspects of the Howard heroine she represents.

Chapter five will contain general conclusions based upon analysis of the three individual plays.

CHAPTER I

SIDNEY HOWARD: AN OVERVIEW

Any study of a playwright's work would seem incomplete without an examination of that playwright's early life, interests, and career. This chapter will serve as a brief survey of Sidney Howard's life and plays. An examination of all twenty-eight of Howard's works--including eleven original plays, fourteen translations and adaptations, and three collaborations--would be lengthy and impractical in a limited study such as this. Consequently, attention will be drawn to those works which are significant examples of developing stylistic patterns and which exhibit the changes and experimentation in a maturing talent. Special attention will be focused upon those works of primary interest to this thesis: They Knew What They Wanted, The Silver Cord, and Lucky Sam McCarver.

Sidney Coe Howard was born in Oakland, California, on June 26, 1891. Howard's father, John Lawrence Howard, was an executive for a steamship company. His mother, Helen Louise Coe, was a professional organist and piano teacher.¹ It is important to note that Howard was raised in an

¹John MacNicholas, ed., Dictionary of Literary Biography: 20th Century American Dramatists (Detroit, Mich.: Gale Research Co., Inc., 1981), p. 309.

environment which was considered somewhat progressive by the standards of the late 1890s and early 1900s; both of his parents were career professionals.² In view of the numerous working, or career-minded female characters present in his plays, it is probable that Howard's attitudes on the working woman began within his home during his early years.

Much of Howard's youth was spent in California. In a letter he wrote to his friend Barrett Clark, Howard describes this period of his life:

I grew up in California. I was next to the youngest of six of which one sister was the oldest. I went to public schools and read books and camped in the High Sierras and rode horses and went to British Columbia and Mexico. I was taken to Italy when I was seventeen. I was sickly a good deal as a kid and never did well at sports. That's always given me a complex.³

The illness Howard refers to in the above passage was tuberculosis. As a consolation for his ill-health, Howard's parents included him in their many trips to Europe, trips which afforded Howard the opportunity to learn many of the Romance languages.⁴ This experience proved to be immensely important to Howard's later work as a translator of many foreign plays and novels.

Unable to participate in sports, Howard developed an early and eager interest in reading. Howard credits his

²Eric John Dingwall, The American Woman: An Historical Study (New York: Rinehart and Co., 1957), p. 129.

³Sidney Howard, quoted in Barrett H. Clark, Intimate Portraits (New York: Dramatists Play Service, 1951), p. 211.

⁴Sidney Howard White, Sidney Howard (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1977), p. 19.

father for inspiring this early interest in books; his father's first job had been in a second-hand bookshop, and ever since that time, his father had always surrounded himself with books.⁵ This hobby passed from father to son and was responsible for Howard's first desire to become a writer:

I grew up in a mess of books . . . I began writing poetry early in life. I think that I always fumbled around for some kind of artistic expression. . . . My father discouraged my wanting to write. I know that he would have liked having a writer son more than anything, but his standards were high. And he would have been quite right about them. Once he gave me an edition of Ibsen which I very much wanted and added that I was to wash the taste out with a good draught of Huxley.⁶

Howard's first interest in the theatre is not as easily traced as his interest in writing and books. "I can't remember very well how I first got interested in the theatre. I just was, somehow, for no very good reason. Oh, yes, I had a toy theatre, but then I had a toy everything else."⁷

In 1911, Howard entered the University of California at Berkeley, as an English major. As his writing abilities matured, Howard composed numerous articles for the campus periodical, The Occident, and became its editor in his sophomore year.⁸ During this time, Howard also became

⁵Clark, Portraits, p. 211.

⁶Sidney Howard, quoted in Clark, Intimate Portraits, p. 211.

⁷Ibid.

⁸White, Howard, p. 20.

involved in acting in many of the University's theatrical productions. Howard's growing familiarity with the theatre resulted in his first play, The Sons of Spain. Written for a poetry seminar, The Sons of Spain was later produced at the University as a pageant.⁹

After his 1915 graduation from the University of California, Howard enrolled at Harvard. His parents insisted that he attend George Pierce Baker's "47 Workshop," a playwriting seminar. Despite Howard's protestations and criticisms about the professor's methods and principles of playwriting, he reluctantly agreed to participate in the class.¹⁰ Once under Baker's supervision, Howard learned that his prejudices about the professor had been in error:

To say that he taught playwriting is to misstate his gift. He taught his students truths more valid than technique. He taught them that plays are important and hard to write; that few subjects are worthy of dramatization; that characters must be imagined beneath their words; that art is an obligation, not a Sunday suit.¹¹

Years after Howard left Harvard, Baker remained a close friend and was valued by Howard as a perspicacious critic.

Under Baker's supervision, Howard experimented with various types of playwriting including modern mystery plays, adaptations, and translations. While Howard was attempting

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Jean Gould, Modern American Playwrights (New York: Dodd, Mead and Co., 1966), p. 22.

¹¹ Sidney Howard, "G. P. B. at Harvard and Yale," New York Times, 5 February 1933, sec. 9, p. 1.

new styles, he became acquainted with Samuel Hume, a young man "whose views of stagecraft fitted in well with the popular taste for expansive outdoor pageants."¹² Hume inspired Howard to write several plays and masques which adapted well to vast outdoor spaces. For the most part, these romantic plays were written in verse and expressed the "poet's quest for beauty."¹³ Hume produced all of Howard's pageants written at this time; however, none of the works or the productions drew much critical attention or success. For this reason, Howard's desire to write pageant dramas subsided.

World War I interrupted Howard's writing as he enlisted in the volunteer ambulance corps in 1916. He served two-and-a-half years at the French and Balkan fronts as an ambulance driver. After the American forces entered the war, he enlisted in the American air service and rose to the rank of captain.¹⁴

In 1919, Howard returned to the United States to work for Life, then a weekly humor magazine. His job with Life consisted of "reading over eight-hundred jokes daily."¹⁵ By 1922, he had become the literary editor of Life, and was

¹²White, Howard, p. 36.

¹³Ibid.

¹⁴Robert L. Schuyler, ed., Dictionary of American Biography (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1958), p. 324.

¹⁵White, Howard, p. 22.

also writing for other magazines including Colliers, The New Republic, and Hearst's International. The subjects of his writing varied from labor union exposés to illegal drug rings and oil scandals.¹⁶

During his years in the employ of these magazines, Howard was constantly at work on short stories and ideas for plays. His subjects for short stories were wide ranging: the war, elements of the supernatural, and the loneliness of old age. Many of these stories reflected the current literary trends in style and dialogue. For example, in Howard's 1924 story "Transatlantic," he experimented with the use of dialogue as the only essential plot element. In "Mrs. Vietch: A Segment of Biography," (1924) Howard creates a character by stringing together biographical facts. Howard achieved a limited amount of success with the seven short stories he published between 1920 and 1929.¹⁷ "The Homesick Ladies," however, published in 1929, is considered to be his best. It won second prize in the 1929 O'Henry Memorial Award competition.¹⁸

Though busily turning out articles and short stories, Howard also made his New York debut as a playwright in 1921.

¹⁶See bibliographic entries under "Articles by Sidney Howard."

¹⁷See bibliography for listing of these seven stories.

¹⁸White, Howard, p. 37.

His play Swords, which he had translated from D'Annunzio's Fedra,¹⁹ opened on Broadway on September 1, 1921:

It told a medieval story in the period of the Guelphs and Ghibellines, it had a gorgeous setting by Robert Edmund Jones, it was written in verse, and it failed--standard practice for the liberal intellectual in the early twenties.²⁰

The failure of Swords was a "painful experience" for Howard. Barrett Clark recounts the events following the first performance of Swords:

After the final curtain, G. P. B. [George Pierce Baker] looked into Howard's tear-brimming eyes and began to chuckle, and the tears turned to laughter and they both laughed until they cried, and Howard never wrote in verse again.²¹

Although a major disappointment for Howard, Swords served as a vehicle of monumental importance; it was Swords that brought Howard and actress Clare Eames together. They married on June 1, 1922.²²

Not one to remain idle for long, Howard plunged into his second professional stage venture in 1922. His S. S. Tenacity, a translation of Charles Vildrac's play, marked a moderate success with a run of sixty-seven performances.²³

¹⁹Ibid.

²⁰Brooks Atkinson, Broadway (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., Inc., 1974), p. 273.

²¹Barrett Clark quoted in White, Sidney Howard, p. 25.

²²MacNicholas, Dictionary, p. 310.

²³White, Howard, p. 16.

Although a translation, S. S. Tenacity is important to Howard's playwriting efforts since Vildrac's style was to be of considerable influence upon Howard's own style. It was the study of Vildrac's work which enlightened Howard as to the virtues of the "realistic drama which emphasized truthfulness, simplicity, and sincerity."²⁴ He learned the advantages of writing about ordinary men and women and their day-to-day compromises, capitalizing upon "pragmatic rather than heroic action."²⁵

The years of 1923 and 1924 marked an increase in Howard's dramatic output. During these years, Howard produced five plays in all: two translations, two original plays, and one collaborative effort.²⁶ Of these five attempts, only one work achieved success--They Knew What They Wanted. An original play, it was Howard's first major Broadway success, a success that was never to be equaled in his career as a Broadway playwright.

They Knew What They Wanted had originally begun as a short story about the wine-makers in Napa Valley,

²⁴Ibid.

²⁵Ibid.

²⁶These plays included: "Sancho Panza;" Casanova; They Knew What They Wanted; Lexington: A Pageant Drama; and "Bewitched," respectively. Both "Sancho Panza" and Casanova were produced, but only enjoyed a limited amount of success. Lexington: A Pageant Drama was written for the Lexington Historical Society of Lexington Massachusetts. "Bewitched," written in collaboration with Edward Sheldon, was never produced during Howard's lifetime.

California.²⁷ Howard had visited the area while vacationing in California. He had met the Italian wine-makers and "had a vast respect for their spontaneity and benevolent impulsiveness . . . they were the exact opposite of worldly people."²⁸ According to interviewer Willis Coleman, that which Howard had intended to be a short story rapidly grew into a play:

He conceived the idea of writing a story about one of these Italians who had made a fortune in the business. He thought it would be a good idea to have Tony establish a dynasty after the fashion of the Vanderbilts and Astors and Goulds. But it wouldn't stay a short story. It developed a plot, and soon Sidney Howard thought Tony, the Italian, the central character of his play, would be more effective speaking than as a silent story character. His vivid Italian speech would sound well, he thought. Then a girl crept into the colorful California atmosphere, and soon there was drama.²⁹

They Knew What They Wanted was written while Howard was on an extended visit in Venice, a "congenial atmosphere"³⁰ in which to develop the theme and characters of the play.

They Knew What They Wanted is the story of a middle-aged vineyard owner, Tony, and his young, "mail-order" bride, Amy. Wanting an heir to inherit his business, Tony arranges to marry Amy. Following an extra-marital encounter, Amy discovers that she is pregnant, and rather than tell Tony

²⁷Brooks Atkinson, The Lively Years (New York: Association Press, 1973), p. 41.

²⁸Ibid., p. 42.

²⁹Willis Coleman, "He knew what he wanted," Theatre Magazine, September 1925, p. 15.

³⁰Atkinson, Lively Years, p. 43.

the truth, Amy prepares to leave Tony. Once Tony discovers Amy's indiscretion he is briefly enraged and then forgives Amy and is willing to accept the child as his own.

Within the character of Amy, Howard creates the first of his many fine female characterizations. Amy embodies many of the Howard-heroine traits: she is an independent-thinking, strong-willed, courageous pragmatist. Amy is one of the Howard heroines who has the ability to prosper, no matter what the situation.

As the Theatre Guild's production of They Knew What They Wanted quickly became a success, controversy built as to the source of its plot. Some speculated that its source was the Paolo-Francesca love story found in Dante's Divine Comedy.³¹ Others suspected that They Knew What They Wanted had been derived from Wagner's Tristan und Iseult. Howard admitted that the plot had been "shamelessly, consciously, and even proudly derived from the Tristan-Iseult legend."³² He later commented in an interview with Joseph Wood Krutch:

They Knew What They Wanted is just the retelling of the Tristan-Iseult story--which has one of the most interesting and durable situations in all legend or literature. . . . It's a whale of a story, just about sure-fire, and that is the only thing that really counts.³³

³¹Gould, American Playwrights, p. 23.

³²Sidney Howard, Preface to They Knew What They Wanted (New York: Samuel French, Inc., 1925), p. xii.

³³Sidney Howard quoted in Joseph Wood Krutch, "Sidney Howard, storyteller," Theatre Arts, February 1957, p. 92.

Howard maintained in his defense that "no story is older than its applicability to life."³⁴

The critical reception to They Knew What They Wanted stirred reviews which were either strongly in favor of it or vehemently opposed to it. Many found that Howard's treatment of sex within the play was contemptible, charging that it was "an unusually well-constructed play, smudged up with repellent situations."³⁵ Criticism such as this made it difficult for Howard's play to be considered for the Pulitzer Prize. Some critics demanded that in order for They Knew What They Wanted to be submitted to the Pulitzer committee, committee members should be forced to re-examine the criteria which stated that the literature chosen "raises the standards of good morals, good taste, and good manners."³⁶ After considerable deliberation, They Knew What They Wanted was selected as the best new play of the 1924-25 theatrical season.³⁷

The overwhelming success of They Knew What They Wanted revitalized Howard, and he returned to the 1925-26 season with four new plays: three translations and one original.³⁸

³⁴Howard, Preface to They Knew What They Wanted, p. xi.

³⁵Arthur Hornblow, "They Knew What They Wanted," Theatre Magazine, February 1925, p. 19.

³⁶White, Howard, p. 57.

³⁷Coleman, "He knew what he wanted," p. 24.

³⁸These three translations were: "The Last Night of Don Juan," "Morals," and Michel Auclair. Michel Auclair was the only one to be published.

Howard had great hopes that his new original play, Lucky Sam McCarver, would recapture the success he had experienced in the previous year. Thought by Howard to be his "best play,"³⁹ Lucky Sam McCarver proved to be his most bitter failure.

Lucky Sam McCarver is the story of a shady, under-world nightclub owner, Sam McCarver, and his aspirations to become part of the "upper-crust," the wealthy and fashionable members of the upper-class whose very names command attention and respect. Sam plans to marry Carlotta Ashe, a member of this elite social circle and thereby begin his ascent up the ladder toward respectability. Carlotta becomes involved in an accidental shooting in Sam's club, and in order to protect Carlotta's reputation, Sam constructs an elaborate cover-up. Perhaps out of gratitude, Carlotta agrees to marry Sam. With Carlotta as his wife, Sam becomes quite a successful Wall Street businessman. Eventually Sam grows tired of Carlotta and her arrogant friends, and deserts her while on vacation in Venice. A year later, Sam consents to visit Carlotta after learning that she is very ill. Shortly after their reunion, an argument ensues. Carlotta, sapped of her energies, dies. Showing a complete lack of concern for his dead wife, Sam then realizes that he is late for a business meeting and rushes off.

³⁹ Sidney Howard, Preface to Lucky Sam McCarver (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1926), p. xiv.

In comparison with Howard's other works, Lucky Sam McCarver was an extremely experimental work. However, the elements he hoped would create "dramatic biography" failed:

It set out to be an attempt at dramatic biography, and, on the whole, it turned out to be just that. It set out to present some detached episodes from the lives of an imaginary man and an imaginary woman who should, between them, represent the two most spectacular extremes of the American social pendulum. . . . It had to get along as best it could without plot, idea, hero, or heroine. It had to get along on incident no more vivid and no more reasonable or inevitable than that which grew out of the reactions of the two chief characters, one upon the other.⁴⁰

Striving for these elements to exist in one play, Howard neglected to realize that an audience needs more than two characters merely interacting, or "detached episodes." An audience needs some kind of plot, idea, or hero. Above all, as Eleanor Flexner frankly explains, a play needs some sort of conclusion:

In order to satisfy an audience it should follow some logic of its own to a satisfactory conclusion. . . . To have human beings to suffer for nothing in the theatre, unless the author draws some conclusion from that suffering which criticizes the circumstances that caused it, has never been acceptable to an audience.⁴¹

Despite Lucky Sam McCarver's bitter failure, some critics agreed that it was Howard's best attempt at the work which he was best suited to: characterization studies. Montrose J. Moses was one critic among the small group who felt that Lucky Sam McCarver was a literary success:

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Eleanor Flexner, American Playwrights: 1918-1938 (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1938), p. 35.

