



**Paradise Lost
America in Robert E. Sherwood's Play,
The Petrified Forest**

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Abstract:

This article offers a close reading of a compelling play by the American playwright, Robert E. Sherwood. It tries to contextualize Robert E. Sherwood's play, *The Petrified Forest* (1935), within the socio-political tensions of the Depression era in the U.S. It portrays the times' ideological tensions, such as liberalism, socialism, fascism, Americanism, idealism and pessimism, which contributed to a crisis of American individualism. Drawing on several different texts, literary and non-literary, written during the late 1920s and 30s, Sherwood's play is presented as one of many texts attempting to negotiate the pros and cons of capitalism and communism as well as the inevitable collapse of the American myth of "rugged individualism". The actual reading of the play is concerned with the depiction of the characters that represent two opposing principles: hopeful communalism and ineffective individualism.

Keywords: The American Dream; Robert E. Sherwood; American Drama; the Great Depression.

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1. Introduction

The myth of “the American dream” has seen different crises during its existence. One of these crises concerns the tension between individualistic and collectivist aspects of the American dream. In the early days of America’s discovery, the philosophy of individualism, with its democratic principles, clashed with an authoritarian and communal system. The Calvinistic foundation of the Puritans was shaken by the Lutheran spirit of the liberal Separatists. The Puritans could not maintain their communitarian ideals for a long time because, as the church gradually split up and the settlers moved out in search of more land, people went astray from their elders’ original communal vision. The growing belief in immediate personal revelation and individual salvation jeopardized the basic doctrines of the Puritans. Pragmatic, capitalistic, and Frontier individualism undermined the Puritans’ authoritarian system and the dream of brotherhood, benevolence and harmony by resorting to individualistic ideologies.

The conflict between individualism and collectivism has been a recurring theme throughout American history, gaining momentum in response to the country’s fluctuating needs. These two major forces were not so deeply divided again until the 1930s when the economic Depression struck the country. The two tendencies clashed as the old American dream of an open, decentralized, self-regulating economy, comprising entrepreneurs and free individuals, came into conflict with the vision of a just society in which the marketplace would be moralized, ethical standards observed, and men motivated by feelings of compassion and brotherhood.

With the Wall Street Crash and the ensuing Depression, the prosperous twenties’ dream of success that identified itself with individualism and material progress was shattered by the grim reality of unemployment, individual dissolution, business failure, displacement, and pervasive human misery. The Crash left millions of Americans unemployed and exposed the volatility of America’s economic structure. Six months after taking office as President of the United States, Herbert Hoover faced a nightmarish situation. An economic slump that affected people from all walks of life punctured the swelling self-reliance of the American people. Hoover believed that the Depression was caused by problems beyond America’s control. Sticking to his belief in the American system of rugged individualism, as opposed to the European state socialism, he refused to provide direct federal assistance to combat the Depression because he believed that the best form of government was the one that let society solve its own problems. He set up the Reconstruction Finance Corporation to help big businesses, but this did not revive the economy as he expected.

In the face of the growing crisis, however, Americans, in the 1932 election, voted for government intervention and turned down the orthodox American idea of self-reliant individualism. Franklin D. Roosevelt’s “New Deal”, which offered welfare programs and

enforced regulations on business, appeared to some conservatives as an attack on state rights, individual liberty and traditional American principles of laissez-faire capitalism. Many believed that it was against the Protestant work ethic to bring relief to the poor (Cashman 180). Some champions of self-reliant individualism went so far as to put the blame on the poor for their misery and starvation (Hearn 13). As one historian comments, the New Deal, with its many programs for economic planning and its control of banking and businesses, was a collective reaction against Jeffersonian individualism. The construction of around one hundred communities in America "reflected one of the most open breaks with the individualistic tradition in American history" (Conkin 3-6). Roosevelt provided relief to the poor and the unemployed and created jobs in order to boost the economy. He also thought that the federal government must act in order to help people who had been harmed by the Depression. He tried to create a welfare state and spent millions of dollars to help revive the economy, an act which enraged the disciples of capitalist individualism.

It was in this milieu of economic depression and amidst tension between the disciples of individualism and collectivism that Robert E. Sherwood wrote *The Petrified Forest*. Sherwood noted that *The Petrified Forest* was his first attempt to write a play about America in his own time (qtd. in Gassner 318). *The Petrified Forest* opened on January 7, 1935 at the Broadhurst Theatre, New York. It was produced by Gilbert Miller and Leslie Howard in association with Arthur Hopkins and initially ran for 197 performances. The play was a theatrical success and was made into a film in 1936. *The Petrified Forest* is a melodrama with an allegorical construction about the collapse of the American myth of "rugged individualism". It dramatizes the story of the disillusioned intellectual and writer, Alan Squier, whose wanderings bring him to the Arizona desert and the gangster, Duke Mantee, who waits for his "moll" in the Mesa Bar-B-Q in the Petrified Forest. Squier's wanderings and Duke's lingering signify the trauma of dislocation and the sense of futility and absurdity in America during the Great Depression.

