

# Bad Pennies and Dead Presidents



Bad Pennies and Dead Presidents:  
Money in Modern American Drama

By

Jon Dietrick

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P U B L I S H I N G

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# CHAPTER ONE

## INTRODUCTION

In his important book, *The Gold Standard and the Logic of Naturalism*, Walter Benn Michaels traces key elements of the worldview of American literary naturalism to an anxiety over issues of material reality and representation – an anxiety that pervaded the gold standard debates of the late nineteenth century. Focusing not on the political differences between the “goldbugs” and silver advocates but on their shared fear of an “insubstantial” paper money, Benn Michaels identifies a cultural logic based on the repression of money as free-floating signifier, which expresses itself in various (and always unsuccessful) strategies of “escape” from the money economy. An aesthetic expression of both the desire for and the impossibility of this escape, naturalism obsesses over the ontological and epistemological questions raised by money, becoming, in Benn Michaels’s analysis, “the working out of a set of conflicts between pretty things and curious ones, material and representation, hard money and soft, beast and soul” (173).

The binarism of “hard” and “soft” value Benn Michaels finds inscribed in the gold-standard debates, as well as the fear of an “insubstantial” currency, have of course been explored by other critics. Marc Shell’s important work on money in world literature notes that historically, the increasingly arbitrary relationship between money’s physical material and its “face value” has made money function as a symbol of a larger disjunction between appearance and reality, seeming and being, “material” and “intellectual currency” (*Money, Language, and Thought* 1). The move, in Shell’s phrase, from “the electrum money of ancient Lydia” to “the electronic money of contemporary America,” has “precipitated awareness of quandaries about the relationship between face value (intellectual currency) and substantial value (material currency)” (1). Like Benn Michaels, Shell does not only interpret money as symbol within specific texts, but reads money as inescapably implicated in textuality itself, and vice versa. Shell writes that “money, which refers to a system of tropes, is also an ‘internal’ participant in the logical or semiological organization of language, which itself refers to a system of tropes” (3). Literary texts act

as symbolic economies built on “tropic exchanges” (*Economy of Literature* 7).

This same view of text as economy underlies the work of French theorist Jean-Joseph Goux, whose study *Symbolic Economies: After Marx and Freud* traces homologies between the economic notion of money as “general equivalent” – a special commodity that makes all other commodities interchangeable with one another, but itself stands outside this system of exchange – and Freudian (and Lacanian) models of the family and of language. For Goux, the phallus, the father, and language itself function as general equivalents in systems of exchange that are “both economic and significant” (3). The other important homology Goux’s work explores is that between what Marx sees as the three historical stages of money – as measure of value, medium of exchange, and means of wealth – and the psychoanalytic categories of the real, the symbolic, and the imaginary. Like Shell and Michaels, Goux cites the gold-money of the nineteenth century as an instance of the fantasy of bringing these three functions together in one object: “At once the *ideal* measure of value, the *symbolic* instrument of exchange, and the *real* means of reserve, gold-money brought together the functions of *archetype*, of *token*, and of *treasure* into a single object.” Yet with the advent of “fiat” money (paper, then credit cards, then money that is entirely electronic), the “three functions have come asunder” (114).

The fundamental relation between economic life and both the inner and the social life of the human being underpinning Benn Michaels’s, Shell’s, and Goux’s analyses was given exhaustive treatment in Georg Simmel’s 1905 work, *The Philosophy of Money*. In addition to the disjunction between “material” and “face” value later explored by other theorists, Simmel traces two further important characteristics of money. One is money’s paradoxical role in what Simmel recognizes as an increasing sense of the relativity of all value. This relativity finds its clearest manifestation in money, which at the same time becomes, in a sense, the only value that is not relative. Money is, first of all, “value turned into substance.” As such, money “expresses nothing but the relativity of things that constitute value.” At the same time, “money, as the stable pole, contrasts with the eternal movements, fluctuations and equations” of the objects whose value is expressed in money. Simmel puts it this way: “By sublimating the relativity of things, money seems to avoid relativity” (121). Another way of saying this is that money offers a kind of stability, at the price of recognizing the relativity of everything.

A second and related characteristic Simmel associates with money is what he calls the “neutrality” and even “lack of character” of money.