"I believe it [Lucky Sam McCarver] to be an honestly wrought character study . . . there is a directness . . . that stings, that hurts."⁴²

The preface of Lucky Sam McCarver forced Howard to finally record a few of his views on the role of the dramatist in the theatre. Serving actors, according to Howard, is the dramatist's function:

The real merit of any play lies in the depth and the scope of its acting parts far more than in its story or writing or idea content. The better, the more profoundly the dramatist writes, the better he will serve actors, and that is his *raison d'etre*. Audiences do not go to the theatre to hear plays, but to see them. No matter how beautiful the writing of a play may be, no matter how profound or original or true an idea it may contain, it cannot be a good play (let alone a great one) unless it allows actors to give an audience a satisfactory exhibition of their art.⁴³

Howard also defines his role as a dramatist as a less than literary function:

For me, the actor is the only theatrical element who matters a tinker's damn. . . . Of all those concerned with the production of the play, only the actor utilizes his talents to the fullest . . . the dramatist is but a vicarious actor who happens to write well enough to be useful to real actors. Set him among real literary men and he cuts a sorry figure.⁴⁴

Howard's views on the actor and the dramatist were somewhat shocking and were highly criticized. Many felt that "he appraises the actor's part in the joint creation too

⁴²Montrose J. Moses, ed., Representative American Dramas (Boston: Little, Brown and Co., Inc., 1941), p. 669.

⁴³Howard, Preface to Lucky Sam McCarver, p. xvii.

⁴⁴*Ibid.*, p. xiv.

highly, for he puts him above the dramatist."⁴⁵

The two successes of 1926, Ned McCobb's Daughter and The Silver Cord, reconfirmed Howard's presence as a major playwriting force of the New York stage. In Ned McCobb's Daughter, Howard creates another fine heroine whose strength and determination are only surpassed by her honesty and love for her family:

In Carrie McCobb, Howard epitomized one kind of New England character, the shrewd, courageous, honest woman who fights hard for her children's future, who forgives her worthless husband until she finds out that he has been unfaithful to her with her own housemaid, and who never wastes a moment in idle regrets.⁴⁶

Although Ned McCobb's Daughter became popular with the New York audiences, it never achieved the success or attention that They Knew What They Wanted had previously attained. This was a disappointing circumstance in light of the fact that Ned McCobb's Daughter, according to many critics, was found to be the superior work of the two.

Ned McCobb's Daughter is a better constructed play than They Knew What They Wanted. The plot is more complex, the situations more completely developed, the "build" is carefully sustained throughout the play; the minor characters are integrated in the plot, the final denouement is logical and yet unexpected.⁴⁷

Howard was also praised for his ability to capture successfully the essence of New England diction while creating

⁴⁵ Arthur Hobson Quinn, A History of the American Drama from the Civil War to the Present Day (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, Inc., 1936), p. 230.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Flexner, American Playwrights, p. 38.

some vivid male characters.⁴⁸

The Silver Cord is Howard's best known work. It never enjoyed the same type of critical reception which They Knew What They Wanted received; however, the sensitive nature of its theme drew a great deal of attention. The Silver Cord exposes the strange relationship between Mrs. Phelps and her two sons, David and Robert. In order to keep from facing a lonely existence as an aging widow, Mrs. Phelps sabotages David's recent marriage and Robert's upcoming nuptials. David's young wife, Christina, exposes Mrs. Phelps' nasty intentions in time and manages to save her marriage to David. As the play ends, Robert is left to become a victim of his mother's obsession.

The provocative theme of The Silver Cord could not mask the play's many weaknesses:

Mr. Howard argues his case with the blunt directness of a skilled dialectician. His handling is as intelligent as it is workmanlike. But so blunt and so direct are his methods, that what starts as a comedy of manners in the drawingroom climbs inevitably into the rostrum to become a public debate. . . . In the process, his people begin to lose their identity as people and become mere sandwich men for ideas.⁴⁹

Others found that The Silver Cord suffered from being "badly propagandistic"⁵⁰ and overly melodramatic, and having poorly

⁴⁸Ibid., p. 39.

⁴⁹John Mason Brown, Upstage: The American Theatre in Performance (New York: W. W. Norton and Co., Inc., 1930), p. 57.

⁵⁰Winifred L. Dunsbury, The Theme of Loneliness in Modern American Drama (Gainesville, Fla.: University of Florida Press, 1960), p. 67.

drawn male characterizations which dangerously neared "reducing his play to caricature."⁵¹

Despite its weaknesses, The Silver Cord became a very popular play. Its popularity was due to the fact that Freudian psychology was highly fashionable during the twenties, and the play's theme echoed elements of an Oedipal situation.⁵² Its theme, one that "the native novelists have been gnawing at with great subjective gusto,"⁵³ reflected the current literary trend. It was for this reason that The Silver Cord drew large and attentive audiences, for as Sidney Howard White notes, "a subject of the times will always have its audience."⁵⁴

The Silver Cord made a contribution to those plays, which were written during the twenties, that became known as the Social Dramas. These plays fused "comedy, realism and melodrama, touched lightly by Ibsenism,"⁵⁵ to attack the social problems of the day. The Silver Cord stands as a prime example of a successful Social Drama in view of the

⁵¹Brown, Upstage, p. 57.

⁵²David W. Sievers, Freud on Broadway (New York: Hermitage House, 1975), p. 166.

⁵³Montrose J. Moses and John Mason Brown, eds., The American Theatre as Seen by Its Critics: 1752-1934 (New York: W. W. Norton and Co., Inc., 1934), p. 314.

⁵⁴White, Howard, p. 71.

⁵⁵Walter J. Meserve, "Sidney Howard and the Social Drama of the Twenties," Modern Drama 6 (December 1963):259.

fact that its socially relevant message is clearly related to its audience.

The years between 1927 and 1929 marked a dwindling of Howard's dramatic energies. The works produced during this period were representative of the failure in his personal life.⁵⁶ Howard's wife, actress Clare Eames, left him in order to perform in Europe. In 1930, Howard sued for divorce, maintaining that Clare had deserted him in early 1928. The divorce was granted in March of 1930, and Ms. Eames died in November of the same year.⁵⁷

Howard's dissolving marriage made a profound impact upon his theatrical career. He lost interest in playwriting, as evidenced by his remark to Barrett Clark: "Clare held me hard to the theatre, of course. I don't know at all what will happen to me now that Clare's gone."⁵⁸ The diminishing impulse to write plays was soon replaced by Howard's interest in the tempting offers which were being made by Hollywood studio heads. Unable to resist the extravagant contract offered by Samuel Goldwyn, Howard left New York to become a screen writer.⁵⁹

⁵⁶ These works were: "Olympia," a translation; "Salvation," a collaboration with Charles MacArthur; and Half Gods, an original.

⁵⁷ Clark, Portraits, p. 206.

⁵⁸ Sidney Howard, quoted in Clark, Intimate Portraits, p. 212.

⁵⁹ White, Howard, p. 125.

Howard's career as a screen writer was an extremely lucrative one. His talents for dialogue, adaptation, and characterization enabled him to become the "highest paid screen writer of his time."⁶⁰ His career as a screen writer was highlighted by the acquisition of two Academy Awards acknowledging excellence in screen writing and adaptation: the first was awarded in 1931 for his screenplay of Sinclair Lewis' Arrowsmith; the second was awarded posthumously for his adaptation of Margaret Mitchell's novel, Gone with the Wind, in 1939.⁶¹

At first, Howard was awed by the appeal and power the motion picture industry possessed:

I like writing for the films. It is interesting to know that your work will be seen perhaps by millions. The entire subscription list of the Theatre Guild is only a week's audience in a single town for a film. That's something. And the cinema has life. Not like I found on the stage when I returned to it a while ago with two plays on the boards that were half-way decent and in which most of the performers appeared half-alive, half-dead.⁶²

Howard's opinions of Hollywood soured rather quickly, however, and after a year he was publishing negative commentaries on the Hollywood movie business in the New York Times. His most piercing and memorable comments on motion picture acting as compared to New York stage acting, are

⁶⁰MacNicholas, Dictionary, p. 313.

⁶¹White, Howard, pp. 16-17.

⁶²Sidney Howard, "Views of the Motion Picture Industry," New York Times, 1 December 1929, sec. x, p. 8.

recorded in a 1936 article:

I don't believe for a minute that the great names of Joan Crawford and Greta Garbo mean for a moment that they can hold a scene on the stage. . . . I know how acting is done in Hollywood. It isn't done in front of the camera. It is done in the cutting room . . .⁶³

Howard continues in this vein, charging that actresses in Hollywood exhaust their limited talents in scenes lasting no more than three minutes. Howard contends "a three minute scene is hardly enough to crank the engine on a good New York stage girl."⁶⁴

Howard discovered that his Hollywood career did not fulfill all his creative energies and outlets. He could not rid himself of the desire to return to his career as a playwright for the New York stage. In a 1929 letter to Barrett Clark, Howard firmly maintained, "I don't believe that I shall give up writing for the theatre until the theatre gives me up . . ."⁶⁵ Howard spent the rest of his life in transit working as both a Broadway playwright, and a Hollywood screen writer. Though it was difficult for Howard to remain unimpressed by the amount of money he earned as a screen writer, he made it abundantly clear that his role as a playwright was the more important of the two:

⁶³Sidney Howard, "Lines to a Gentle Young Actress," New York Times, 29 March 1936, sec. ix, p. 4.

⁶⁴Ibid.

⁶⁵Sidney Howard quoted in Clark, Portraits, p. 208.

. . . you can do just so much Hollywood and then it shows. One's mental and spiritual muscles get soft. . . . I know that when I have come back from writing pictures in Hollywood, it is that much harder for me to get down to something like serious work afterward.⁶⁶

The nine remaining years of Howard's life, 1929-1938, yielded a total of thirteen works: eight translations and adaptations, and five original plays.⁶⁷ Of the original plays--Half Gods (1929), Alien Corn (1933), Yellow Jack (1934), The Ghost of Yankee Doodle (1937), and Madam, Will You Walk? (1953)--Yellow Jack stands out as the most interesting, innovative, and successful of the lot.⁶⁸

Howard spent six years developing the idea for Yellow Jack. His plan was to dramatize certain events leading to

⁶⁶Howard, "Gentle Young Actress," sec. ix, p. 4.

⁶⁷The eight works not listed above are: Lute Song (1930), an adaptation; "One, Two, Three" (1930), a translation; "Marseilles" (1930), a translation; The Late Christopher Bean (1932), an adaptation; Dodsworth (1934), an adaptation; "Gather Ye Rosebuds" (1934), a collaboration; "Ode to Liberty" (1934), an adaptation; and Paths of Glory (1935), an adaptation. Of these eight plays, The Late Christopher Bean and Dodsworth ranked as the most successful and financially rewarding.

⁶⁸Half Gods, a picture of Howard's soured view of modern marriage, was a great disappointment, failing after only 17 performances. Alien Corn became a personal success for actress Katherine Cornell, but ranks as a mediocre play at best. The Ghost of Yankee Doodle, which foreshadowed America's entrance into the Second World War, was Howard's only original play to contain an anti-war theme. Regardless of the theme's topicality, the play marked another failure for Howard. Howard's last play, Madam, Will You Walk?, was in revision at the time of his death. Robert Sherwood, Elmer Rice, S. N. Behrman, and Maxwell Anderson each worked to complete Howard's final revision so that it might be produced by the Playwright's Company. Madam, Will You Walk?, published by Howard's widow, Polly Howard, in 1953, ran on Broadway for 42 performances.

the discovery of the cure for yellow fever. Facts taken from Paul de Kruif's The Microbe Hunters (1926) served as the basis for Howard's play.⁶⁹ Yellow Jack exhibited Howard's talents of making "art out of reportage"⁷⁰ and was acknowledged as the most "technically advanced production Howard had ever tried."⁷¹

The method Howard adopted was an uninterrupted series of scenes. It was a wise choice for a play that is essentially a documentary. . . . Most of all, it was Jo Mielziner's novel setting which made everything work. Upon a comparatively bare stage, two simple levels were arranged, the one above containing a bay which served as the laboratory, and the stage level where a variety of scenes could be played. The twenty-nine episodes could move swiftly at the two levels, changes being indicated by lighting alone so that the effect would be one of continuous motion. . . . Apart from the obvious melodramatic effects, the play well deserved its critical acclaim. . . . The complete reliance on light and sound effects nearly approaches what we today call expressionistic theater. Such an ensemble arrangement whereby any means are justified by the desired total effect indicated an awareness of total theater more often seen in Thornton Wilder or Eugene O'Neill.⁷²

Howard designed Yellow Jack to be "exciting without love interest, and heroic without heroics."⁷³ It required six years of his time and became the play which "gave him more

⁶⁹Flexner, American Playwrights, p. 45.

⁷⁰John Gassner, ed., Best American Plays: Supplementary Volume: 1918-1958 (New York: Crown Publisher, Inc., 1961), p. xiii.

⁷¹White, Howard, p. 109.

⁷²Ibid.

⁷³Barrett Clark, "His Voice Was American," Theatre Arts, April 1949, p. 30.

trouble and took more time than any other."⁷⁴

As a dramatist, Howard became a leader in the "battle by professional playwrights for greater control over their creations."⁷⁵ In 1937, Howard joined with playwrights Elmer Rice, Robert Sherwood, Maxwell Anderson, and S. N. Behrman to organize a "producing company to put on their own plays."⁷⁶ Known as the Playwright's Company, their purpose was to renounce commercial management by successfully producing four new plays. Brooks Atkinson comments upon the uproar the Playwright's Company initiated:

Broadway was not altogether pleased. Broadway invariably sees disaster in anything new. Some managers believed that the Playwright's Company foreshadowed the end of the commercial manager. It seemed to them like further proof that the dramatists, who already imposed stiff terms in their play contracts, were going to become the dictators of the Broadway theatre. The Theatre Guild, which lost five of its best dramatists to the company, was particularly distressed.⁷⁷

The Playwright's Company succeeded in its bid to threaten Broadway management, and along with the Theatre Guild, it dominated "the cultural aspects of Broadway."⁷⁸

Howard's membership in the Playwright's Company is an excellent example of his desire to become involved in the protection of the rights of the creative artist. Prior to 1921 and his entrance onto the Broadway scene, Howard was

⁷⁴Ibid.

⁷⁵MacNicholas, Dictionary, p. 309.

⁷⁶Atkinson, Broadway, p. 271.

⁷⁷Ibid.

⁷⁸Ibid.

actively speaking against unjust causes through his journalism. His articles fought to awaken the average citizen to abuses of his civil liberties and his rights as an American. These articles sought to expose parties interested in the destruction of labor unions, the illegal marketing of narcotics, and oil or stock market fraud. Howard also helped to organize the Willard Straight Post, a radical attachment of the American Legion. The Willard Straight Post brought suit against the American Legion on the issue of Veteran bonuses, maintaining that demands for bonuses were "unpatriotic and disloyal."⁷⁹ The suit was awarded in favor of the Willard Straight Post.

In the theatre, as president of the Dramatists Guild, Howard championed the rights of dramatists. As a screen writer, he was aware of the tremendous need for material in Hollywood, and that the power and influence of the motion picture industry could rape the New York stage of its playwriting talent. Howard also fought the issue of stage censorship on many occasions, which included his leading the fight against Play Juries and the Jenkes Bill.⁸⁰

⁷⁹White, Howard, p. 27.