2. The Decline of American Ideals

In this play, Sherwood dramatizes the decline of American ideals in the symbolic setting of the play, "the Black Mesa Bar-B-Q, a gas station and lunchroom at a lonely crossroads in the eastern Arizona desert" near the Petrified Forest (360). The Petrified Forest appears as a symbol of the lost American frontier and the economic, intellectual, social and political sterility of the Depression years. According to the owner of the Black Mesa Filling Station, in the old days, this place was a frontier land, and the pioneers had to be very tough in order to be able to cross it (I.363). Now the place has been reduced to an infertile desert with no sign of life in it. The desert in the Petrified Forest "stands for the totality of mid-Depression America, a parched, sterile country with scarcely a promise of cooling, regenerative rain" (Goldstein 147). The place is also described by Alan Squier as "the graveyard of civilization." It signifies the

disintegration of what Alan Squier calls the world of old-fashioned ideas: "Platonism - patriotism - Christianity - romance - the economics of Adam Smith" (II.397).

The Petrified Forest is based on the conversion of the mythical garden image into a wasteland where one can find no sign of the once Edenic and pastoral American frontier. America, that once evoked poetic images of a bountiful Eden, has now been reduced to an arid, desolate and fossilized land. In this play, the myth of the garden that, according to Henry Nash Smith, incorporated "fecundity, growth, increase, and blissful labour in the earth", has vanished (138). This happened at a time when the U.S.A. was experiencing the worst economic decline in its history and the inhospitable nature inflicted upon the Great Plains of America a seven-year drought (starting in 1931), followed by the coming of dust storms that dried up the farms and ended in what has become known as the "Dust Bowl".

The Black Mesa Bar-B-Q in *The Petrified Forest* is a place peopled by several individuals who appear in this play as types, representing two opposing principles. One group advocates communalism and is enraptured by the collectivism of the Soviet Union, and the other still clings to the old American individualistic dream. The communist telegraph Lineman belongs to the first group, and the devitalized hitchhiking writer, Alan Squier, the gangster, Duke Mantee, the All-American boy of muscles (now a menial worker), Boze, the pioneer, Gramp, who has turned into a good-for-nothing hoarder, the disenchanted War veteran, Jason, and the idealist and romantic artist, Gabby, belong to the second group. One common factor that all the characters in the second group share is that they are all frustrated and dislocated people who are wandering in search of their identities and unfulfilled dreams. The Depression era's sense of discontent is exemplified in these failed individuals' pursuit of or fascination with their dreams of a better world.

At the opening of Act One, in the lunchroom of Mesa Bar-B-Q, two Linemen are seen talking to each other about the Russian Revolution. The First Lineman represents the group of people who sought their utopian and communal dreams in communist Russia and tried to make the Russian situation apply to the U.S. The Lineman thinks that if the "revolution" comes, they will "finally get some of that equality they talked about in the Declaration of Independence" (I.362). He believes that Russians are "pushing ahead" because they are "pioneering" and are "opening up new territory - and for the benefit of all, not so's a few land grabbers can step in and take the profits after somebody else has done the real work" (I.363). He contrasts the lawlessness and gangsterism in America with the peace and order in the Soviet Union.

As Gilbert Seldes observes, those Americans who sought refuge in the Russian system saw in it the reflection of American ideals "because Russia was as experimental as America had been in its formative years [...]" (80). In this play the First Lineman Americanizes Russia's revolutionary ideals by trying to reconcile revolutionary experiments in communist Russia with American pioneering values. The Lineman has a Russian dream because Russia is prospering, whereas America appears to be in ruins. In his dream, engineers in the Soviet Union are

"building"; however, in America, they are only "repairing", climbing up the poles, fixing the wires, "so that some broker in New York can telegraph in a split second to some guy in Los Angeles to tell him he's ruined" (I.363). In the Lineman's dream, the Russians have "abolished the cause of crime. They've abolished greed!" (I.365).

The Soviet experiment was hailed by many American intellectuals during both the 1920s and 1930s as the hope of the future. To the communists, "the Soviet Union by 1926 was no longer an experiment, but an unqualified success in social planning [...]" (Aaron 161). Intellectuals were captivated by the "Soviet myth" and the dream of a just society. Theodore Dreiser published his impressions of Soviet Russia that he gained from a trip through the country in *Dreiser Looks at Russia* (1928). In this book, Dreiser endorsed the goals of the Soviet leaders and sympathized with their collective theories and programs. In *The Modern Temper* (1929) Joseph Wood Krutch declared that the future lies in Russia because its people had not yet passed through the debasing stages of capitalist culture, had not lost faith in love, honour and self-sacrifice and were confident about overcoming the individualistic problems of Western culture.