Money is “the value of things without the things themselves.” It stands “between individual objects and in equal relation to each of them” (123). More importantly, money lends its characterless-ness to everything it touches – and it touches everything. Simmel illustrates: “The statement that the value of A is I mark has purified A of everything that is not economic, i.e. not an exchange relationship to B, C, D and E [ . . . ] Everything else that A may be, in itself and independent of this relation, is irrelevant here” (121). Simmel writes that the “absence of any inherent worth in an object cannot be more distinctly expressed than by substituting for it, without any sense of inadequacy, a money equivalent” (123-24).

The practical results of money’s phenomenological impact are explored in the final section of *The Philosophy of Money*, which Simmel entitles “The Style of Life.” Here, money’s relativity and “lack of character” are shown to impart the same qualities to life, with both positive and negative results. One negative result is a modern cynicism Simmel calls “the blasé attitude,” a result of “the reduction of the concrete values of life to the mediating value of money”(255). Corollary to this is an increasingly instrumentalist view of the world. Money, for Simmel, is “intrinsically and exclusively instrumental” (Poggi 201). At the same time, money, the absolute *means*, becomes the absolute *end*, thereby reducing all other contents of life to means (i.e. to ways to get money). This in turn gives the modern world “a quality of growing abstractness and artificiality” as an increasing number of things that used to constitute ends in themselves become simply ways to get money (Poggi 209). This instrumentalist view of the world is further encouraged by the increasing dominance of technology that fuels and is fueled by an advanced market economy. As the complexity of technology outpaces the ability of the individual subject to understand that technology (even as that technology plays a larger and larger role in that subject’s daily life), individuals must “bracket their own subjectivity and concentrate on tinkering with objects” (Poggi 200).

In Simmel’s estimation, then, money is the site of a number of interrelated paradoxes. It is a symbolic manifestation of the cool, “objective” relations between the individual and his world, and it is the means – the only means, the more central it becomes to our lives – to (temporarily) overcome this objectivity through the act of consumption. Money is the symbol of the ultimate valueless-ness of everything, and it is the symbol of value.

There are of course important similarities between Simmel’s and Marx’s analyses of money, especially in regard to money’s alienating and reifying effects. In the “Money” chapter of the *Economic and Philosophic*

*Manuscripts of 1844*, Marx describes money as “the *pimp* between need and object, between life and man’s means of life.” As such, money, for Marx, not only conditions the way my needs are turned into actions, but profoundly alters my relation to the world, and to other people. Marx writes, “*that* which mediates *my* life also *mediates* the existence of other men for me. It is for me the *other* person” (*Young Marx* 375). Money’s mediating role results in “the inversion and confusion of all human and natural qualities, the bringing together of impossibilities” (377).

Money’s most disturbing quality, for Marx, is what one critic calls its “limitless power of becoming” (Sheehan 98). “Through money,” writes Marx, “I can have anything the human heart desires. [ . . . ] What I as a man cannot do, i.e. what all my individual powers cannot do, I can do with the help of *money*.” Yet money’s seeming agency is ultimately not one I can control. Money is “the alienated *capacity* of *mankind*,” and as such its great power (and danger) is its tendency to invert the materially real and the abstract:

*Money*, which is the external, universal *means* and *power* – derived not from man as man and not from human society as society – to turn *imagination into reality* and *reality into mere imagination*, similarly turns *real human and natural power* into abstract representations, and therefore *imperfections* and tormenting phantoms, just as it turns *real imperfections and phantoms* – truly impotent powers which exist only in the individual’s fantasy – into *real essential powers* and *abilities*. (*Young Marx* 378)

As this quote illustrates, a primary trope in Marx’s rendering of money is that of *monstrosity*. Paul Sheehan explains that for Marx, “Money’s capacity for disfigurement, for warping perception and moral efficacy, makes it capable of turning reality into a grotesque distortion of itself” (98). For Marx, this tendency makes money a malevolent force: money leads to “the universal *confusion* and *exchange* of all things, an inverted world, the confusion and exchange of all natural and human qualities” (379). Furthermore, money (in the form of finance capital) is monstrous in its apparent ability to self-generate, to breed itself from itself and to hide its own origins:

Capital appears as a mysterious and self-creating source of interest — the source of its own increase. [ . . . ] The result of the entire process of reproduction appears as a property inherent in the thing itself. [ . . . ] In interest-bearing capital, therefore, this automatic fetish, self-expanding value, money generating money, are brought out in their pure state and in this form it no longer bears the birth-marks of its origin. (*Capital* III, 385)

In describing money as monstrous in this way Marx echoes a theme from

Aristotle's *Politics*. There Aristotle condemns the practice of usury on the grounds that it "makes a gain out of money itself, and not from the natural use of it." The passage continues: "And this term Usury, which means the birth of money from money, is applied to the breeding of money, because the offspring resembles the parent." Unlike Marx and Simmel, both of whose analyses locate monstrous effects in money's interest-generating *and* exchange functions, Aristotle only seems to locate monstrosity in the latter, distinguishing as he does between the "natural" use of money in exchange, and money as interest-generating capital, of which latter Aristotle writes that "of all modes of making money this is the most unnatural" (qtd. in Cannan et al. 105). This Aristotelian distinction forms the crux of the Scholastic conception of interest-bearing capital as an unnatural generation from a "barren" substance, and is essentially the one Antonio invokes in Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice*, when he describes Shylock's usury as "a breed for barren metal" (1.3.132).

Aristotle thus distinguishes between a natural and an unnatural economy, between *oikonomia* and *techne chrematisike*, or a "household" economics based on need and its fulfillment, and a chrematistics based on unbounded desire. Of course, such a distinction is difficult to maintain: at the very least we may say that the distinction between need and desire is far from a simple one, that desire is always already a part of what Aristotle may wish to think of as a contained *oikos*. Viewed from the perspective of the work of Benn Michaels, or the work of Marx for that matter, Aristotle's distinction between a natural and an unnatural use of money may seem like an attempt to repress or at least limit money's monstrous characteristics and effects, akin to the nineteenth-century distinction between "natural" gold-money and "unnatural" paper currency. In fact, the association Benn Michaels makes between attempts to "naturalize" money and attempts to limit signification is already recognized in earlier thinking about money that, like Aristotle's writings, marks usury as an "unnatural" use of money. Shell discusses the notion of "verbal usury," and notes that while this idea has been overlooked by modern critics, it is "an important technical term in the Jewish Talmud, in the Christian church fathers, and in the Islamic traditions," where it refers to "the generation of an illegal – the church fathers say unnatural – supplement to verbal meaning by use of such methods as punning and flattering" (*Money, Language, and Thought* 49). As the Aristotelean, Jewish, Christian, and Islamic traditions would attempt to "reign in" monstrous money by naturalizing exchange while placing restrictions or outright prohibitions on the "breeding" of money from money, so would these traditions attempt to limit or repress language's threatening supplementarity.

While I have just grouped together Marx and Benn Michaels in order to contrast their views of money's monstrosity with Aristotle's, there are of course important differences as well between these thinkers' conceptions of money. While Benn Michaels's study may be thought of as broadly Marxist in its demonstrating how money problematizes the relation of appearance to essence, material reality to abstract idea, it is essentially adopting a postmodern stance on that relation. That is, from Benn Michaels's point of view, the problem is not (as it is for Marx) that money monstrously turns the real into the symbolic and the symbolic into the real; rather, money only appears monstrous to the extent that we adhere to an "essentialist" view of that relation. From the perspective of many Marxists, this postmodern view already represents a surrendering to the monstrous distortions of money, and Benn Michaels's notion of the impossibility of "escape" from the money economy would represent the reification of the "economy" and concomitant devaluation of human life.