⁸⁰Play Juries were established in 1925 by "the city fathers of New York" in order to censor the plays which appeared on Broadway. These Play Juries attempted to ban They Knew What They Wanted and Eugene O'Neill's Desire Under the Elms from New York theatres. Both plays, however, were eventually acquitted by the Play Juries. The Jenkes Bill was Albany's attempt to monitor sex in the theatre; however, this bill was defeated with the help of Howard,

Howard was interested in the individual who was able to fight the "good fight," as witnessed by the themes in many of his plays. He tried to maintain this as a personal standard, which is best exemplified by the causes for which he fought. For example, in 1937 the Reich Theater Company in Germany had considered producing Howard's adaptation of Sinclair Lewis' Dodsworth. Before the Reich Theater Company could proceed with the production, it characteristically had to obtain "evidence of the dramatists' Aryan descent."⁸¹ The letter Howard and Lewis wrote in reply stated:

". . . who knows what ancestors we may have had in the last few hundred years? We really are as ignorant of them as even Hitler of his.

"In answering please use our proper legal names: Sidney Horowitz and Sinclair Levy.

Yours sincerely,

Sidney Howard and Sinclair Lewis"⁸²

Howard's career was cut short by an accident on his farm in Tyringham, Massachusetts, on August 23, 1939. He was cranking the engine on his tractor when it lurched forward and crushed him against the wall of the barn; he was unaware that the last person who had used the tractor had left it in gear.

the Author's League, and the Association of American Dramatists. (See Sidney Howard White, Sidney Howard (Boston: Twayne Publishing, 1977), pp. 27-28.

⁸¹Sinclair Lewis, quoted in Sidney Howard White, Sidney Howard (Boston: Twayne Publishing, 1977), p. 144.

⁸²Ibid.

Howard's nineteen years of playwriting produced twenty-eight works in all, making him the "most prolific writer of the Postwar American Theatre."⁸³ He brought an "attitude toward life which helped characterize the social drama of the twenties."⁸⁴ Along with his plays, Howard was an important force in the theatre of the twenties and thirties. His involvement with the political, as well as the creative battles of the stage, "gives you the picture of a man who loves a row, or rather, who loves a joyous participation in dramatic events."⁸⁵

⁸³MacNicholas, Dictionary, p. 309.

⁸⁴Meserve, "Social Drama," p. 266.

⁸⁵Joseph Wood Krutch, The American Drama Since 1918: An Informal History (New York: George Braziller, Inc., 1957), p. 56.

CHAPTER II

THEY KNEW WHAT THEY WANTED AND THE CHARACTERISTIC

HOWARD HEROINE

This chapter is devoted to an analysis of Howard's They Knew What They Wanted. Particular emphasis is focused upon Amy, the play's heroine, and those qualities which make her the characteristic Howard heroine.

They Knew What They Wanted is set in the Napa Valley of California, in the early 1920s. Predominantly an agricultural area, the Napa Valley is best known for its ability to develop superior grapes used in producing various types of wines. Howard first became familiar with this area during the time he spent as a youth in California.¹ He became reacquainted with the area while on vacation in the early twenties. From his encounters with the immigrant farmers and vineyard owners, Howard was determined to develop a story revolving around this community. The majority of the residents of this area were Italian immigrants. Howard found that these "simple, warm-hearted people"² were content to lead modest lifestyles, their only

¹Sidney Howard White, Sidney Howard (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1977), p. 9.

²Ibid., p. 49.

needs being the soil in which to grow the grapes and a marketplace in which to sell them. As immigrants, their comprehension of the American political and legal systems was often as inferior as their overall knowledge of the English language. Hence, their lives revolved solely around their work and their families.

They Knew What They Wanted captures this spirit of the simple immigrant lifestyle. Tony, a middle-aged immigrant vineyard owner, personifies this existence. Tony worked hard all his life to make his vineyard a success, and along with his hard work, prohibition has aided in making him a wealthy man: "Before pro'ibish' I sell my grape for ten, maybe twelve dollar' da ton. Now I sell my grape' some'time one hundra dollar' da ton. Pro'ibish' is make' me verra rich."³ Comfortably stationed in life, Tony desires the companionship of a wife, and an heir to insure the vineyard's protection and continuance. Tony's acquisition of a wife exemplifies the simple, pragmatic logic of the immigrant as portrayed in They Knew What They Wanted:

JOE: . . . Tony goes to Frisco lookin' for a wife, see? The nut! An' he finds Amy waitin' on tables in a spaghetti joint. . . . He ain't even got the nerve to speak to her. He don't even go back to see her again. He just falls for her, gets her name from the boss an' comes home an' makes me write her a letter proposin' marriage.⁴

³Sidney Howard, They Knew What They Wanted (New York: Samuel French, Inc., 1925), p. 21.

⁴Ibid., p. 32.

Tony is a man of simple means and philosophies. His problems and desires are reduced to statements of basic needs which are fulfilled. For example, he requires a wife in order to produce a legitimate heir. In order to fulfill the need, Tony seeks a suitable candidate and proposes marriage. For Tony, time in courtship or in search of love would be a superfluous waste of time.

The majority of Act One is spent in Tony's excited preparations for his meeting with, and subsequent marriage to, Amy. Anesthetizing his nerves with wine, Tony rushes off to meet Amy's train. Moments later, Amy arrives at the vineyard, infuriated that she was left waiting at the train station. Amy is greeted by Joe, Tony's vineyard foreman, and mistakes him for Tony. Satisfied with the choice she has made for herself, Amy is eager to proceed with the wedding. Before Joe is able to properly identify himself, Tony is brought in on a stretcher. In his overly-excited state, he had lost control of his car which plunged off a bridge and into a ravine. Once Amy discovers the true identity of her intended, she is stunned into silence. In the most memorable scene of the play, Amy summons all her courage and decides that Tony "ain't so bad,"⁵ and is determined to continue with her plans for marriage.

Act Two consists of the "festa" following Amy and Tony's wedding ceremony. Despite his injuries, Tony marries

⁵Ibid., p. 67.

Amy and is forced to watch the celebration from his bed. The doctor describes this more-than-herculian medical feat on Tony's behalf:

DOCTOR: . . . I've never known the like. Never in all my years of practice. It's a case that ought to be written up for the whole, entire medical profession. Both legs broken in the morning. Tibia, fibula, femur, and ischium. X-rayed and set inside of an hour after the accident. Patient married at noon and survives ten hours of whooping Dago celebration with no apparent ill effects.⁶

Amy plays the role of the happy bride, exposing little or no indication of doubt in the decision she has made. Near the end of the act, however, Amy begins to betray her feelings for Joe. She becomes increasingly irritated by his presence, and she is forced to admit to herself that in order to have a successful marriage to Tony, all thoughts of Joe must be forgotten. Amy struggles to maintain the facade of the "happy bride," but as the evening wears on, Amy weakens. Unable to resist her feelings for Joe, she surrenders to her momentary passions.

The third act takes place three months after the wedding night. Amy has grown quite affectionate and protective toward Tony through the months of nursing him, and Tony has fallen deeply in love with Amy. The doctor's news of Amy's pregnancy, however, shatters Amy's new life. In an effort to protect Tony from the truth, Amy and Joe prepare to flee the vineyard. Tony disrupts their escape

⁶Ibid., p. 116.

and discovers that Amy is carrying Joe's child. Tony's first reaction is to kill Joe, but Amy prevents him. As Tony composes himself, he pleads with Amy to stay, knowing that Joe cannot adequately provide for Amy and her baby. Tony's simple, practical philosophy remedies the situation:

TONY: . . . yes . . . ees good sense! Ees w'at is evrabody wantin' here! You an' Joe an' me! . . . Looka Joe. Joe is wantin' go with Wobblies, eh? With goddam Wobblies. All right. . . . Looka Amy . . . Amy is wantin' stay here nice an' safe in dees fine house with Tony. Is not true, eh? Sure is true. Look Tony, Dio mio, an' ask him w'at he want? Don' he want baby?⁷

Tony's humble reasoning resolves the crisis: If Amy stays with Tony, Joe is free to join the Wobblies, Amy has a safe and comfortable home, and Tony has an heir. This solution entitles all three persons to have what they want.

Although the resolution of the situation is arrived at through simple logic, the sophistication required to accept all the consequences this alternative proposes might seem beyond the means of these simple characters.⁸ Joseph Wood Krutch explains that Amy, in this instance, is the catalyst which enables these characters to rise above their own resource:

. . . it is this essential goodness, coupled with a native generosity in the girl herself, which make it possible for the three simple persons involved to face a problem apparently too difficult for their uncultivated intelligences and yet to succeed, in a measure, in solving it by means of native virtues vigorous

⁷Ibid., p. 176.

⁸Joseph Wood Krutch, The American Drama Since 1918: An Informal History (New York: George Braziller, Inc., 1957), p. 47.

enough to make them perceive how by giving up much they can still salvage something from the wreck which circumstance has brought about.⁹

This serves to echo the dominant theme in They Knew What They Wanted: "even when it spares us fundamental catastrophe, life often disappoints our rosier expectations."¹⁰ It is that quality to survive, rather than intellect, which sees us through these disappointments.

An underlying theme of They Knew What They Wanted concerns the issue of Tony's forgiving nature in view of Amy's adultery. Though the couple, Joe and Amy, swear they have only spent one night together, they credit their devotion to Tony as the factor which kept them from succumbing to their passions again. Once the truth is known, Tony forgives Amy saying, "What you done was mistake in da head, not in da heart. . . . Mistake in da head is no matter."¹¹ Tony dismisses all adulterous actions in view of the fact that they were neither premeditated or committed in order to hurt or undermine him; it was merely a case of poor judgment and circumstance. Through Tony, Howard reiterates the underlying theme that the only actions which matter are those motivated by the heart; one should not be held accountable for actions stimulated by reasoning, for reasoning is often faulty.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Howard, They Knew What They Wanted, p. 178.

In They Knew What They Wanted, Howard seeks to present immigrants as people of simple tastes, philosophies and morals.¹² These uncomplicated philosophies are best exemplified in Tony's speech explaining the reason why he waited so long to marry:

TONY: I think you know verra good w'y. Ees because I'm no dam' fool. . . . W'en I'm young, I got nothing. I'm broke all da time, you remember? I got no money for havin' wife. I don't want no wife for make her work all da time. Da's no good, dat. Da's mak' her no more young, no more prett'. Evrabody say Tony is crazy for no havin' no wife. I say Tony is no dam' fool. W'at is happen? Pro'ibish' is com'. Salute! (A glass of wine. Ah Gee has returned to his kitchen.) An' w'at I say? I say, "ees dam' fool law. Ees dam' fool fellas for bein' scare' an' pullin' up da grape' for tryin' growin' som'thing different." W'at I'm doin'? I'm keep the grape, eh? I say, "I come in dees country for growin' da grape! God mak' dees country for growin' da grape! Ees no for pro'ibish' God mak' dees country. Ees for growin' da grape! Ees true? Sure ees true! (Another glass of wine.) I got my fine house. I got Joe for bein' foreman. I got two men for helpin' Joe. I got one Chink for cook. I got one Ford car. I got all I want, evrathing, excep only wife. Now I'm going' have wife. Verra nice an' young an' fat. Not for work. No! For sit an' holdin' da hands and havin' kids. Three kids. (He demonstrates the altitude of each.) Antonio . . . Guiseppe . . . Anna . . . Da's like trees an' cows an' all good peoples. Da's fine for God an' evrabody! I tell you, Padre, Tony know w'at he want!"¹³

Said to be "one of the best speeches that Sidney Howard ever wrote,"¹⁴ it indicates that Tony's naiveté happens to be his strongest appeal. Tony's needs--to be an independent

¹²White, Sidney Howard, p. 49.

¹³Howard, They Knew What They Wanted, pp. 20-21.

¹⁴Edith J. R. Issacs, "Sidney Howard," Theatre Arts, October 1939, p. 727.

landowner, to afford servants and material possessions-- remain quite simple and straightforward. Ambitions such as politics or civic duties remain valueless in this system. As Tony remarks, "W'at I care for gover'ment?"¹⁵

In spite of Tony's apolitical attitudes, They Knew What They Wanted captures the mood of the changing and turbulent times of the twenties throughout its discussions of socialistic doctrines and prohibition. One of the central issues of They Knew What They Wanted is prohibition, and it is chiefly argued by two minor characters, Father McKee and the Doctor. During one discussion, the doctor demands that Father McKee clarify the church's position on the issue of prohibition, to which Father McKee replies, "The church is opposed to interfering with the divine gifts of Providence."¹⁶ The doctor, being a prohibitionist, retorts, "It's the greatest reform since the abolition of slavery."¹⁷ Although Father McKee does not take a strong anti-prohibitionist's viewpoint, he fails to understand the logic of outlawing liquor consumption:

FATHER MCKEE: . . . I ain't got no sympathy with drunkenness, but there's plenty worse things. How about chamberin'? Ain't chamberin' a worse sin than drunkenness? You think you can put a stop to drunkenness by pullin' up all the grapes? I suppose you think

¹⁵Howard, They Knew What They Wanted, p. 136.

¹⁶Ibid., p. 103.

¹⁷Ibid.

you can put a stop to chamberin' by pulling up all the women!¹⁸

The doctor continues his opposition to Father McKee's argument on the basis that alcohol "is a poison to the entire alimentary system."¹⁹

It is interesting to note that the doctor is the only character who takes a prohibitionist's view, and even then, the doctor's primary objection is a scientifically motivated one, rather than a moral conviction. In view of Howard's anti-prohibitionist view,²⁰ it is not difficult to imagine that most of his characters dismiss prohibition as a "dam' fool law."²¹

An interest in radical or socialist politics is a minor underlying idea presented in They Knew What They Wanted. A timely theme of the decade, socialism and involvement in radical political causes climaxed during the twenties:

. . . the effect on American minds of seeing what was happening in Russia. Here was being put in practice a new conception of society and government which not only ran counter to, but denied, opposed, and regarded as its enemies, nearly everything that, in other forms of society and government, were regarded as fundamental.²²

¹⁸Ibid., p. 104.

¹⁹Ibid.

²⁰Barrett Clark, "His Voice Was American," Theatre Arts, March 1949, p. 30.

²¹Howard, They Knew What They Wanted, p. 20.

²²Mark Sullivan, Our Times: The Twenties (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, Inc., 1935), p. 390.

Changing political tides in the world had a tremendous effect upon individuals and organizations during the twenties. Supporters of communist and socialist doctrines grew in numbers, as did the strikes and violence connected with these radical organizations.²³ One such organization, the I.W.W. (the International Workers of the World), is briefly debated in Howard's They Knew What They Wanted.

Tony's vineyard foreman, Joe, is a member of the I.W.W. As a "Wobblie"--a term used to denote supporters of the I.W.W.--Joe supports the I.W.W.'s purpose to unite all workers in a solid front. Joe circulates the literature issued by the I.W.W., but Howard never fully develops Joe's interest in the organization, nor does he allow Joe to become deeply involved in the discussion about the I.W.W.

The principle weakness of They Knew What They Wanted lies within its structure, a problem which is acknowledged as the fault of many of Howard's plays.²⁴ The first act of They Knew What They Wanted is hailed as Howard's best: "technically Howard never wrote anything better than the first act of They Knew What They Wanted, which is a model of deftness in its exposition, character portrayal, and development. It has tension and pace."²⁵ After the first

²³Ibid., p. 167.

²⁴Walter J. Meserve, "Sidney Howard and the Social Drama of the Twenties," Modern Drama 6 (December 1963):258

²⁵Eleanor J. Flexner, American Playwrights: 1918-1938 (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1938), p. 33.

act, Howard manifests such an elevated sense of climax--the events leading up to Amy's decision to marry Tony in spite of her feelings for Joe--that the ensuing acts pale in comparison. In Act Two, deemed by many to be "mostly padding,"²⁶ Howard tries to enliven the spirit with an introductory taste of an Italian-style celebration. The colorful characters are to provide interest in the lagging act. The climax of the second act, Amy's surrender to her true feelings for Joe, results rather quickly. The first half of the third act is merely a surface discussion of politics, pleasantries, and afternoon "tea-time" conversation. The final scene, of the third act, however, is lively and action-packed.