Many American writers and intellectuals in the 1930s became skeptical about capitalist individualism. They were attracted by the Soviet Union and thought that the Soviet experiment with communism might be the best way of realizing American dreams of opportunity, liberty, justice and equality. The Soviet Union, which emerged as a prosperous country in the 1930s by promoting a classless society, inspired many Americans to accept the collective economy as a solution to the problems of capitalism and as a model of an ideal state. In this regard, Adolph Berle and Gardiner Means's *The Modern Corporation and Private Property*, Stuart Chase's *A New Deal*, and George Soule's *A Planned Society*, all published in 1932, were inspirational in pointing out the evils of capitalism and the virtues of communism. As Robert J. Griffin observes, after America's "attempts to resurrect the money-making dream [were] aborted, the depressed 30s, very naturally, inevitably took up the romance of a search for social justice." And in this search, communism appeared as the "extreme ideological form and the new Russia its exotic objective correlative" (196). The picture of a "raw vibrant nation teeming with a vigorous, happy people who were, excepting some unimportant physical discomforts, free from the economic and spiritual malaise afflicting the capitalist countries" became a well-known stereotype in the thirties (Aaron 165). The Russians depicted "a society where unemployment and racial discrimination had been permanently abolished, where artists and writers were honoured and made use of, a country resolutely opposed to imperialistic ventures and staunchly antifascist." (Aaron 175). The U.S. Communist Party pictured the Soviet Union as a workers' paradise and was instrumental in encouraging some American Communists to go to the Soviet Union and settle in the Karelian region bordering Finland to help build socialism (Klehr). Henry Bamford Parkes and Vincent Carosso report that, during the 1930s, "Russia's experiments with a planned economy attracted much attention in

the United States.” The swift economic growth of the country and the much-advertised triumphs of its Five Year Plan seemed to present a startling contrast to the chaotic conditions which prevailed in the United States” (482). In *Dawn in Russia* (1932), Waldo Frank contrasted the individualistic system of the United States with the collectivizing and powerful humanitarian Workers’ Union in Russia. Upton Sinclair admired the self-sufficiency, lack of unemployment, increased production and industrialization of the Soviet Union, while he lamented the failing economy of the “so-called ‘democracies,’” Britain, France, and the United States (*Letters to A Millionaire*, Letter IV, 17). John Dewey expressed his confidence that the future historians “will combine admiration” of the Soviet people who possessed “the imagination to see that the resources of technology might be directed by organized planning to serve chosen ends with astonishment at the intellectual and moral hebetude of other peoples who were technically so much further advanced” (90).

In the First Lineman’s speech, the linking of the Russian Revolution with American pioneering and revolutionary traditions reminds one of the marriage of liberalism and Marxism proposed by philosophers and sociologists such as Frederick Schuman, John Dewey, Robert S. Lynd, Reinhold Niebuhr and Lewis Mumford. These people tried to bring together traditional liberal ideals and socialist ideology in the hope of finding a solution for the crisis facing capitalist ideology in America. They were successful in maintaining a balance, though feeble, between liberalism and Marxism (Pells 149). To a political scientist like Schuman, “the Soviet Union was fulfilling not Marxist but Progressive ideals” (Pells 64). The Soviet Union fascinated Dewey as a “frontier land” populated by young people heading towards building a new world (Pells 66). A great many social analysts of the 1930s talked publicly about “precedents for national planning in the far-off Soviet Union.” Public discussions focused on “how to apply the lessons from the Soviet experiment to the American scene.” Stuart Chase, for example, “argued that America must receive a ‘New Deal’ that would tread the narrow road between an outmoded system of free enterprise and the regimentation of the Soviet Gosplan.” The political scientist, Charles A. Beard, accumulated a variety of suggestions on social planning published in a book entitled *America Faces the Future* (Regan 15). The writers who were attracted by Bolshevism’s dream vision did not believe their approval of Marxism was a deviation from traditional progressive ideals. To use Arthur Koestler’s words, they regarded it “as the logical extension of the progressive humanistic trend” and “a new fresh branch on the tree of Europe’s progress through Renaissance and Reformation, through the French Revolution and the liberalism of the nineteenth century, towards the Socialist millennium” (qtd. in Aaron 174).

3. Native American Individualism

In contrast with the First Lineman, the gangster, Duke Mantee and the desperate writer, Alan Squier, represent native American individualism. Individualism “has petered out in Squier

in inertia and parasitism and run amok in crime in Mantee" (Flexner 277). Both Squier and Duke are associated with the dead forest. Together, they are "the last survivors of an age of romantic self-sufficiency, and the petrified forest, which exists further down the same Arizona road, is offered as a patent image of their vestigial existence" (Bigsby 140-1). One resemblance between Duke and Squier, according to the playwright, is that they are both "unmistakably condemned" (I.387). They are destined to become petrified in the desert because they are condemned to die. Duke and Squier form an interesting duo as the representatives of American brutal and intellectual individualism, which, to Sherwood, appeared to be doomed and on the verge of extinction. As Squier himself puts it, they are both "obsolete" and must die (II.412).

Squier describes Duke as "the last great apostle of rugged individualism" (II.397). The gangster in American culture has always been associated with the idea of success and rugged individualism. He possesses one of the essential ingredients of the myth of self-reliant individualism and is committed to its material dream. The gangster, with his ruthless and ambitious character, embodies the capitalist desire for success and riches (Pells 271-2). We marvel at the gangster's "ruthless climb to power" and his "rise from small-time hoodlum to full-time racketeer" (Shindler 20). Robert Warshaw notes that "the whole meaning" of the gangster's occupation is "a drive for success" (132). The gangster also embodies the anarchistic desire to assert one's individuality, particularly at a time when individuality comes under threat from different social, economic and political institutions. Sherwood has noted that there was an "anarchistic impulse" running throughout the Depression, signifying "people's desperate desire to express their individuality" in the face of uniformity and totalitarianism (qtd. in Fearnow 128).

Duke is described as the gangster with "Straight black hair" and "Injun blood" in his veins (I.366). The slow-speaking Humphry Bogart, whose gaunt figure, dark hair and haggard eyes reminded the audience of the Mediterranean looks of the gangsters (some of the most notorious of whom, such as Al Capone, Charlie Luciano, Salvatore Maranzano and Albert Anastasia were of Italian origin), played Duke's role and, from then on, and particularly after playing in the film version of the play, became typecast as a gangster. Bogart's "driven power, his anguished dark eyes, the puffs of pain beneath them, and the dangerous despair which lined his face" made the director of the play, Arthur Hopkins, choose him for the role of Duke Mantee, rather than Boze, whose role he was originally supposed to play (Brown *Worlds of Robert E. Sherwood* 320). Bogart resembled Public Enemy No. 1, John Dillinger.

The role of the lost intellectual, Alan Squier, was assigned to the fair-looking British actor, Leslie Howard, in an attempt to create a contrast with the dark-featured, unshaven and ill-dressed Duke. Sherwood described Howard as a "brilliant, sensitive, natural actor" (qtd. in Brown, *Worlds of Robert E. Sherwood* 321). Howard managed to "combine something of the indescribable pathos of Charlie Chaplin with the attractiveness of a matinee idol" (Brown, *Two*

on the Aisle 165). His Britishness implied sterile intellectuality that was often associated with Europe.

Duke uses the Black Mesa Bar-B-Q as a hideout to avoid a police dragnet and as a rendezvous for his “moll” (I.388). He is not depicted in this play as an entirely vicious character, although the radio’s voice does refer to him and his gang as a “fierce, colourful band of murderers, kidnappers, bank-robbers, perpetrators of the shocking massacre in Oklahoma City [...]” (II.393). In the play, however, Duke is shown to be capable of making love and is risking his life for the love of the girl he cares for (II.405). In fact, Duke is suffering from a malady that almost all the gangsters suffer from. He is rough-surfaced but soft-hearted. As David Ruth shows, this kind of “male enfeeblement” was revealed in many of the accounts of writers and filmmakers about the gangsters of the underworld (110-111). This “enfeebling effect” reflects the power of women and the weaknesses of men at a time when men were unemployed and women’s presence in the labour market increased (Filene 150-1).

Squier’s remark that Duke is the last disciple of rugged individualism becomes more meaningful when we consider how the Depression seriously challenged the assumptions associated with the myth of individualism. Personal virtues of ambition, hard work, perseverance, self-reliance, frugality and initiative and social ideals of equality of opportunity and laissez-faire capitalism no longer held any value in the face of privation and economic disaster.

In 1930, in his book, *Individualism Old and New*, John Dewey called American individualism a “ragged” individualism (14) and “a dying echo” (76). He wrote about the “tragedy of ‘the lost individual’” (78) and “the bankruptcy of the older individualism” (77). Dewey declared that while bureaucracy, money culture and a powerful minority control the nation’s resources, individuality becomes impossible. In this book, Dewey lamented that, “The spiritual factor of our tradition, equal opportunity and free association and intercommunication, is obscured and crowded out” (21). He acknowledged the existence of a tension between individualism and collectivism (71) and noted that, “the older individualism has now shrunk to a pecuniary scale and measure.” “The virtues that are supposed to attend rugged individualism”, he wrote, are measured by their “connection with those activities that make for success in business conducted for personal gain” (86). While recognizing the crucial relationship between self-realization and social conditions, Dewey argued for a new system in which progress was to be gained through a planned use of the available resources. Dewey called for a “new individuality integrated within itself and with a liberated function in the society wherein it exists.” He agreed that this new individualism could be “achieved only through the controlled use of all the resources of the science and technology that have mastered the physical forces of nature” (88). He mentioned those who regarded socialism as “an extension of the earlier individualism to the many” and believed that “socialism of some form is needed to realize individual initiative and security on a wide scale” (77).