The overall result is that the play spends too much time and care in erecting the circumstances surrounding Amy's pregnancy. Her pregnancy, the crisis point of the play, is discovered only a few moments before the final curtain of the play. The crisis, discovered this late in the play, leads Howard to Tony's speedy reversal and resolution to the play which is difficult to believe.²⁷

Howard had first considered the idea for They Knew What They Wanted as a short-story project, but it was the richness of the Italian dialect which Howard could not resist exploiting for its effect. Printing the dialect, however, posed a problem for Howard:

²⁶Ibid.

²⁷Ibid.

I have considered to print it legibly rather than phonetically because I much prefer the reader's imaginative cooperation to any laboured and vision-destroying phonetics that I might have invented. I have tried (with as much consistency as seemed quite convenient, the reader's and my own sloth considered) to suggest inflection, intonation, and pronunciation through the minimum amount of misspelling.²⁸

Howard's choice appears to have been correct. In the case of Tony, the dialect is perhaps his strongest characterization tool.

The single, most effective element of Howard's writing is his ability to create vivid characterizations of "everyday men and women."²⁹

Undoubtedly his forte is character portrayal. His finest creations along this line are the simpler types--sterling, vivid, individual and stolidly human--which people our heterogeneous American scene. . . . They have a raciness, a quality of forthrightness, independence, and integrity which epitomizes what is best and most typical in our American tradition. They are Sidney Howard's most valuable contribution to our theatre.³⁰

Amy and Tony of They Knew What They Wanted stand as evidence for this testimony of Howard's talents. They are both fully explored, well-rounded characters whose actions, for the most part, are significantly motivated.

As in many of Howard's plays, Amy, Tony, and Joe each meet a well-tailored crisis situation, "moments of tension

²⁸Howard, Preface to They Knew What They Wanted, p. xi.

²⁹White, Sidney Howard, p. 39.

³⁰Flexner, American Playwrights, p. 30.

when the voice is raised."³¹ Each character's ability to solve the crisis he faces, comes from his ability to objectively envision his goal and attain it: Joe, to be free to join the Wobblie's rebellion; Tony, to have Amy and an heir for his estate; and Amy, to have a comfortable home.

Tony is a fine example of Howard's characterization work; he is drawn as a completely simple and honest man. Howard emphasizes Tony's modest philosophies of life and moral maxims as simple phrases which govern Tony's entire being. "If folks is bent on makin' mistakes, let 'em go ahead," Tony explains. "I don't want nobody hatin' my guts for bein' to dam' right all the time."³² Tony's philosophies match the simplicity of his needs in life. Tony is the Howard portrait of the immigrant: simple wants, simple life.

Tony possesses one quality which nearly estranges him from this class entirely, the immense ability to forgive beyond his limited intellectual capacity. It is a quality reminiscent of child-like innocence. Tony is incapable of believing that people are evil, which is responsible for his ability to forgive Amy's infidelity.

Joe, Tony's vineyard foreman, is an impatient and restless young man whose best attributes lie within the

³¹John Mason Brown, Upstage: The American Theatre in Performance (New York: W. W. Norton and Co., Inc., 1930), p. 55.

³²Howard, They Knew What They Wanted, p. 29.

physical realm; Howard describes him as "dark, sloppy, beautiful and young."³³ Joe's participation in the Wobblies stems from a sense of restlessness, rather than from the urge to be politically active. Joe's desire is to be involved in the fight, rather than fighting for a cause, as evidenced by his declaration, "I don't want to miss another fight like that, do I?"³⁴

Within Joe's selfishness and disquiet, he possesses a tremendous amount of loyalty and love for Tony, which is his finest quality. Tony's charitable acts toward Joe are rewarded with Joe's dedication to Tony's happiness and welfare:

JOE: . . . Tony--oh, he's a nut an' a wop an' all that, but he's just the best old fella I ever knew. Regular salt of the earth, Tony is. I wouldn't like to see Tony in trouble or unhappy or gettin' his feelings hurt or anything in that line.³⁵

Joe does give into his passions for Amy, yet it is this regard for Tony's happiness which prevents him from having any further encounters with Amy, and makes him "worthy of sympathy, rather than abhorrence."³⁶

Howard complements They Knew What They Wanted with a variety of characters in direct opposition to each other. For instance, Joe represents the viewpoints of a type of

³³Ibid., p. 8.

³⁴Ibid., p. 121.

³⁵Ibid.

³⁶White, Sidney Howard, p. 55.

radical politics, while Father McKee voices a more conservative well-seasoned view of American politics. In another instance, Howard uses Father McKee as the opposition to the doctor's prohibitionist's beliefs. In each circumstance, these opposites serve to emphasize and highlight "each character's traits as they bring them out."³⁷

Perhaps Howard's best characterization portrait in They Knew What They Wanted, Amy, serves as a model for nearly all of Howard's future women. In Amy, we are first introduced to Howard's developing viewpoint of the modern American woman of the twenties. Amy is an honest woman, strong in her convictions and master of her own fate. She is an earth-bound stoic and pragmatist, and a woman whose simple philosophies govern her assertive abilities which enable her to achieve what she wants out of life.

Our first look at Amy is as she appears with the mailman in search of her soon-to-be-husband Tony:

As for Amy, she is all that Tony said of her and much more. She wears a pretty dress, new, ready-made, and inexpensive, and a charming and equally cheap hat. Her shoes are bright coloured and her handbag matches them. But her own loveliness is quite beyond belief. She is small and plump and vivid and her golden hair shimmers about her face like morning sunshine. She herself shines with an inner constitutional energy. Her look is, to be sure, just a little tired. She probably is not more than twenty-two or three, but she seems older. Her great quality is definiteness. It lends pathos to her whole personality.³⁸

³⁷ Brown, Upstage, p. 55.

³⁸ Howard, They Knew What They Wanted, p. 39.

Following this vivid introduction to Amy, one soon discovers that the life she has led has been responsible for her appearing to be older than she is. She is a young woman who has had to overcome many hardships in her life. Encouraged by Joe to tell him about herself, Amy explains some of the experiences which have shaped her into the type of woman that she has become:

AMY: . . . Our old house in Santa Clara was bigger than this, but it wasn't near as pretty. I must say you keep your house nice and clean for having no woman around. Our house got awful dirty toward the end. You see, my mother got to drinking, too. [She had previously admitted to her father's abuse of alcohol.] Hard stuff, you know . . . I don't want no more experience with the hard stuff. . . . Has this house got a cellar? . . . I used to hide in the cellar when things got too rough upstairs. You could hear feet running around over your head, but they never came down in the cellar after me because there was a ladder, and when you're that way you don't much care for ladders. . . . They always took it out on me.³⁹

Given this description of her childhood, it may not be difficult to imagine that Amy grew up to be reliant only upon herself. (It is interesting to note the irony here; Howard creates a woman, whose worst childhood memories involve alcohol, to marry a man whose entire life is dedicated to producing the means of illegal alcohol.)

Amy's independent attitude is only surpassed by her ability to control, or successfully mask, her emotions. After being delivered to the vineyard by the mailman, instead of being properly greeted at the train station by Tony, Amy manages to suppress her irritation and conduct

³⁹ Ibid., pp. 52-53.

herself amazingly well. Even through the embarrassment of explaining the reason why she was found crying at the train station, Amy rigidly maintains:

AMY: . . . I was thinking: Well, if they ain't got enough sense of politeness to come after the bride, I'm going to hop the very next train back to Frisco. I'd have done it, too, only--would you believe it?-- I didn't have the price of a ticket! I spent the last cent I had on this hat. Say, when I remembered that, maybe I didn't cry! That's what I was crying over when you come up.⁴⁰

Rather than allowing anyone to think that she had lost her composure and become upset over the possibility of being rejected, or hurt by a cruel joke, she makes it abundantly clear that she was only upset by the thought of not having the price of a return ticket.

Pragmatism, a quality with which Howard endows most of his heroines--and if not, its absence is one reason for their downfall--is nowhere more visible than within Amy. Amy has the ability to sum up a situation, decide what it is she wants out of the situation and what she can actually attain from it, and make the best out of the circumstances. In perhaps the most emotionally moving scene of the play, Amy's pragmatism and irrepressible stoicism enable her to make the most painful decision of her life. When Amy realizes that Joe--the man whose picture she fell in love with and is responsible for her coming to the vineyard--is actually just a transient farm worker, and that the unattractive, middle-aged Italian is actually Tony, Amy

⁴⁰Ibid., p. 41.

reacts quickly and sensibly:

AMY: (. . . Then her eye falls upon Joe's photograph which still lies, face-up, on the table. She takes it in her hand and looks at it. Mechanically she makes as though to put it into the bosom of her dress. She changes her mind, drops it on the table and looks around again. She seems to reach a decision. Her face sets and she pushes the photograph away from her.) I ain't going.

JOE: What?

AMY: No. I ain't going. Why should I go? I like the country. This place suits me all right. It's just what I was looking for. I'm here and I might as well stick. I guess he ain't so bad, at that. I guess I could have done a lot worse. If he wants to marry me, I'm game. I'm game to see it through. It's nice up here. (She pulls off her hat and sits, exhausted. Joe stares in mute admiration as the curtain falls.)⁴¹

Forced to accept the unhappy reality, Amy looks objectively at her situation: She wants to stay, to be comfortably supported, and has no desire to return to her duties as a waitress. Even though she is distressed by her feelings for Joe, she chooses the most practical alternative to resolve her situation.

As an independent stoic and an earthbound pragmatist, Amy is prepared to accept the fate of the choice that she had made. In a speech characteristic of her forthright practicality, Amy allays the worries of the others:

AMY: I ain't sad. . . . It was a swell wedding. . . . And I don't want to hear no more of what Doc was telling me about bringing a trained nurse up here from Napa. I'm all the nurse Tony needs. . . . I'll sit beside him and read the paper out loud and we'll look at the view and feel that nice wind and we'll just

⁴¹Ibid., p. 68.

enjoy ourselves. . . . Don't nobody fret about little Amy. She's going to be all right.⁴²

Amy embraces her duties and responsibilities as Tony's new wife, assuring the others and herself of the firmness of her decision.

Her choice made, Amy never revokes her decision. She stubbornly defends her logic to Joe:

AMY: . . . I know what I'm about, see? I married for a home, see? Well, I got a home, ain't I? I wanted to get away from working in the city. Well, I got away, didn't I? I'm in the country, ain't I? And I ain't working so very hard, either, that I can notice. Oh, I know what's expected of me and I ain't going to lay down on my job.⁴³

However tough Amy truly is, her simple philosophy never abandons her, although she finds it difficult to live by such strong stoic codes. For example, when she learns of her pregnancy, Amy muses, "If you go wrong, you're sure to get it sooner or later. I got it sooner. . . . It serves me right."⁴⁴ Incapable of finding herself as an exception to her own codes and standards of behavior, Amy accepts her pregnancy as a type of punishment for her waywardness.

As a modern woman of the twenties, Amy reflects the courage and independence necessary to support herself by her own means. As a woman on her own, however, Amy has found it rough going. Many of the attitudes and opinions which were held at that time inhibited and suppressed young

⁴²Ibid., p. 112.

⁴³Ibid., p. 122.

⁴⁴Ibid., p. 157.

women. Amy has encountered these troubles previously, such as the difficulties she faced in her job as a waitress:

AMY: There ain't no short for Amy. It's French and it means beloved. Beloved! Can you beat it? The boss in the spaghetti palace told me that the night he tried to give me a twelve dollar pearl necklace. Twelve dollars! He was some sport. When he seen I couldn't see it that way, he gave it to Blanche. She was the other girl that worked there. He had a wife and three kids, too. I like that name Blanche. I used to wish my name was Blanche. Instead of Amy. Blanche got into trouble. Poor Blanche! Gee, I was sorry for that girl!⁴⁵

Blanche serves as an example of the type of problem the modern woman faced at this time; her independence may be something which she must fight hard to retain and it may often prove to be a costly struggle.

Howard uses his male characters to emphasize the attitudes men held against the modern woman of the times and to express his view of the difficulties she faced in order to attain her goals as an independent person. For example, through Joe's eyes we experience his version of the difficulties of functioning as a woman in a man's world:

JOE: . . . Believe me, a girl gets a lousy deal any way you look at it. Take a fellow, now, a young fella like me, see? It's goin' to do him good to knock around an' have his troubles an' all. But knockin' around just raises hell with a girl. She can't stand it, because it ain't in her nature to get away with the whole show like a fella can. If a fella wants a meal, he swipes it, don't he? A girl can't be swipin' things. It 'ud make her feel bad. She'd think she was doin' somehin' wrong. Gee, I sure would hate to be a woman.⁴⁶

⁴⁵Ibid., p. 94.

⁴⁶Ibid., p. 85.

Joe represents, and voices, the type of attitudes and opinions that women such as Amy are forced to confront on a daily basis. Joe continues:

JOE: Ever heard of anythin' about this dam' woman's rights stuff? You know. Equality of the sexes. Woman doin' a man's work and all that bunk? . . . The idea ain't so bad. . . . But I been lookin' women over from Seattle to San Diego an' what most of 'em is after is a home. A good safe home, whether they get any rights with it or not . . .⁴⁷

Joe, like many other men of the twenties, recognizes that women are beginning to revolt against their traditional roles as wives and mothers. Rather than continue to fight a battle which had been proven to be a losing one, Joe accepts the idea of women wanting their equal rights as citizens. Despite the fact that he recognizes the change which is beginning to take place in the field of women's rights, Joe still views women as being better qualified to remain in the home.

Amy represents Howard's first portrayal of the type of American woman that had begun to emerge during the twenties. In order to remain current, women had begun to alter many of their ideas on lifestyle and womanhood to better adapt to the changing times. As women began to realize that they were as able as men to earn wages, their attitudes toward careers changed:

Women began to play an increasing part in industry, commerce and politics. In 1900 there were 5,000,000 engaged in industry (or 19 percent of women in the

⁴⁷Ibid., p. 86.

population), of whom 769,000 were married (5.6 percent); in 1930 there were over 10,500,000 (22 percent) of whom over 3,000,000 were married (11.7 percent).⁴⁸

Gone were the days of looking forward to the only respectable profession available to her: mother and wife. The American woman in the twenties was aware that she was employable and necessary to the labor force.

During the three decades previous to the twenties, women such as Carrie Chapman Catt, Alice Paul, Lucy Larcom, and Susan B. Anthony, and organizations such as the National American Women's Suffrage Association, pioneered the suffrage movement which culminated in the Nineteenth Amendment in 1919.⁴⁹ The independent and forceful attitudes and personalities of these women inspired others with the courage to step out from the home and seek their right to earn wages, have a career of their choosing, or seek education. Women inspired with these independent attitudes no longer faced the inevitability of marriage. One could remain single and have a fulfilling life in a career.⁵⁰

This bit of independence that women had strived so long to attain, however, had not been a sufficient answer to all their problems. They still had to contend with the male ideal of womanhood, the ideal of womanhood their mothers

⁴⁸Eric John Dingwall, The American Woman: An Historical Study (New York: Rinehart & Co., Inc., 1957), p. 129.

⁴⁹Eleanor Flexner, Century of Struggle: The Women's Rights Movement (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1959), p. 249.

⁵⁰Dingwall, The American Woman, p. 133.

had programmed into them, and their identity as women, while also having to function as women in the rapidly changing society of the twenties. In this respect, Howard's Amy of They Knew What They Wanted is a direct product of her era.

Amy reflects the confusion of the twenties' American woman. As a woman of the twenties, on her own and self-sufficient, Amy portrays the tiresome struggle the modern type of woman faced. In order to maintain her independence, this woman must overcome the social stigma attached to the role of the cold, calculating, career-oriented woman who rejects home in search of self.