4. American Individualism in Crisis

In the realm of fiction, in his story of the plight of migrant farm workers, *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939), John Steinbeck showed how capitalism renders individualism obsolete by reducing individuals to mere slaves unless they organize and fight for their rights. In this novel, the "Okies" create spontaneous communities that compensate for the failure of self-reliant individualism. The Joads, the Wilsons and many other families meet, share each other's calamities and become one when they suffer great hardships in the hands of selfish landowners and law enforcement agents. As the novel's protagonist, Tom Joad, realizes, his people eventually become all people when they establish a real sense of kinship with other families. In *To Have and Have Not* (1937), Hemingway showed the inadequacy and fall of the isolated individual in the story of Harry Morgan, who tries to keep body and soul together by turning to illegal trade, but finally realizes that a man alone does not have a chance of succeeding in this world. In the film, *American Madness* (1932), Frank Capra's failing individual, the bankrupt banker, is saved only by the goodwill of the community, who rally behind him to save his failing business. King Vidor's collectivist views are revealed in *Our Daily Bread* (1934), which pictures the possibility of creating a utopian communal cooperative farm as a couple leave the city to work a plot of land along with other disenfranchised Depression-stricken victims. As Daniel Aaron observes, "In a society economically and morally bankrupt, they would have to find a substitute for the old individualism by renewing their faith in the masses" (207). This substitute came in the form of collective action. In the manifesto, *Culture and the Crisis* (1932), fifty-two artists and writers called for a union between intellectuals and workers in a collective attempt to overhaul society and confront fascism and capitalism (League of Professional Groups for Foster and Ford).

It was amidst this crisis facing American individualism that gangsterism re-emerged as the champion of individualism. It represented another version of the self-made man, emphasizing, to use John G. Cawelti's words, "such secular qualities as initiative, aggressiveness, competitiveness, and forcefulness" rather than the conservative Protestant tradition of piety and frugality (4-5). In this version, individualism came to mean aggressiveness, lawlessness, violence, brutality and murder. The self-destructive and cruel mobster took the place of the idealistic and ambitious self-made man. In this play, Sherwood appears to be embalming the idea of rugged individualism, which, for a century, dominated America's economic life but was shattered during the Depression, and ridiculed out of existence by the New Deal. He "trimmed the play to fit the sequence of history from the well-meaning rugged individualism of Hoover's day to the buoyant and optimistic New Deal with its enthusiastic faith in government regulation and collective social effort, its eagerness to profit from the errors of the past" (Gurko 178-80).

The New Deal, which offered welfare programs and enforced regulations on business, appeared as an antithesis of American individualistic principles. After all, it is against the Protestant work ethic and the myth of rags-to-riches to bring relief to the poor. Yet, in the 1930s, the economic paralysis and the failure of self-reliant individualism necessitated the implementation of government-sponsored relief programs. In writing this play, Sherwood seems to have created a propagandistic political play for the New Deal. He believed, despite the old theory that “the average American is a rugged individualist”, during hard times, when “problems become too big for individual solution,” people become “conscious of the old ‘team spirit’” and start “looking anxiously toward the sidelines for instructions from the coach” (*Roosevelt and Hopkins* 39). Sherwood was an intimate friend of the New Dealer and the champion of social work in America, Harry Hopkins, and a gifted White House speechwriter for F.D.R. He wrote the Pulitzer Prize-winning book, *Roosevelt and Hopkins: An Intimate History* (1948). Franklin D. Roosevelt had a great faith in the virtues of collective action that, he thought, could solve America’s problems. He substituted cooperative planning for the chaos of the free market and brought businesses and prices under control. According to Sherwood, Roosevelt’s communal policies were evident from the day he became Governor of New York. In his first Inaugural Address as Governor of New York (1929), at a time when the motto of the day was, “every man for himself”, Roosevelt observed that “our civilization cannot endure unless we, as individuals, realize our personal responsibility to and dependence on the rest of the world.” He further noted that rugged individualism or the idea of “self-supporting” individual has vanished as the man of the Stone Age (Sherwood, *Roosevelt and Hopkins* 10). In 1931, Roosevelt appointed Hopkins as the executive director of the New York State Temporary Emergency Relief Administration. Soon after Roosevelt’s inauguration as president in 1933, he summoned Hopkins to Washington to implement his various social welfare programs as federal relief administrator. Hopkins also worked to achieve the passage of the Social Security Act of 1935. He was successful in keeping F.D.R.’s attention focused on the poverty-stricken section of the nation and used his influence with the president to push for federal programs to provide government-sponsored jobs for the unemployed. As director of the Works Progress Administration (1935-38), he employed millions of people and was responsible for the building of highways, bridges, public buildings and parks.

In *The Petrified Forest*, it is not just Duke Mantee who belongs to the dead forest. As Alan passes through the Petrified Forest, he appears as the dead forest itself, an ossified relic of the past. He is another displaced and uncertain individual whose “gipsying” around brings him to the Black Mesa Bar-B-Q (I.370). Squier is the representative of the sterile and unproductive intellectuals who are in search of “something to believe in [...] hoping to find something that’s worth living for - and dying for” (I.377). As he himself puts it, he is one of the intellectuals who belong to “a vanishing race” (I.380). Alan’s sterility is revealed through his unproductiveness. His book has not sold; his marriage has not produced any children. Squier describes himself as

a "hollow man" in the language of T. S. Eliot: "[...] brains without purpose. Noise without sound. Shape without substance" (l.380).² He is a wastelander who has arrived at a dead land with old, stone trees. He believes that the Petrified Forest is a "suitable heaven" for him. He says to Gabby that he is "destined to make an interesting fossil for future study. Homo Semi-Americanus - a specimen of the in-between age" (l.381). He is among "the intellectuals who thought they'd conquered Nature. They dammed it up and used its waters to irrigate the wastelands." However, Nature was not to be subdued. Nature is hitting back with neuroses, "taking the world away from the intellectuals and giving it back to the apes [...]." Squier carries a copy of Jung's *Modern Man in Search of a Soul* (1933), a book that probes the problems of neuroses and psychic disturbances in the context of a complex and bewildering world (l.381). Squier is a lost individual who feels that: "Destiny [is] closing in" on him (l.391). When Gabby offers him her love, he does not even have the power to positively respond to her affections.

This kind of pessimistic outlook towards life is said to have stemmed from Sherwood's reading of Joseph Wood Krutch's *The Modern Temper* (1929). As Richard Wattenberg holds, Sherwood's pessimistic view of life was shaped by this book, in which Western civilization is shown to be in its final stage of decline (165). Squier's view of the failure of science and intellect, and his death wish, can be detected in Krutch's book. Krutch says that science cannot comfort the human spirit and that in the modern world, people are either to give up their humanity by adjusting to the reality of the world or "live some kind of tragic existence in a universe alien to the deepest needs of its nature" (xi). Krutch notes that, under such circumstances, "[...] it is not strange that decadent civilizations are likely to think that the collapse of their culture is in reality the end of the human story" (160). He further states that: "If death for us and our kind is the inevitable result of our stubbornness, then we can only say, 'So be it.' Ours is a lost cause and there is no place for us in the natural universe [...]. We should rather die as men than live as animals" (169).

Alan Squier is also "the stereotype of the bourgeois writer" that started to emerge in the leftist imagination in 1926, the year when the radical newspaper, *The New Masses*, was launched. This bourgeois writer was "a man who cried 'pooh' at every sentiment and every generalization, who distrusted all convictions and ideals [...] who insulated himself from the currents of life [...] he squirmed in confusion, 'cursing the lies of this civilization' [...]." (Aaron 179). The portrayal of a dislocated person such as Alan Squier was a central theme in the plays, films, and novels of the depression such as the portrayal of the romantic, jewel thief in Vicki Baum's *Grand Hotel* (1930), the silent-screen stars in George Kaufman and Moss Hart's *Once in a Lifetime* (1930), the aged actors in Kaufman and Ferber's *Dinner at Eight* (1932), the old judge who kills the director and himself in Elmer Rice's *Judgment Day* (1934) and the aristocrat-turned Nazi who kills himself rather than continue as one of the beasts in Clifford

² These are not the exact words of T. S. Eliot. They only echo Eliot's description of "The Hollow Men."

Odets's *Till the Day I Die* (1935). Many factors, such as the economic paralysis, threat of an imminent war in Europe, fear of totalitarianism and the intrusion of technology into people's lives, were instrumental in the 1930s in arousing the fear that civilization was approaching its end (Fearnow 128). Oswald Spengler's diagnosis of the crisis of modern life in *The Decline of the West* (1928) and his pessimistic views about the breakdown of culture and civilization also added to the fear of ultimate doom.

Jason, who is a War veteran and is now running his father's business, is one of the frustrated individuals in the play who thinks that he has not been given the chance to fulfill his dream of success (I.365). Jason's individualistic dream is in contrast with the Lineman's communal dream. Jason dreams of selling the Bar-B-Q and buying a big Auto Camp in Los Angeles and making good money (I.366). Jason dreams of going to Los Angeles just as his daughter, Gabby, dreams of going to France. Los Angeles' mild climate and diversity of crops made it a promised land in the eyes of weather-beaten southern migrant workers. Nobody seems to be satisfied with their lives in this place. As Jason's father, Gramp, complains, there is nobody around this place who is "satisfied to stay put" (I.366).

Jason's artistic daughter, Gabby, is another discontented individual in the play who cherishes a dream. Gabby's dream is not the American dream but a French one. She longs to go to France to enjoy life. She shares her French mother's resentment of the American desert and has found solace in the work of the French poet, François Villon, whose poems she recites to the world-weary writer, Alan Squier (I.374-5). She believes the French can understand and enjoy life. She is thinking of going to Bourges, "where there's something beautiful to look at, and wine, and dancing in the streets" (I.376). She clings to her French dream and thinks that the French, unlike the Americans, are "always having a good time [...]" She tells Squier that when the French part of her takes over, she wants to do something crazy, but when the American part speaks up, it spoils the fun and makes her "go to work and figure out a lot of dull accounts [...]" (I.380). Gabby hopes that, with Gramp's money, all willed to her, she will one day be able to go to France with Squier to see all the art works, live in sin and have a good time (I.382).