Through Amy, Howard shows the weariness of the woman who fights the attitudes and biases others held against the career woman of the twenties. After Amy has struggled on her own, she concedes that the role of the modern woman of the twenties is difficult to maintain:

AMY: I wouldn't never have said I was going to marry an Italian, though. But I guess I just jumped at the chance. I got so tired of things. Oh, everything! I used to think I just couldn't keep on any longer.⁵¹

Fulfilling the role of the modern woman continuously forced Amy to re-evaluate her goals, bearing in mind, "What will people think of me?" Amy "gave into" allowing Tony to support her as his wife under the pressure of maintaining this role.

Amy provides the mold, the basic characteristics, for all of Howard's heroines which followed They Knew What They

⁵¹Howard, They Knew What They Wanted, p. 54.

Wanted.⁵² She reveals Howard's opinion of the modern woman of his day: independent, pragmatic, and self-assertive. In spite of her desires to succeed as a modern woman, however, she sometimes fails in her struggle against those circumstances which she fights.

They Knew What They Wanted opened November 24, 1924, and is said to have been responsible for "having brought sex to Broadway."⁵³ The play faced various censorship attacks, due to its themes of adultery and pregnancy, but in spite of its difficulties, They Knew What They Wanted was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for best new play of the 1924-25 theatrical season.⁵⁴ More importantly, it was responsible for creating the characteristic Howard heroine, Amy, which set the pace for all of his succeeding female characters.

⁵²White, Sidney Howard, p. 133.

⁵³Ibid., p. 27.

⁵⁴Ibid.

CHAPTER III

THE SILVER CORD AND "THE PROFESSIONAL WOMAN"

AS A HOWARD HEROINE

This chapter will discuss Howard's The Silver Cord and his most popular heroine, Christina. As a professional woman, Christina represents the first Howard heroine lashing out at the traditional view of womanhood.

The entire action of The Silver Cord is set in Mrs. Phelps' home, located in "one of the more mature residential developments of an Eastern city,"¹ during mid-winter of 1926. Act One opens with the entrance of David and Christina Phelps, home from Europe and newlyweds of six months. The couple is greeted by David's brother, Robert, and Robert's fiancée, Hester. David is eager to present his new wife, Christina, to his mother for the first time. Soon after Mrs. Phelps arrives, however, Christina becomes aware of Mrs. Phelps' repeated attempts to dismiss Christina and Hester from the conversation. Christina senses her new mother-in-law's acute jealousy of the young women who are involved in relationships with her sons.

¹Sidney Howard, The Silver Cord (New York: Samuel French, Inc., 1926), p. 3.

As the evening progresses, Mrs. Phelps becomes increasingly irritated by Christina's presence and is worried that Christina's job as a biologist in New York will disturb the life-long plans she has nurtured for David. Hoping that he will design a housing subdivision bearing her name, Mrs. Phelps has painstakingly outlined David's future. His surprise marriage to Christina, however, is proving to be a threat to these plans. Mrs. Phelps endeavors to maneuver Christina--as easily as she does all the other characters in the play--into blindly consenting to all of her wishes. Mrs. Phelps is taken aback when she discovers that Christina is a strong woman who is not easily preyed upon by her mother-in-law's emotional appeals of loneliness and ill-health.

Unable to sway Christina with her pitiful pleas, Mrs. Phelps turns to her younger son, Robert, for solace. Worried that she is losing her grasp upon both of her sons, Mrs. Phelps manipulates Robert into agreeing that his marriage plans to Hester are too incomplete and would result in a disastrous consequence. Robert agrees to break his engagement to Hester after his mother convinces him that his marriage will result in his mother's decline into loneliness and eventual death. Mrs. Phelps is only able to revel in her victory momentarily, as Christina announces that she is expecting a baby in four months.

Christina's birth announcement is but another indication to Mrs. Phelps that she is losing her son, David. A child

will only serve to cement David's commitment to Christina. Mrs. Phelps refuses to discuss the upcoming birth during the second act, and this behavior toward Christina is sensed by Hester. After she speaks out against Mrs. Phelps' rude behavior toward Christina, Hester becomes the brunt of Mrs. Phelps' wrath. She indicates to Robert that it is time for him to dismiss Hester as his fiancée. Hester is shattered by Robert's announcement to end the engagement.

Mrs. Phelps continues her "reign of terror" during the second act as she begins to manipulate David back into his old role as "her boy." She gradually wears down David's resistance, and soon she is picking up his clothes and tucking him into bed as if he were a child again. When Christina comes to report Hester's condition, she reveals to David his mother's role as instigator in the broken engagement. Worried that her marriage to David may be in jeopardy, she tries to explain the danger of remaining in the house. Forewarned by his mother that Christina might fabricate just such a story, David begins to have doubts about his marriage. In her defense, Christina finally speaks the previously unspoken truth: Mrs. Phelps' attitude toward her sons is an unhealthy, all-consuming desire for them to "suckle at her breast."² This discussion is interrupted as Hester is nearly drowned in her attempt to escape from the Phelps home.

²Ibid., p. 91.

The third act of The Silver Cord opens to find Mrs. Phelps fearful that her attempts to undermine Christina and Hester may be revealed. As the two girls prepare to leave the Phelps home, Christina verbally attacks Mrs. Phelps' involvement in Hester's broken engagement and her disgusting interpretation of motherhood. When Christina realizes that her speech has failed to elicit the proper response from David, she and Hester leave. Realizing that he will be "trapped" in any life that includes his mother's unhealthy interferences, David chases after the girls. Robert is left to sink deeper into his mother's maniacal obsession, lost and hopelessly smothered for life.

Howard embraces many themes and ideas in The Silver Cord, but certainly the most difficult to ignore is his Freudian theme on the concept of motherhood-gone-amuck. The relative newness of the Freudian interpretation made it quite a popular subject in the twenties, and the relationship Howard portrays to exist between Mrs. Phelps and her sons is unhealthy in its obsessive, smothering, destructive tendencies. Howard, however, "is known to have quarreled violently with the Theatre Guild because its directors insisted upon discussing it in Freudian terms, and that fact is significant of his temperamental antipathy to intellectual formulas."³ Despite his many objections to

³ Joseph Wood Krutch, The American Drama Since 1918: An Informal History (New York: George Braziller, Inc., 1957), p. 56.

the contrary, The Silver Cord represents "the most palatable and civilized presentation of the possessive-mother-and-passive-son relationship" and serves as an example of Freudian drama in many anthologies.⁴ Perhaps one may conclude that, in view of Howard's successful ability to adapt popular ideas to the stage, he may have taken the problem that such a situation would create and then "drained it" for the theatricality which it offered.

The popularity of the newly-imported Freudian interpretation was as important to the theme of The Silver Cord as was the rising social awareness of "Momism" in the American family scene. Seeking to justify themselves as being as important as the modern career women, American mothers began to consider their roles as mothers and protectors of the home as professions.⁵ Applying themselves with new vigor and a heightened sense of sentimentality toward their professions, mothers began raising their children with a renewed sense of importance. The American male's "unparalleled devotion"⁶ to his mother ("Mom"), resulted in the creation of "adult children."⁷

⁴David W. Sievers, Freud on Broadway (New York: Hermitage House, 1955), p. 167.

⁵Eric John Dingwall, The American Woman: An Historical Study (New York: Rinehart and Co., Inc., 1957), p. 134.

⁶Ibid., p. 34.

⁷Winifred L. Dusenbury, The Theme of Loneliness in Modern American Drama (Gainesville, Fla.: University of Florida Press, 1960), p. 68.

. . . their lack of maturity was reflected in what they were called. They were called "boys," they often thought of themselves as such, behaved as such and indeed often continued to be called by this word all their lives.⁸

Failing to "build a sustaining power to live creatively after their children's normal need of them had ended,"⁹ these women often became maternal tyrants. Thus, "Momism" was a term which denoted the rising tide of "professional mothers" during the twenties.

Blending the theme of "Momism" with hints of Freudian undertones, The Silver Cord debates the proper attitude toward childrearing. Howard clearly takes a stand against the form of motherhood with which Mrs. Phelps is identified. By depicting her despicable scheming and unmistakable manipulations, Howard illuminates his loathing for this type of motherhood. He bares Mrs. Phelps to the audience, revealing her disgusting sentimentality and false physical ailments, stripping her intentions and motivations for all to witness. The values of motherhood which she represents are decidedly unhealthy. Using her sons to replace a marriage in which she found no satisfaction, and then enveloping their lives with a love that is "sterile," Mrs. Phelps attempts to re-capture a sense of self-importance through her sons:

⁸Ibid., p. 139.

⁹Dusenbury, The Theme of Loneliness, p. 68.

MRS. PHELPS: . . . Only a woman who has lived without romance knows how to value it. . . . That isn't true of my life either. I didn't live without romance. I found it where you say it doesn't belong . . . in motherhood. I found it in my two babies. In Dave first and in Robin four years later. I found it in doing for them myself all those things which, nowadays, nurses and governesses are hired to do.¹⁰

Referring to them as her "Arab steeds," her "jealous beaux," and her "two great men," Mrs. Phelps envisions her two sons as virile suitors competing for her attention and favor. This "romance" is reciprocated by both sons; in a sense, David courts his mother's attentions while Robert jealously battles David to be the sole recipient of her affections.

Robert, the weaker of the two sons, is decidedly more affected by the competition for his mother's affections. Robert becomes bitter over his mother's returning interest in David, and he willingly does anything she requests in hopes of replacing David as the center of her interests. Robert's suffering, caused by his mother's manipulatory abuse, is abundantly more apparent than David's. He sees his mother as the ideal mate, using her as a "yardstick" by which he evaluates other women: "I wonder if I'm the marrying kind. Failing the possibility of marrying you. I mean your double."¹¹ Robert goes to the extent of making a bizarre comparison of himself and his mother: "We're just like Macbeth and Lady Macbeth, aren't we? . . . We've got

¹⁰Howard, The Silver Cord, p. 89.

¹¹Ibid., p. 27.

into a mess we can't ever get out of. We'll have to get in deeper and deeper until we go mad."¹²

In keeping with Howard's flair for irony, The Silver Cord is plentifully endowed with ironic situations. Most ironic of all is the fact that Hester, a young girl recovering from an apparent "breakdown," happens to be the most level-headed, calm and rational character of all. Throughout all the debating over the proper methods in which to raise children, Hester remains uninvolved, maintaining that it is best to "Have 'em. Love 'em. And leave 'em be."¹³ Hester's emotional outburst, duly induced by Mrs. Phelps' deceptions, seems to be a reasonable reaction to the stress she is under. As Hester leaves the house, we see that her mental health and sense of humor are intact as she announces her future plans, "I'm going to marry an orphan."¹⁴

The ending of The Silver Cord is typical of Howard's use of twisted ironic fates. As David rushes after his wife, Robert is left to become enveloped by his mother's possessive love. This is ironic in that from the very first moment Robert is introduced, he appears to be the son who has the clearest opportunity to break free of Mrs. Phelps' clutches. She seems far more interested in

¹²Ibid., p. 77.

¹³Ibid., p. 13.

¹⁴Ibid., p. 91.

"trapping" David, rather than Robert. Yet, at the end of the play, it is Robert who remains to become a captive of her repellent love.

The dramatic construction of The Silver Cord may be Howard's best work. Each scene builds from a prior series of emotional crises, which lead to three stunning, if somewhat melodramatic, curtains. Act One builds from Christina's arrival, to her alienation from her mother-in-law, to her physical separation from her husband. Meanwhile, Howard uses the scene between Robert and his mother in the first act to establish Mrs. Phelps' pattern of peculiar behavior. Christina's announcement of her pregnancy affirms her hold on David, testifies to Mrs. Phelps' loosening hold over David, and so startles Mrs. Phelps that she spills her cocktail. (As David Sievers remarks, "One might be tempted to call it a Freudian spill."¹⁵)

The second act, evolving smoothly from the events of the first, continues Christina and Hester's complete alienation from Robert and David. The first scene of this act provides Christina with the facts behind Hester's broken engagement. The second scene illuminates the unnatural relationship which exists between David and his mother. Howard's directions, calling for a connecting door between the mother and son's bedrooms, further demonstrate this relationship as Mrs. Phelps seductively creeps through the

¹⁵Sievers, Freud on Broadway, p. 167.

door on four occasions. Hester's near-drowning ends the act on an upbeat climax, foreshadowing the inevitable "showdown" between Christina and Mrs. Phelps.

Howard allows Christina little time to cut to the heart of the problem with Mrs. Phelps' ideas of motherhood in Act Three. Christina's argument, which exposes Mrs. Phelps as the meddlesome, maladjusted woman that she is, fails to have an immediate impact upon her husband. David, however, comes to his senses and follows after Christina, affirming Howard's position against "professional motherhood."

There can remain little doubt that the construction of The Silver Cord is superior to that of Howard's other plays:

The Silver Cord is put together with better plan, more forceful purpose, than any other on the Howard list. . . . Its acts open upon excellent notes, humorous, natural, inviting and each of them close upon ringing, right, tight drama. The talk is fresh in its comedy and forthright in its denunciations, lithe at its engrossing business of putting things plainly, craftily, understandingly.¹⁶

It is difficult to overlook the fact that the endings of Acts Two and Three seem slightly extreme and overly-melodramatic. Yet, as Brooks Atkinson aptly points out, "If you were attacking motherhood in 1926 you had to be sure to kill your opposition."¹⁷

¹⁶Gilbert W. Gabriel, quoted in Montrose J. Moses and John Mason Brown, eds., The American Theatre as Seen by Its Critics: 1752-1934 (New York: W. W. Norton and Co., Inc., 1934), p. 315.

¹⁷Brooks Atkinson and Albert Hirschfeld, The Lively Years (New York: Association Press, 1973), p. 51.

In spite of his excellent dramatic construction, Howard was criticized for his treatment of the subject matter. Critics charged that he had become "none too impartial,"¹⁸ which reduced The Silver Cord to a debate. Howard's attempts to clarify his position in the conflict between the role of the traditional mother and the role of the new modern woman had forced the play to "suffer from preachment:"¹⁹

What makes it effective theatre contrives at the same time to make it less profound as art. What makes it more theatrical makes it less deep. This strong shoveling of effects, this underscoring of points, drives the matter of this play over the footlights with a bang and sets the simplest people in the audience to debating. . . . On a deeper basis Mr. Howard had for a time a fine case, but as the play progressed his instance lost a good deal of its point by being pushed so vivaciously.²⁰

The play is crippled by Howard's "lack of depth,"²¹ or superficial approach toward the subject matter. The Silver Cord, however, still stands as "one of the best social-thesis dramas written in America."²²

¹⁸ John Mason Brown, Upstage: The American Theatre in Performance (New York: W. W. Norton and Co., Inc., 1930), p. 57.

¹⁹ Walter J. Meserve, "Sidney Howard and the Social Drama of the Twenties," Modern Drama 6 (December 1963):259.

²⁰ Stark Young, Immortal Shadows: A Book of Dramatic Criticism (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1948), p. 78.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Meserve, "Sidney Howard and the Social Drama," p. 259.

Howard presents some interesting characterizations in The Silver Cord, and once again, his strongest character work seems to be present within his female portraits. Mrs. Phelps, the antagonist, is drawn by Howard to be a woman consisting of a mass of contradictions. She boasts of her ability to "see into people," of her philanthropic efforts on behalf of the community (her involvement as a patron of the library and her position on the hospital board), her pride in her religious affiliation, and her knowledge of world literature. Each of these statements is contrary to the facts represented in the play: her insight to "see into people" is blinded by the prejudices she maintains about them; her interest in the community's welfare is motivated by purely self-serving intentions; she relies on her faith only when it serves her immediate interests to do so; and her knowledge of literature seems to be confined to The Little Flowers of St. Francis, little more than fairy tales. Most ironic of all is the fact that she does not realize her own loneliness and "inner emptiness,"²³ yet she continually uses it as a weapon to enlist the sympathies of her sons.²⁴

As Howard's representation of traditional motherhood, Mrs. Phelps is drawn to extremes. She jealously protects her sons from any contact with other women, as she eventually separates Robert from Hester, and attempts the same with

²³Dusenbury, The Theme of Loneliness, p. 70.