Squier thinks that Gabby has "heroic stuff in her. She may be one of the immortal women of France [...]" (II.403). To Squier, Gabby is "the future. She's the renewal of vitality - and courage - and aspiration - all the strength that has gone out of you." Squier believes that Gabby is "essential" to him and "to the whole damned country, and the whole miserable world" (II.405). In a desperate act of chivalry, Squier tries to play hero and reassert his lost individuality. He decides to sign his insurance policy over to Gabby and die at the hands of a gangster in a way that it would look like he was killed in cold blood (II.404). He wants to enable Gabby to pursue her dreams with his money (II.403). Gabby has the makings of an artist in her that will enable her to survive the wasteland. Squier wishes to transfer the hidden artist in him to Gabby. "Thus in your field my seed of harvestry will thrive", recites Squier from a poem by

Villon. He is providing the "barren soil for that seed" and expects Gabby to "give it fertility and growth and fruition" (II.409). As L. Broussard notes, "*The Petrified Forest* emerges as a compromise between abject defeat [represented by Alan Squier] and absolute faith [represented by Gabby]. Recognizing his world as a wasteland of hopeless institutions where gangsterism is the only individualism still possible," Sherwood tries to convey the message that we should never overlook man's ability for sacrifice and courage" and for producing "simultaneously with those institutions which destroy him, the beauty of art and song" (110).

Several other dislocated, dissatisfied and obsolete individuals occupy the Mesa Bar-B-Q. Gramp is the representative of the pioneer-turned-hoarder. He was once a pioneer, but now, in the words of Squier, he is reduced to a "mean old miser" who is hanging on to his money, preventing his granddaughter from realizing her dream (II.399). He lives in his dream of the old, pioneering days and the memory of his encounter with the notorious outlaw, Billy the Kid, and takes pleasure in telling his story to the people who come to his station. Gramp is the fossilized remains of the pioneering days who tries to assert his individuality by recounting his past adventures. But, as an individual, he is now non-existent in the world of those around him. The pioneering days are over. His heirs look forward to seeing him dead so that they can collect his money and go in pursuit of their dreams.

Boze, an ex-football player who is now working in the Black Mesa Filling Station, represents another extinct rugged individualist. He is "the man of muscle", who is "suffering from the pangs of frustration" and boasts about his past athletic achievements that have done him no good (II.395). He shows Gabby the gold medal he had obtained for playing football. He reads from a newspaper clipping about the notices he received from the media as a footballer (I.368). Football, in American culture, is linked with the idea of success. It offers opportunities for upward mobility and is a way of fulfilling one's dreams. Boze is the prototype of fallen football players such as Biff Loman and Brick Pollitt, who later appear in the plays of Arthur Miller and Tennessee Williams. Boze is the manifestation of the failure of American individualism (like the sick ex-champion, Ben Gordon, in Clifford Odets' *Paradise Lost* (1935)). In effect, Boze, who considers himself a once successful man, tries to compensate for his present shortcomings by resorting to his past glories. By remembering the fame and praise of the old days that have now deserted him, Boze is, in fact, lamenting his failure. He, in the words of John Mason Brown, is "an example of fatuous but physically courageous 'third generation' youth whose only glorious hours were his college years" (*Two on the Aisle* 164).

The Chisholms are a wealthy couple, belonging "to the topmost layer of society in Dayton, Ohio," who happen to pass by the filling station and drop in for refreshment and fuel. Despite her husband's wealth, Mrs. Chisholm is not satisfied with her life. She feels she has been stifled by her duties to her husband. She complains about her marriage to her husband, whom she calls the "pillar of the mortgage, loan and trust" who has taken her individuality and self-respect away from her and has them "stencilled on a card and filed." She further complains

that, ever since her marriage, she has been kept in “an art metal cabinet” and treated like “an ornamental cipher” (II.407). She tells Gabby to profit by her example and encourages her to go in pursuit of her French dream and find her true self (II.408). Using Thorstein Veblen’s words in *The Theory of the Leisure Class* (1899), Mrs. Chisholm embodies the notion of “female slavery” that points to “the institution of ownership” in a consumerist culture (34). She, in Veblen’s terms, has been possessed like a “chattel” (45) and is “the economic dependent” of her husband (111). Her “sphere is within the household, which she should ‘beautify,’ and of which she should be the ‘chief ornament’ ” (Veblen 110).

5. The Demise of American Individualism

One interesting point about *The Petrified Forest* is that it dramatizes the demise of American individualism by creating an atmosphere of limitation, stagnation and death. It constructs a dramatic situation in which characters are thrown together for a limited period and a limited space. Interruptions and procrastination stop the natural overflow of dialogue and action. The characters are doomed to wait until the final shootout to meet their fate.

The disillusioned individuals in this play keep constantly interrupting each other. If examined closely, one can find a pattern of interruptions in the first act that foreshadows the major interruption in the play, that is to say, the intrusion of the gangster, Duke Mantee, at the end of Act One. These interrupting moments keep punctuating the plot and create a dead ambiance where everything comes to a standstill in the play. These disruptions are of different kinds. They are sometimes physical, as in the case of Gabby, whose appearance on the stage breaks up people’s conversations, or verbal intrusions, such as Jason’s constant verbal intrusions in Act One, and sometimes both physical and verbal, as in the case of Boze. They impede the flow of dialogue in the play and, sometimes, reduce it to a set of dismembered talks. They also interrupt and trivialize the interchange of political and philosophical ideas of the characters and, finally, bring the play to a state of inaction.

In fact, Sherwood dramatizes the frustrations and disillusion brought about by the Depression in the lives of several disheartened individuals whose wanderings bring them to a standstill in the dead end of the Black Mesa Bar-B-Q near the Petrified Forest. The play starts in an autumn sunset (“The action begins late in the afternoon of an autumn day in 1934 and continues into the evening of the same day” (360)) with a gloomy and morbid atmosphere and portrays several drifters and dreamers whose lives are interrupted by events over which they have little or no control. This dark and dismal atmosphere is sustained throughout the play. The play not only starts in darkness but also ends in darkness. But the ending that culminates in the final interruption of a gang of murderers brings the individuals to a state of paralysis where they wait for their impending doom before the concluding bloody nighttime shootout.

Although it seems that it is the gangster’s arrival that brings the play to a state of inaction, one can notice that, from the very beginning of the play, there is no substantial action (in the

Aristotelian sense of arrangement of incidents in a cause-and-effect relationship). From the outset, despite the apparent comings and goings of people, one can see that the driving force of the plot is rather weak, and as far as the stage events are concerned, there is no ongoing dynamic movement involved, and the characters achieve no great effect. Both the whole progression of observable transformation on the stage and the characters' psychological or moral development are extremely limited. All these characters are capable of doing is "talk". The very few attempts, such as Boze's attempt at seizing Duke's gun and outdoing the gangsters, are aborted in the end. One of the Linemen keeps talking about Russia and revolution. Boze's amorous advances towards Gabby are twice aborted. All that seems to have been achieved belongs to the past or the faraway and appears to be unreal. The glories and adventures of the old days turn out to be more like a dream than a reality. Boze is proud of his past athletic success as he reads from a newspaper clipping about his bygone reputation as a footballer, and Gramp boasts about his past encounters with a notorious gangster. There is no real forward movement in the play. All the departing parties (Jason, Squier, the Chisholm's, and Herb) have to return, sooner or later, to the Mesa station. It is only after the arrival of Duke that all action is brought to a halt so completely that dialogue cannot help propel the plot forward. The characters are all trapped in one place and have to sit still or huddle together in the centre (II.395). Nobody can escape; nobody can even move a finger without Duke's permission. At one point, they even have to stop talking. Duke orders his captives to be quiet because he wishes to listen to the radio (I.391). Insiders (such as Boze, Gabby, Jason and Gramp) and outsiders (the hitch-hiking Alan Squier, the wealthy, touring Chisholm's, and Jason's Legionnaires) are all trapped by Duke and his gang, who linger on waiting for the chaos and murder of the final and climactic shoot-out scene. Even during the shoot-out between the Sheriff's men and the gangsters, Duke's captives remain motionless and helpless. Later, Duke uses them as human shields to escape. Squier, however, is excluded from the shield because he has to remain stagnant forever after Duke shoots him dead at his own request (II.416).

6. Conclusion

The state of suspension, pessimism, inaction and delay in the play is so wearisome and worrying that even one of the members of the Duke Mantee gang, Pyles, keeps complaining about it (II.400-408). This is the way Sherwood dramatizes the stagnant state of American society and the downfall of individualism. On an allegorical level, as Gramp comments, it is America and American ideals that are particularly suffering from this dormant state. "The trouble with this country", says Gramp, "is, it's got settled. It's camped down in the bed of a dried-up river, and whenever anybody says, 'Let's get the hell out of here,' all the rest start to holler, 'If we move a step the Injuns'll get us' " (I.367).

Although, later, in 1938, Sherwood discarded the apocalyptic pessimism of *The Petrified Forest*, and in *Abe Lincoln in Illinois*, his dramatization of Abraham Lincoln's early years, re-

awakened his belief in the ideals of liberty, equality and the brotherhood of man, it is in *The Petrified Forest* that he captured the sense of frustration and failure that permeated American society in the 1930s. The 1930s was an age of complex ideologies when liberal democracy, communism, fascism, Americanism, pessimism and idealism existed side by side, but there was one major trend that drew all the intellectuals towards itself and that was the tension between the principles of capitalist individualism that could hardly be tenable at a time when traditional principles associated with American individualism were undermined by economic failure and the alternative myths to the American dream of success and golden opportunities such as the myth of the Russian dream. Collective impulses that came with the unionization of workers, radicalization of writers and artists and the socialist experiments in Russia created the dream of collective action that was supposed to restore America to its former glory. Sherwood, like many other American dramatists such as Clifford Odets, Lillian Hellman, and Elmer Rice, witnessed the breakdown of the free enterprise system and the industrial slump and promoted a collectivist response to the problems of capitalism. The more radical playwrights, such as Elmer Rice and Clifford Odets, were inclined to the Left. The more liberal ones, such as Sherwood, who disapproved of radical dogmatism, tried to Americanize the socialist solution but regarded the collective alternative very seriously. Whether the 1930's playwrights chose for their subjects the plight of the dispossessed workers and farmers, gangsterism and cynical intellectualism, the rise and fall of money-obsessed bourgeoisie and the disastrous pursuit of success, it was the depiction of the crisis facing individualism that informed their dramatization of the grim-faced realities of the Depression. After all, as Edward Newhouse explained in his novel *You Can't Sleep Here* (1934), the thirties "was not the 'lost generation', but the crisis generation'" (qtd. in Aaron 168).

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