²⁴Ibid.

David and Christina. In her attempts to separate her sons from their women, it is difficult to overlook the Freudian elements. She discourages any form of physical contact between her sons and the women. She maneuvers each couple to maintain as much physical distance between them as possible. At tea, she arranges the seating to exclude their contact, and later manages to place Christina in a bedroom all the way down the hall from David's room. In order to extinguish any remaining doubts about this relationship, Howard constructs the evening sequence in Act Two in which Mrs. Phelps uses her connecting bedroom door to have "little talks" with her son.

Mrs. Phelps uses guilt as the major weapon to attack her sons' defenses--what little there are--and prey upon their sympathies. Constant reminders of the suffering she endured, so that they might have a better life, serve her in times of conflict:

MRS. PHELPS: . . . I have always taken the stand that my boys could do no wrong and that it is the proper stand for a mother to take. Didn't I always side with you in your school scrapes? Even against the masters? Even when you were clearly in the wrong? Of course, I did!²⁵

Mrs. Phelps manipulates David and Robert expertly by playing on their sympathies in this manner, and she is not above inventing an illness in order to attain her goals:

MRS. PHELPS: What I'm wondering now, though, is what I'm to do with Robin? And I'm afraid you've got to help me with him.

²⁵Howard, The Silver Cord, pp. 55-56.

DAVID: I'll do anything I can.

MRS. PHELPS: If I were well and able to stand the things I used to stand before my heart went back on me--because it has gone back on me--and my blood pressure got so high . . . I shouldn't trouble you. But as I am, and with Robin on the verge of a complete breakdown . . .²⁶

Mrs. Phelps completes the scenario by grasping at her heart or dashing off for her smelling salts in times of stress. It becomes clear that Mrs. Phelps has always used this false state of ill-health to control her sons; however, she has failed to convince her doctor of her illness. The doctor tells Christina and Hester that Mrs. Phelps is in perfect health, and that her "illness" is an act.

Portraying a character such as Mrs. Phelps places an actress in a precarious situation. The role of the vicious mother-in-law is a difficult one for any actress, and the ability to lend credibility to the role is a must. In the case of the Theatre Guild's original production of The Silver Cord, the actress who portrayed Mrs. Phelps had talent to perform in this manner. Primarily a comedic actress, Miss Laura Hope Crews turned in a performance which served to "scare the living daylights out of proper people in the audience."²⁷ The play's success seemed to be hinged upon the effectiveness of this one role; "It is difficult to estimate what the effect of The Silver Cord might have

²⁶Ibid., p. 80.

²⁷Atkinson and Hirschfeld, The Lively Years, p. 51.

been, had the central character, Mrs. Phelps, been interpreted by an actress of less skill than Miss Crews."²⁸

The male characters of The Silver Cord represent one of the play's weaknesses. Both Robert and David are easily manipulated by their mother, which leads to an important question: are these two men reward enough for the women of this play to battle so intensely for them? In the case of Hester, the exposure of Robert's infantile weaknesses serves to make him an undesirable mate. In fact, one might consider Hester fortunate that she discovered this before she married him. Though David is able to sport a strong facade against his mother's attentions, he eventually weakens to her persistence. David becomes powerless, as he watches his mother and Christina fight to be the master of his destiny. In view of the fact that "in drama, a conflict is increased by the importance of the object of the battle,"²⁹ The Silver Cord is weakened by the male characters' lack of strength and resistance. Neither son is worth the effort that these women put forth in order to "attain" them.

Within the character of Christina, Howard creates the consummate Howard heroine. She is not only courageous, independent, and pragmatic, but she is also intelligent and

²⁸Arthur Hobson Quinn, A History of the American Drama: From the Civil War to the Present Day (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, Inc., 1936), p. 232.

²⁹*Ibid.*, p. 233.

career-minded. Christina represents, as a lady scientist, "a newer role in the 1920s and one which properly demands conviction and determination."³⁰

As a "completely modern woman,"³¹ Christina appears to mirror Howard's view of the professional woman of the twenties. The first introduction to Christina provides an interesting insight into this Howard viewpoint:

She is tall, slender, grave, honest, shy, intelligent, most trusting and, when need be, courageous. She has a scientist's detachment and curiosity and these serve oddly to emphasize a very individual womanliness which is far removed from the accepted feminine.³²

Howard emphasizes that the very thing that sets Christina apart from the traditionally acceptable definition of femininity--her "professionalism"--is what serves to make her feminine. This view is contrary to the stereotypical attitude toward career women which Mrs. Phelps echoes: "I expected Christina to be hard and cold."³³ Howard, unlike many of his contemporaries, was a man who believed that a woman's career, or profession, did little to change her identity as a woman.

As a woman of the twenties, Christina's occupation as a biologist is found to be somewhat progressive by many

³⁰Sidney Howard White, Sidney Howard (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1977), p. 134.

³¹Ibid., p. 72.

³²Sidney Howard, The Silver Cord, p. 5.

³³Ibid., p. 58.

standards of the time. Even though colleges for women had been established in America in the mid-1800s, attaining professional training and licensing in the field of medicine was extremely difficult and rare. In many cases, women who sought careers in the professional fields often fared better in the European countries, as in the case of Christina's German education. Christina's job offer from the Rockefeller Institute serves as her acceptance, as a woman, into what was primarily a man's field.³⁴

Being a professional woman, however, Christina is forced to battle the opinions and biases of those, such as Mrs. Phelps, who fail to understand the fact that women are capable of maintaining a career. Mrs. Phelps treats Christina as if she were some type of side-show oddity, remarking, "I've never seen a lady scientist before."³⁵ Unable to fathom Christina's interest in biology as anything more than a "hobby," Mrs. Phelps ignorantly offers the local hospital's laboratory as some sort of comparison to the type of facilities present at the Rockefeller Institute:

MRS. PHELPS: I'll take you down in the morning and introduce you to Dr. McClintock, homeopathic, but very agreeable, and he'll show you our laboratory. We've just got in a new microscope, too. Oh, a very fine one! One the high school didn't want anymore. You'll simply love our laboratory. Oh, you will!

³⁴Eleanor Flexner, Century of Struggle: The Women's Rights Movement in the United States (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press, 1959), p. 114.

³⁵Howard, The Silver Cord, p. 14.

It has a splendid sink with hot and cold running water and quite a good gas stove because it is also the nurses' washroom and diet kitchen. And you'll be allowed to putter around as much as you like whenever it isn't in use by the nurses or real doctors.³⁶

Mrs. Phelps' use of the phrase "real doctors," reveals that she does not consider Christina a professional, or that women in general are capable of functioning as professionals in demanding fields such as medicine.

Through the years of programming her sense of duty as a mother into her sons, Mrs. Phelps has made her sons aware of her anti-feminist opinions. She does not believe that a woman who is committed to a career can also be committed to a marriage or raising children. Representing another fabled bias of the modern woman, Mrs. Phelps warns Robert as to the consequences of becoming involved with women such as Christina:

MRS. PHELPS: . . . Let Dave find out for himself what he's done. She won't be able to hold him. She won't have time for a home and children. She won't take anymore interest in him than Hester takes in you. . . . I want to save you from throwing yourself away as Dave has.³⁷

According to Mrs. Phelps, a career-minded or modern woman would be incapable of providing a proper home for a husband or child.

Mrs. Phelps is intimidated by Christina's profession, feeling inferior in comparison to Christina's educational and social accomplishments. Though Christina never presses

³⁶Ibid., p. 22.

³⁷Ibid., pp. 27-28.

Mrs. Phelps to acknowledge them, Mrs. Phelps is constantly aware of Christina's superiority and is threatened by her presence:

MRS. PHELPS: . . . I think as I talk to you, that I belong to a dead age. I wonder if you think that? In my day, we considered a girl immensely courageous and independent if she taught school or gave music lessons. Nowadays, girls sell real estate and become scientists and think nothing of it. Give us our due . . . we girls who did not go out into the world. We made a great profession which I fear may be in some danger of vanishing from the face of the earth. We made a profession of motherhood. That may sound old fashioned to you. Believe me, it had its value. I was trained to be a wife that I might be a mother.³⁸

Mrs. Phelps compensates for her feelings of inferiority by constantly explaining the situations which thrust her into motherhood, rather than "out into the world." She blames her up-bringing and her unsuccessful marriage as the factors responsible for making her into the type of mother that she is.

Even though she despises the type of motherhood Mrs. Phelps practices, Christina does not condemn her. She feels a great deal of compassion toward Mrs. Phelps for the difficult life she has been forced to lead. In spite of Mrs. Phelps' comments about Christina and her career--such as, "I don't like to say 'profession' because that has such a sinister sound for a woman,"³⁹ which is a subtle parallel to prostitution as a "profession"--Christina does

³⁸Ibid., p. 19.

³⁹Ibid., p. 21.

not speak out against Mrs. Phelps until she learns of her diabolical role in Hester's broken engagement. This stands as testimony that Christina applies the same level-headed, scientific detachment to her personal opinions as she would to an unproven laboratory hypothesis.

Christina's ability to remain in charge of her emotions and unbiased, allows her to form an accurate opinion about Mrs. Phelps and her relationship with her sons. This is not to say, however, that Christina does not become emotionally involved over the prospect of losing her husband. Indeed, Christina fights for David the best way she knows how; she presents all the evidence against Mrs. Phelps like a courtroom lawyer, leaving the audience to render their own verdict upon her.

CHRISTINA: . . . Look at your sons, if you don't believe me. You've destroyed Robert. You've swallowed him up until there's nothing left of him but an effete make-believe. Now he's gone melancholy mad and disgraced himself. And Dave! Poor Dave! The best he can do is dodge the more desperate kinds of unhappiness by pretending! How he survived at all is beyond me. If you're choking a bit on David, now, that's my fault because you'd have swallowed him up, too, if I hadn't come along to save him! Talk about cannibals! You and your kind beat any cannibal I've ever heard of! And what makes you doubly deadly and dangerous is that people admire you and your kind. They actually admire you! You professional mothers!⁴⁰

With all the "candor of the new woman of 1926,"⁴¹ Christina proceeds to settle the "David question." When David fails to be moved by Christina's blatant presentation, she says

⁴⁰Ibid., pp. 87-88.

⁴¹Atkinson and Hirschfeld, The Lively Years, p. 49.

her farewells to him. Typical of the courageous Howard heroine, Christina remains steadfast to her convictions, and seizes the only pragmatic opportunity available to her.

Christina embodies the most strong-willed characteristics of all the Howard heroines. From her first meeting with Mrs. Phelps, Christina quickly realizes that Mrs. Phelps is accustomed to having her way. Rather than argue with Mrs. Phelps about David's future as an architect, Christina merely explains the plans she and David have already outlined. Though Mrs. Phelps tries to maneuver Christina into her plans, Christina remains steadfast to those plans and goals she has previously set. Christina intends on living in New York, working at the Rockefeller Institute, and seeing David employed with an important architectural firm. By the end of the play, there is little doubt that Christina has attained exactly that which she had planned.

Christina's strength of will and determination are clearly portrayed by the fight which she initiates in order to prevent Mrs. Phelps from possessing David. She risks insulting and shocking his mother and brother in order to protect her husband and her unborn child. Protecting her interests, as well as those of Hester, Christina goes into battle against Mrs. Phelps. In the middle of their heated conflict, Howard describes Christina as "Joan of Arc raising the siege of Orleans."⁴²

⁴²Howard, The Silver Cord, p. 87.

Within the character of Christina, Howard creates such a strongly independent woman that he very nearly strains her credibility. Howard uses Christina to represent a drastic contrast to Mrs. Phelps' ideas and philosophies. Yet, Christina and Mrs. Phelps share a common strength of wills. It is the superior strength of Christina's will, not David's, which frees him from his mother's clutches. In this respect, David has merely changed keepers. Married to a strong woman such as Christina, it appears that David will continue to live his life under female domination of one type or another.⁴³

Christina combines the other traits of the characteristic Howard heroine, yet provides a new and interesting insight into Howard's view of the modern woman; Christina embodies the strength of will and determination necessary in order to survive as a professional woman of the twenties. Like the other Howard heroines, Christina finds that being a modern woman of the twenties is difficult at times. Yet, unlike the other Howard heroines, Christina does not sacrifice her independent attitudes and philosophies due to the fact that opinions and biases of others create hardships.

The Silver Cord, said to have been based on either Howard's family or that of his wife, Clare,⁴⁴ was produced

⁴³Alan S. Downer, Fifty Years of American Drama: 1900 1950 (Chicago: Henry Regnery Co., 1951), p. 59.

⁴⁴White, Sidney Howard, p. 78.

by the Theatre Guild on December 20, 1926. Playing for a total of 112 performances, The Silver Cord was a welcome success for Howard. Said by Howard to be a "wicked, humorous tirade against mothers,"⁴⁵ the play created an immediate sensation. Its popularity, due mostly to its sensitive thematic elements, testifies to Howard's ability to capture the popular ideas of the day and translate them onto the stage.

⁴⁵Ibid.

CHAPTER IV

LUCKY SAM MCCARVER AND THE "TARNISHED" HEROINE

Howard's heroines, until the creation of Carlotta Ashe in Lucky Sam McCarver, represented the favorable side of femininity, with qualities which primarily consisted of courage, honesty, and strong-willed independence. With this formula, Howard created many lasting and popular characters which helped to broaden the range of the female role within the American theatre of the twenties. There was, however, a small category of his leading women who did not lend themselves easily to the noble variety of the Howard heroine. Atypical of his previous leading women, Carlotta Ashe is a prime example of this version of the Howard heroine. This chapter will examine Lucky Sam McCarver, its revealing preface, and those qualities which serve to make Carlotta the "tarnished" heroine.

Lucky Sam McCarver, or as it is subtitled, Four Episodes in the Rise of a New Yorker, is set in New York City in 1925. The play consists of three acts, the final act containing two scenes. The action takes place in New York, with the exception of the first scene of the third act which takes place at the Palazzo Strá in Venice. The time elapsed from the first to the last act is

approximately fifteen months.

The first act takes place on New Year's Eve at the Club Tuileries. Owned by Sam McCarver, the Club Tuileries is what might have been described as a "swanky" speakeasy. Shortly after the play opens, we encounter Sam McCarver drinking a toast with the neighborhood police sergeant and a member of the Prohibition Unit. Apparently visiting the club in order to collect "their regular graft,"¹ the two officials toast Sam McCarver's success in operating an "on the up and up"² club. The club's clientele is a mixture of hearty drinkers and a generous collection of wealthy and influential people. As Sam succinctly states, "We get all kinds."³ It is, however, the population of the upper class which is responsible for the Club's reputation. Sam boasts of his successful rise from his impoverished background to his lucrative career as a nightclub operator. Sam's ambition, however, has not been completely achieved as he explains his desire to have the one thing his newfound wealth is unable to provide: that quality of respectability which is generally the result of wealth and breeding. It is that sense of social status which many of his customers possess that seems to have eluded Sam's rise

¹Brooks Atkinson and Albert Hirschfeld, The Lively Years (New York: Association Press, 1973), p. 46.

²Sidney Howard, Lucky Sam McCarver, in Representative American Dramas, ed. Montrose J. Moses (Boston: Little, Brown, and Co., 1939), p. 680.

³Ibid.

to success. Aware that money alone cannot provide this elusive quality, Sam plans to marry into this social circle. The candidate which he has chosen to aid him in his ascent to "respectability" is Carlotta Ashe. A somewhat notorious young woman, Carlotta possesses all the qualifications which Sam requires: she is rich, well-bred, beautiful, and a fashionable member of the society to which he aspires. Unafraid that his background and rough edges will render him any social handicaps, Sam remains determined to propose to Carlotta at the first opportunity.

Carlotta enters with a loud and drunken crew of comrades, and then is ushered to Sam's private office. Having just returned from Atlantic City with her "friend," Monty Garside, Carlotta is eager to begin her New Year's celebrations. Sam nervously tries to steer the conversation onto the subject of marriage, but Carlotta quickly dismisses the subject. Wounding Sam, Carlotta trots off to the party which Sam has arranged for her and her boisterous friends. Moments later a shot is heard, and Carlotta's escort, Monty Garside, is found murdered. Realizing that Carlotta's involvement in a crime--especially one taking place in a speakeasy--would endanger her reputation and ruin his ultimate plans for taking advantage of her social status, Sam quickly constructs an elaborate story to protect her. Sam covers up Carlotta's involvement by saying that he and Garside had quarrelled, and that he shot Garside in self-defense. The act concludes as the investigation into

Garside's murder continues.

The second act finds Sam and Carlotta married and living in a Park Avenue apartment. Sam has become a successful businessman on Wall Street, and his investments in the stock exchange have earned him the title "lucky" Sam McCarver. Carlotta appears to have married Sam out of some sense of gratitude, although she maintains that she is in love with him. Her mad, party-going days seem to have ended, and her marriage to Sam has forced her to become a social recluse. She has arrived at the realization that she will never be able to alter Sam's crass exterior, and social refinement will always remain beyond his comprehension. Carlotta is forced to face another reality: her free-spending ways have nearly depleted her finances. In order to replenish her financial situation, Carlotta is forced to accept Burton Burton's proposal. Burton, custodian of her finances and a devout admirer, promises to reinstate her finances and remain silent about Sam's falsification of the evidence the night of Garside's murder. In return, Carlotta must secure Burton a position in Sam's latest Wall Street venture. Carlotta accepts Burton's terms, partially to protect Sam from facing perjury charges and imprisonment, and partly to protect her own reputation.

In order to get Sam to agree to allow Burton in on his latest business venture, Carlotta must give Sam the use of her family name for the new company. Sam revels in

the prospects his company will have with an old and respected name such as Ellis. In his excited state, however, Sam accidentally reveals that his primary motivations behind marrying Carlotta were the advantages her name and reputation offered him. Carlotta, horrified by Sam's revelation, grows resentful toward him.

The first scene of the third act presents a strained portrait of some fashionable personalities of Venice society. Visiting her aunt, Carlotta is no longer determined to hide Sam from her family and acquaintances. She has apparently concluded that the cruelest way to strike back at Sam is to unleash him upon the society of which he so urgently desires to be a part. Since he does not possess the refinement necessary to function in this class, Sam would ultimately become an embarrassment to himself. Carlotta merely passes time entertaining her friends, as her resentment of Sam turns to a cold loathing. Sam's social incompatibility becomes more and more apparent to him, as does his impatience with the idleness and arrogance of Carlotta's "set." Unable to tolerate his unpleasant surroundings a moment longer, Sam intends to drag Carlotta back home with him. An argument ensues, and Sam becomes so enraged with Carlotta that he nearly strangles her. Archie, Carlotta's cousin, intervenes and Sam angrily stomps off for New York.

The final scene of Lucky Sam McCarver finds Carlotta ill and near poverty, desperately trying to finance a trip

to Europe. Sam, having heard of her illness and misfortunes, has arranged with Archie to meet Carlotta and offer her a monthly allowance which will relieve her difficulties. Carlotta refuses to accept the money Sam offers, and the two continue until an animated argument begins. Carlotta desperately grasps for her heart--Howard established in every prior scene that her heart was weak--and dies. Sam continues arguing his point until Archie informs him that Carlotta has died. Sam stands for a moment looking at her body, and then rushes off to avoid being late for an afternoon business appointment.

In Lucky Sam McCarver Howard appears to focus his theme upon the clash of two people from social extremes. Carlotta's breeding and status serve to place her in extreme opposition to that of Sam's social incompatibility:

It set out to present some detached episodes from the lives of an imaginary man and an imaginary woman who should, between them, represent the two most spectacular extremes of the American social pendulum as it swings, in all its shoddiness of standard and philosophy, across the handsome horizon of this handsome city of New York.⁴

To better enhance the differences between the two characters, Howard "stacked the cards"⁵ against them:

I gave my man an overweening ambition for material success. I gave my woman an indomitable passion for material pleasure. I made my man both hale and shrewd. I gave my woman a body as inept as her mind. I put my man in his class and my woman in hers, and I arranged them in a pattern which allowed me to show:

⁴Howard, Preface to Lucky Sam McCarver, p. viii.

⁵Ibid., p. ix.

first, the man in his world, with her comment upon it; second, the pair of them together; third, the woman in her world, with his comment upon it; and last, the pair of them forever separate.⁶

Howard succeeded in creating the clash of two people from different social levels. The contrast each character provides the other is so acute that there was "nothing that either one could say or do or desire or believe that did not outrage the other."⁷

Like They Knew What They Wanted, Lucky Sam McCarver deals with the idea of prohibition during the twenties. The play takes the audience directly into the speakeasy of 1925 and lends some valuable insights into the behavior of this era:

In 1925 the fashionable speakeasy was more democratic than the traditional saloon for a basic reason: It brought the upper classes into contact with the normal drunks. Prohibition had made drinking popular. Therefore the speakeasy seemed romantic because it combined lawlessness with the drinking of whiskey smuggled in from enlightened nations.⁸

The differences between Sam and Carlotta, previously noted by Howard, become highlighted when set against the conflicting elements of a speakeasy.

The "lawlessness" element of the speakeasy lends itself well to Lucky Sam McCarver as a background for its violence, as well as making a descriptive statement about the twenties:

⁶Ibid.

⁷Ibid.

⁸Atkinson and Hirschfeld, The Lively Years, p. 45.

That tense first act with its violent incident is an excellent portrait of the depraved mood of the twenties--graphic, extravagant, reckless, dissipated: also corrupt on a colossal scale from top to bottom. Prohibition had made a lawbreaker of everyone who had any self-respect.⁹

Howard's portrayal of the prohibition official in Lucky Sam McCarver reflects this view of the corruption present in the twenties. This particular portrait stands as evidence toward Howard's anti-prohibitionist's beliefs.

Lucky Sam McCarver's failure can be traced to several sources. The play contained several serious faults which marred its effectiveness. The play lacked a carefully developed plot and well-defined characters, and contained many structural weaknesses. It is difficult to determine which flaw is responsible for the play's failure, but it seems reasonable that one might assume the combination of these faults made it nearly impossible for the play to succeed.

Howard originally intended Lucky Sam McCarver to be a "dramatic biography," and his main purpose was to reveal the characters of two diametrically opposed individuals. His method, "to get along on incident no more vivid and no more reasonable or inevitable than that which grew out of reactions of the two chief characters,"¹⁰ consisted of viewing his two characters arbitrarily in four different moods. Howard chose to allow the characters to function

⁹Ibid., p. 46.

¹⁰Howard, Preface to Lucky Sam McCarver, p. viii.

without a carefully designed plot, merely reacting to one another. Eleanor Flexner explains the result of this approach:

In form it is less a play than a series of one-acters; transitions are sudden and baffling, not only because the dialogue is often elliptical to the point of obscurity but because they are totally unprepared for. New characters are introduced, old ones drop out, as desultorily as in real life; the result is a quality of haphazardness out of place in the theatre. And the author's complete renunciation of any aim beyond that of putting two characters on the stage and letting them work out their relationship to its disastrous conclusions, robs the play of a badly needed point.¹¹

Howard recognizes these faults in his preface, which appears as a lengthy explanation and justification of his intentions for Lucky Sam McCarver.

Those who misunderstood 'Lucky Sam McCarver' found nothing in it to enjoy--neither plot, idea, hero, nor heroine. Well, I can only strike a defiant note in pleading guilty to the omission of those elements. There is no plot in biography. Furthermore, no one in life (saint or fundamentalist, perhaps excepted) is ever quite a hero or ever quite a villain. As a thinker, I am neither profound nor original. The absence of idea seems, therefore, to be just one of those things.¹²

Whether or not Howard is fully justified in creating "dramatic biography," it seems fairly safe to assume that the audience of his time needed more than random events and happenings in order to sustain them.

¹¹Eleanor Flexner, American Playwrights: 1918-1938 (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1938), pp. 34-35.

¹²Howard, Preface to Lucky Sam McCarver, p. viii.

The ending of Lucky Sam McCarver has another flaw which is difficult to ignore. After a brief argument with Sam, Carlotta dies. Although her ill-health and weak heart had been mentioned previous to this point, her death does not appear to be sufficiently justified, nor does her death serve any purpose. Carlotta's death makes an effective bit of theatricality, but as Barrett Clark aptly notes, her death is "effective, but so obvious."¹³ The problem between Carlotta and Sam was one that could be resolved, and in this sense the conclusion of the play "indicates nothing, except that Sam is a certain kind of a person, which we have known all along, and that Carlotta had a weak heart."¹⁴

Paradoxically, Howard's ability to create believable characters appears to have handicapped the effectiveness of Lucky Sam McCarver. His aim, to create "two people as close to life"¹⁵ as he possibly could, is achieved so completely as to be considered among the weaknesses of the play:

I was resolved, for example, that my characters should, throughout the play, do and say what they would, as people have done and said, rather than what the dramatic situation might seem to require of them. I did not, furthermore, make any attempt at a theatrical simplification of the motives of my characters.

¹³Barrett H. Clark, "Several New Plays for Broadway," Drama 16 (December 1925):90.

¹⁴Flexner, American Playwrights, p. 36.

¹⁵Howard, Preface to Lucky Sam McCarver, p. xii.

No one, in life, ever does anything much for any single reason; I cannot see why people in plays should be as single-minded as audiences like to have them. In good plays they never are. In many great plays they can be made to appear so by a simple process of stupid acting and directing.¹⁶

So real and lifelike were Sam and Carlotta, that they failed as theatrical elements. As Arthur Hobson Quinn remarks, the characterization of Sam was so lifelike that it was "difficult to sympathize with him, and the last few moments of the play in which he leaves Carlotta's dead body to go to a business appointment, while probably revealing his character exactly, left the audience in revolt."¹⁷

Of the two major characterizations in Lucky Sam McCarver, Sam is the more developed and well-defined. Sam has one goal in life: to succeed. He wants to be a wealthy and respectable member of the elite. Sam's background, as told by his doorman, Dan, was a disadvantaged one:

DAN: . . . I first knowed Sam when he was no better'n a runt, rustlin' drunks an' pickin' up towels for a Turkish bath in Hoboken. It was me started him out in life, gettin' him th' first respectable job he ever had, washin' glasses for a democratic bar on Grand Street.¹⁸

Dan continues to describe Sam's ascent to the Club Tuileries as a difficult one:

DAN: It was me put him into th' fightin' game, makin' him me promoter an' manager in th' days of me prime.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Arthur Hobson Quinn, A History of the American Drama: From the Civil War to the Present Day (New York: Appleton-Crofts, 1936), p. 230.

¹⁸ Howard, Lucky Sam McCarver in Moses, Representative American Dramas, p. 678.

It was me set him up in the first place he ever run for himself, which was a business lunch on Liberty Street, as ye know very well.¹⁹

From his humble origins, we assume that Sam moved successfully from owning one "place" to another, until the time we meet him as the owner of the Club Tuileries. The moderate success which Sam has attained, however, serves to fuel his desire for more.

Sam's first appearance in the play reflects both his dubious background, and his particular sense of flair which may be partially responsible for his success:

Sam McCarver enters precipitately by the door from the lobby. He is thirty-six years old, handsome, husky, and not much the worse for wear. There are things about him which set him apart from the rest of men and well above the men with whom he habitually associates. The ordinary refinements of good people, however--Sam doesn't know, or doesn't trouble about them. His fur coat is too furry and you and I wouldn't wear our hat quite so extravagantly. And, when he strips off the coat, he discloses a taste in jewelry which, for a man, is bizarre and then some. As to his manner, he is genial without ever stooping to the conventions of the glad hand. Innate force and instinctive wariness would always save him from that.²⁰

Other than lacking a conservative taste in clothing, Sam does not appear to be a disgusting or repulsive thug. The only quality which Sam appears to possess to an unadmirable extreme is his intense thirst for social position and wealth. "From the start of the play," Howard states, "Sam is doomed by the violence of his worship of success. . . ."²¹

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid., p. 679.

²¹ Howard, Preface to Lucky Sam McCarver, p. xiii.

From Sam's point of view, the fulfillment of one's life is directly proportionate to the amount of power, wealth and success he has accumulated. Sam began his life from the bottom rung of the ladder, and he will spend the rest of his life enviously looking to that rung posed over him. Sam realizes, however, that money and power do not provide an individual with style.

Sam's answer to his problem reveals a great deal about him. His choice to marry a woman whose name and social position are her most attractive elements, proves the lengths Sam is willing to go to in order to have the respectability he seeks. His ruthless quest for success is condensed by Howard as being "a series of opportunities he never missed."²²

Sam's single-minded motivation serves as one example of the many differences between himself and Carlotta. His overwhelming drive to obtain power is surpassed by Carlotta's lack of drive, motivation, or goal. Howard emphasized their differences in the play's preface:

If he cared deeply about the power money brings, she thought of thousands as convenient antidotes for creditors. If he cut his past off consciously as something of which he was ashamed, she unconsciously leaned upon hers as her sole support in the world. If his standards and conduct and conversation entertained and irritated and infuriated her, her conduct and conversation and standards puzzled and horrified him. If he kept his eye always on the main chance, she never considered the consequences or counted the cost of anything. If he faced every event for what

²²Ibid.

there might be in it of profit to himself, she evaded every event for what there might be in it of responsibility. If her life seemed intensely desirable and valuable and significant to him, his life seemed to her no more than an amusement and a stimulant.²³

The conflicting qualities and personalities of Sam and Carlotta are highlighted by yet another difference: Sam's portrait is a considerable improvement in comparison to that of Carlotta.

Howard's portrait of Carlotta is sketchily drawn, and her motivations do not appear as transparent, or as singular as in the case of Sam. "Carlotta is rich, high in society, pleasure-mad, world-weary and thoughtless," contends critic Alan Downer, and she is "very much a product of her time and her milieu."²⁴

Carlotta represents a different type of Howard heroine in that she fails to meet the characteristic standards of many of his female portraits. While his typical heroine is strong and courageous, Carlotta is vain, weak, and selfish. She reacts quickly and impulsively to each situation, where "thoughtful," "logical," or "pragmatic" generally tend to be characteristic adjectives for his women. Whereas Howard's heroines typically select a goal and strive toward it, Carlotta's energies are static and unproductive. She cannot ascertain what it is she wants from life, and therefore, never achieves anything from her life.

²³Ibid., p. xii.

²⁴Alan S. Downer, Fifty Years of the American Drama: 1900-1950 (Chicago: Henry Regnery Co., 1951), p. 48.

Like a spoiled adolescent, she has no concept of the future and lives her life from day to day.

Howard's introduction of Carlotta provides some interesting insights into his opinion of this type of modern woman of the twenties:

The box door is opened by CARLOTTA ASHE and we see this bone of contention. Some of us wonder and some of us don't. No one denies that she is a masterpiece, for it has taken centuries to produce her. Nothing so finely fashioned ever could come before the complete maturity of a race. Indeed CARLOTTA is, and has always been, a sort of danger-signal which nature hangs out to warn a race of its decadence.

There is nothing tangibly wrong with her and yet she is, in some curious and intangible way, a little tarnished. Her great blood is there, though, and it preserves her poise. She is just twenty-eight and she can look nineteen or fifty. It depends on her mood, which depends on circumstances. Her manners are as bad as her breeding had been good. She was never disciplined in her life and nothing had ever affected her. Her eyes have that false innocence which only irresponsible wealth and an utter carelessness about money can produce. But she is undeniably and irresistably fascinating.²⁵

Stressing her "decadence" as a "sort of danger-signal,"-- it is this "decadence" which probably classifies Carlotta as a "tarnished" woman--Howard appears to be repelled, yet captivated by this type of woman. Not unlike the "pleasure-mad," wealthy young women who had begun to make their appearance in the literature of the twenties, Carlotta is an undeniable product of her time. Carlotta, in fact, bears a striking resemblance to a famous F. Scott Fitzgerald character. According to Sidney Howard White, "Carlotta is

²⁵Howard, Lucky Sam McCarver in Moses, Representative American Dramas, pp. 684-85.

another Daisy Buchannon, the heroine of The Great Gatsby. She represents the idle, young, rich women of the 1920's who fascinated both writers."²⁶

Carlotta is an impulsive, selfish, and often an insensitive young woman whose lack of manners appears to be overlooked due to her impressive beauty and deportment. Her notable features are described by Howard:

She is aristocratic in every trifle and aspect of her person and her atmosphere. She has the distinction which scorns elegance. . . . She doesn't care about jewelry just as she doesn't care about make-up; she is too lazy and too busy for either. She knows, too, that such youthful loveliness as hers needs no assistance. It is beauty of every part, and unbelievably fragile and exquisite. Enchantingly incongruous, too. . . . The classic modelling and chiselling of her features is thrown completely off by the boyish gawkiness of her bodily movement.²⁷

Completing this portrait is Howard's description of her speech, which is comprised of "musical-comedy catch phrases" with a voice one would expect to be heard "in and about the more expensive country clubs, drinking tea at the Plaza, slouching on the beach of Southampton."²⁸ These physical attributes assist Carlotta in her ability to "enlist" the financial aid and sympathies of her many male companions and admirers.

²⁶Sidney Howard White, Sidney Howard (Boston: Twayne Publishing, 1977), p. 65.

²⁷Howard, Lucky Sam McCarver in Moses, Representative American Dramas, p. 684.

²⁸*Ibid.*, p. 685.

Carlotta is dedicated to maintain her lifestyle as a comfortable one. She is not above using men to achieve this; however, the men in Carlotta's life appear to divert her from boredom. Previous to her introduction, Howard establishes the fact that she has been married three times, and that she is currently returning from a weekend interlude with Monty Garside in Atlantic City. This information is relayed by Jimmy, a dancer at the Club Tuileries, who is in love with Carlotta and went to Atlantic City to "catch her" with Garside. When Carlotta and Jimmy meet in Sam's office, she hardly acknowledges his presence. One presumes, from her actions throughout the scene, that her involvement with Jimmy was little more than a brief "affair." No longer in need of the diversion he offered, Carlotta has lost all interest in him. Carlotta's attitude toward Garside appears to be the same as her attitude toward Jimmy, a momentary amusement.

Carlotta's involvement with Burton Burton remains one of necessity; Burton controls her income and personal investments. Burton foolhardily believes that his control over Carlotta's finances will eventually enable him to possess her. Carlotta, however, is intent upon keeping Burton exactly where she wants him, and boasts, "I don't mind stringing him along."²⁹ For as long as Burton believes that a future with Carlotta is possible, he will

²⁹Ibid., p. 697.

continue to provide her with all the money she desires.

In view of Carlotta's relationships with other men, her relationship with Sam McCarver is not as easy to define. Before our first introduction to Carlotta, we learn that Sam is quite taken with her and intends upon asking her to marry him. When Carlotta and Sam have their first meeting alone, it becomes apparent that she has little, or no true affection for him and his glamourless life. During this encounter, Carlotta begins to sense that Sam is nervously working his way up to a proposal of marriage. In an effort to avoid an embarrassing situation, Carlotta is seen expertly maneuvering Sam:

CARLOTTA: I hope you're not thinking of getting married?

SAM: I am, though.

CARLOTTA: Oh, please don't, Mr. McCarver!

SAM: Why not?

CARLOTTA: It's a perfectly poisonous idea. I shan't love you any more if you get married!

SAM: Why not?

CARLOTTA: It would ruin you.

SAM: You're wrong there. It would make me.

CARLOTTA: I won't have it. You're fascinating to me as you are.³⁰

Successfully leading Sam to the realization that she would not even entertain a proposal from him, or any other such

³⁰Ibid., p. 687.

ludicrous ideas, Carlotta avoids having to reject him formally. After their conversation, she rushes off to join in the celebrations with the rest of her crowd. As she exits, Howard's stage directions comment, "She closes the door. The last we see of her, her shoulders are shaking with suppressed laughter. Sam stares after her, his face wooden."³¹ Carlotta is apparently amused that Sam would actually have the audacity to think that she would even consider such a proposal.

This initiates some important questions: Why did Carlotta marry Sam, and did she, at any time, ever love Sam? The answers to these questions lie in an examination of her relationship with Sam. Based on Carlotta's previous relationships with men, it seems odd that she married Sam out of gratitude, as she claims to have later in the play. It is also apparent that prior to the shooting of Garside, Carlotta had no romantic feelings toward Sam. Yet in Act Two, she confesses to her cousin, Archie, that she is in love with Sam. From these two facts, one can arrive at a few conclusions. First of all, Carlotta is a complex woman, unlike her preceding Howard counterparts, and her reasons for marrying Sam were many. Her marriage may have been initiated, as she claims, through gratitude. It also could have been motivated out of compassion, in that she mistakenly thought that Sam's desire to marry her was out

³¹Ibid.

of love. This may explain her abrupt reversal when she learns that Sam married her only for her name. After learning this truth, her ego is bruised, and she retaliates by hating Sam.

Assuming that Carlotta married Sam out of a mixture of compassion and gratitude, it is possible to imagine that she eventually convinced herself that she was in love with him. After all, if she believed that she was actually in love with Sam, her relationship would be far more acceptable to her family and friends, and far easier to rationalize to herself. Yet, when Carlotta realizes that Sam is not in love with her so much as with her name, she feels betrayed. Not only has he been able to fool her, she has actually allowed herself to become blinded. Feeling justified in attacking and hurting Sam in any manner that is available to her, Carlotta strikes out on a course that will eventually ruin Sam's reputation and handicap his business ventures.

The question of love between Sam and Carlotta illuminates a basic problem in Howard's characterization of Carlotta. She never reveals any true feelings for Sam, and even if she does love Sam, why is her reversal so quick and easy for her to accept? Howard fails to define the type of relationship between Sam and Carlotta, and because of this, one must draw his own conclusions. Their marriage and their relationship must somehow be justified, and Howard's failure to do so at this point, seriously flaws

the play and its characters. In his own defense, he states:

I refused to allow their deep love for one another to help them in the slightest degree, because, whatever dramatists and novelists write to mislead young people into romance, love remains the only thing which fails humanity more treacherously than religion does.³²

The fact remains that Howard's exclusion of the "love" between Sam and Carlotta cripples the play since their relationship lacks any justifiable motivations.

One of Carlotta's major problems as a character is that she lacks any effective or worthwhile goals. Howard may draw a fair portrait of this type of woman, yet, as a character in a drama, she is flawed by her lack of any goal. Carlotta's aimless wandering through life is not to say that she necessarily lacks energy. Indeed, Carlotta is continually in motion and maintains a constant and high level of energy. Yet, without any direction, she appears to be merely a representation of vibrant energy spinning around in small circles. Carlotta boasts, "I drive my buggy at my own gait. . . . When I fall out, I lie in the mud until I'm entirely rested, then I get back in and drive on."³³ While this may indicate she makes her own decisions, it does not indicate any type of ultimate plan or future upon which she bases any of her decisions. When a problem arises, she merely reacts to the situation.

³²Howard, Preface to Lucky Sam McCarver, p. xi.

³³Howard, Lucky Sam McCarver in Moses, Representative American Dramas, p. 694.

None of her decisions or actions made throughout the play supports any kind of goal or future destination.

Carlotta's independence, unlike that of many of Howard's modern women, is given to her rather than being fought for or won. Her inheritance from her family and the income which was furnished by her ex-husbands are what enable Carlotta to function on her own in an independent manner. For this reason, her independence is only threatened by financial deficiencies. In cases such as this, Carlotta finds it well within her abilities to "string" men along in order to aid her faltering money situation.

In spite of her many differences from the characteristic Howard heroine, Carlotta does illuminate one facet of the modern woman of the twenties: now that she has earned her emancipation, what should she do with it? As a rich young woman of the fashionable elite, Carlotta is a collection of goalless energy. Elsewhere, women were making great strides in fields which were previously closed to them, yet Carlotta does nothing with her newly-found liberation. She continues to spin in the same circles as before, confused by what she wants out of life, and never asserting herself to obtain anything of value.

Carlotta's failure, as a character and as a modern woman, appears to make a statement about Howard's view of this type of twenties' woman; if she fails to recognize her abilities, seize her opportunities, and assert herself through her newly-acquired role as an emancipated person,

she will fail to be happy or fulfilled in life.

Lucky Sam McCarver was originally produced at the Playhouse Theatre in New York on October 21, 1925.³⁴ Howard directed this production, and its failure was a disappointment he never forgot. In his preface he notes, "The crash of critical crockery is still loud in my ears. . . . I am quite clear that it is an unusually good play and that it has been remarkably well produced and well-acted."³⁵

Despite its failure, some critics found that Lucky Sam McCarver contained some valuable insights into Howard's theories of theatre and playwriting, as well as reaching a level of skill in characterization that he "never excelled."³⁶ According to John Mason Brown, characterization was among Howard's "best abilities."³⁷ Brown continues on to praise the play:

It is the most personal of his plays in that it is freest from compromises with theatrical effectiveness. And it is the least obvious. It benefits by the vigor that belongs to all of them. But by virtue of its dogged and unswerving honesty, it stands above them all, indicating that, as surely as Grand Central Station has an Upper and Lower Level, so there is an upper and lower level to Mr. Howard's writing.³⁸

³⁴White, Sidney Howard, p. 16.

³⁵Howard, Preface to Lucky Sam McCarver, p. xii.

³⁶John Mason Brown, Upstage: The American Theatre in Performance (New York: W. W. Norton and Co., Inc., 1930), p. 58.

³⁷Ibid.

³⁸Ibid., p. 59.

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSIONS

The preceding discussions analyzed They Knew What They Wanted, The Silver Cord, and Lucky Sam McCarver as dramatic literature with particular focus on the characterization of each play's heroine. These three comedies were selected as representative of Howard's work during the twenties, and his view of the modern American woman.

An examination of the three heroines of these plays--Amy, Christina, and Carlotta--produces various conclusions as to the personality of the Howard heroine in general. Foremost of the qualities which these characters share is their strength of will. Each of these women appears to have the ability to fight for whatever it is she desires. Although, as is the case with Carlotta, the heroine may not have a specific goal in mind, she does possess the ability to fight for it. When a Howard heroine is successful, it is her strength of will which forces her on until she obtains that which she desires.

Another quality which these three characters exhibit is their capacity for courage and defiance. Despite the situation, each heroine is able to courageously strike out on her own course of action and brave the opinions and

prejudices of others. In each circumstance, Howard constructs a situation in which these women confront their destiny: Amy must face the fact that in order to escape a life of loneliness, she must rapidly make a choice which will forever alter the course of her life; Christina must react calmly, yet adamantly, to her mother-in-law's decrees or her career and future life with her husband and child will be destroyed; and Carlotta must face the fact that her marriage to Sam is a mockery, and unless she takes action, she will remain trapped in her relationship to him. Each of these heroines bravely confronts her destiny, and although each reacts differently, each resolves her situation or crisis. None of these women deserts her difficulties in the hope that they will eventually resolve themselves. These heroines take, in each case, quick action which they hope will alleviate the problem.

Amy, Christina, and Carlotta reflect a "zest and energy,"¹ for life which mirrors Howard's own energetic lifestyle. They may be momentarily bogged down in the resolution of the problem their life poses them, yet the solutions they choose reflect a love for life. Although Amy is confronted with adultery and an unintended pregnancy, she almost appears to be awed and amused by the "curves" life often throws.² Christina's choice to fight

¹Sidney Howard White, Sidney Howard (Boston: Twayne Publishing, 1977), p. 137.

²Ibid., p. 42.

for her husband and her career portrays a vibrant and enthusiastic involvement in life. Carlotta, though characterized as "world weary,"³ is a spirited young woman whose enjoyment of friends and parties reflects an energetic participation in life. In comparison to other female characters of the theatre of the twenties, these are three vibrant portraits.

As modern women, these character portraits represent controversial views of the new morality which accompanied the changing role of women in the twenties. In Amy's case, the audience's acceptance of her extra-marital affair and unintended pregnancy is an indicator of a shifting sense of values. Christina's portrayal of a biologist is that of a rare commodity of the twenties. Not only is she a professional, but she defies the stereo-typical presentation of a cold and hardened career-minded woman. Carlotta appears to be Howard's ultimate statement of the decline of morality and behavior in the twenties. She is an arrogant, class-conscious snob who appears to go through money as quickly as she does husbands. In each case, these characters embody certain qualities of the times which were considered current and fashionable. It is these qualities which reflect the changing moral values of the twenties, and serve to make each of these character portraits an undeniable product of that era.

³Alan S. Downer, Fifty Years of American Drama: 1900-1950 (Chicago: Henry Regnery Co., 1951), p. 48.

Amy, Carlotta and Christina are independent women in the sense that they are the masters of their own fate. Each decision these women face is resolved by their own actions. Although her mate may help to illuminate the resolution, each takes her own course of action. In Amy's case, it is her decision to marry Tony--a man she has never met, to continue with her marriage plans after she has been deceived, and to make the best of her alternatives. Christina's independence is designated by her acquisition of her education and career. Carlotta's independence is indicated by the type of decisions she makes in order to maintain the lifestyle she desires.

The basic qualities which these characters share illuminate some insights into Howard's view of the modern woman of his day and the problems which he felt affected her. First, it may be said that Howard saw the modern woman of the twenties as a person who possessed many newly-found freedoms. Having secured the vote from the Nineteenth Amendment, and thereby being recognized as a functioning citizen, the American woman began to see new opportunities in the making. She had the ability to become involved in a career outside the home, and the chance to make contributions to a society which had long viewed her as only a mother, wife or sister. This freedom posed a number of problems for many women. The greatest problem was--according to the degree to which this theme is repeated in Howard's female portraits--now that they have attained

their freedom, what should they do with it? This theme is echoed by Eric Dingwall in his study of the American woman in the early twentieth century:

For although, as the century advanced, it seemed that she was attaining all for which she had so long striven, her success nevertheless seemed to bring her no nearer to serenity, tranquility and the enjoyment of her gains. Instead of calm confidence many a woman exhibited merely restless frustration.⁴

The restlessness and frustration of which Dingwall speaks is mirrored by Christina, Amy, and Carlotta. Amy has difficulties facing the attitudes others force upon her, and maintaining her role as an independent woman forces her to seek the serenity of marriage. Christina's profession provides her an outlet for her intellectual and creative impulses, yet it is the way in which she fights for her husband which reveals that Christina does not enjoy being "out there on her own." Carlotta's lack of goals and confusion in what she wants out of life reflects the frustration which her newly-acquired freedom causes.

The Howard heroine also possesses the quality of assertiveness. In each case, the success of his female portrait is directly related to her ability to assert herself. Both Amy and Christina assert themselves, and achieve their goals. Carlotta, however, fails to assert herself which results in her failure to obtain any worthwhile goals. One may determine that Howard saw the woman

⁴Eric Dingwall, The American Woman: An Historical Study (New York: Rinehart and Co., Inc., 1957), p. 132.

of the twenties as having the ability to assert herself, and her failure to do so resulted in her leading a less than meaningful life.

From the examinations made, it may be said that Howard found the modern woman of the twenties an exciting woman possessing the qualities of courage, independence, a changing sense of morality, and the strength of will to energetically participate in life. She was a woman who had the ability to assert herself to attain any goal she chose, but she was occasionally troubled by confusion in determining what she wanted from life.

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