The decentering effects of money explored by these theorists have had, arguably, an especially profound effect in America, the first country on the planet to institute the widespread use of paper money. In the nineteenth century in America, concerns over the "inessential" character (or the total *lack* of character) of money paralleled concerns over the possible lack of "hard," intrinsic characteristics in nature. The era's obsession with "natural laws" was in fact often applied to the economic realm, where social Darwinism and other views of "human nature" served as justifications for glaring economic inequalities. Writes historian Michael O'Malley, "If physical signs offered one marker of essential identity, possession of money and the virtues it implied offered another" ("Introduction" 370). This use of money as "marker" of essential identity, however, begs an unsettling question:

But what if the money itself had no fixed character? What if it represented no more than social convenience, or optimism, or paper promises? The answer was the gold (and silver) fetish, the nineteenth-century political economy's insistence on a specie economy and the intrinsic value of precious metal. The essential value of specie, like the essential character of certain races or occupations, helped resolve the ambiguity of identity in public by a resort to "natural facts." (370)

O'Malley's discussion locates this need for a value that *is* what it *represents*, and related anxiety over representative money as a marker of an arbitrary relation between appearance and reality, as a primarily nineteenth-century phenomenon. By the turn of the twentieth century, he writes, "more 'relativistic' or social theories of value and identity" that tended to emphasize "self-making" over natural law gained ground,

though such ideas “remain contested today just as they were 150 years ago” (371). The present study is based on the prospect that the conflicts O’Malley traces between natural law and self-making, compulsion and freedom, and representation and reality, conflicts “rooted in the logic of the free market itself”(371), have only deepened in the last hundred years, which have seen an acceleration of the process Simmel, in 1900, already identified as the increasingly rapid “spiritualization” of money (Poggi 161), a telos Goux sees reflected in the once-familiar question, “Cash, Check, or Charge?” (“Cash” 114).

In America, the crash of the stock market in 1929 and its widespread and devastating effects, from unemployment and bank foreclosures to mass homelessness,<sup>1</sup> made the existential implications of an advanced money economy impossible to ignore. The debate between the *laissez-faire* social Darwinists and the New Dealers that dominated the politics of the thirties only underscored the centrality of money in the life of the individual. And perhaps most significantly for this study, Roosevelt’s attempt to take the country off the gold standard gave birth to fears of “the end of civilization” (Syracusa and Coleman 29). Through the second half of the twentieth century anxiety over money played out in the ideological battle between the Keynesianism that characterized American economic policy after the Second World War and the “supply-side” and related monetarist philosophies that came to dominate American economics from the 1970’s to the present period. Keynes himself had once famously referred to the tying of money to a gold standard as a “barbarous relic” (138). By 1967, however, future Chairman of the Federal Reserve Alan Greenspan, in an essay that appeared first in Ayn Rand’s *Objectivist* newsletter and was later reprinted in her volume *Capitalism, the Unknown Ideal*, decried what he called “[a]n almost hysterical antagonism toward the gold standard” (89). A currency tied to gold, argued Greenspan, is our best defense against a “welfare state” that would “confiscate the wealth of the productive members of a society to support a wide variety of welfare schemes” (93). “[G]old and economic freedom,” declared Greenspan, “are inseparable” (89).

It was not until 1975, the year in which David Mamet’s *American Buffalo* debuted at the Goodman Theatre in Chicago, that President Richard Nixon signed an order allowing gold, for the first time in American history, to be traded freely on the market like any other commodity. By 1978, one year after *American Buffalo* landed on Broadway, economist Jude Wanniski’s *The Way the World Works* laid out the tenets of “supply-side” economics, with its fear of an “unstable” currency and call for a return to a version of the gold standard. In 1987,

Greenspan was appointed Fed Chairman, his supply-side ideology dominating American economic policy through the administrations of Reagan, George Herbert Walker Bush, and Bill Clinton, and well into the administration of George W. Bush. Whether or not “supply-side” economics, as is often charged, is a smoke screen for the protection of capital and the disappropriation of the working class, its fear of an excess of “paper” currency not tied to a “tangible asset”<sup>2</sup> shares the nineteenth-century goldbugs’ need to believe in a “natural” money – this in an era that has seen even “insubstantial” paper money and plastic credit cards replaced by still less substantial electronic forms. What this logic fears, ironically, is the very nature of money.

The “logic of naturalism” that must recognize all phenomena as either “hard,” essential reality or mere representation and nothing else has, Benn Michaels asserts, come to limit the ways we think about aesthetic expression. Just as money, in the essentialist logic of the “hard” money fetishists, must either *be* what it *represents*, or be a worthless piece of paper, the work of art must either be a formal object (words on a page or paint on a canvas) or, in Romantic fashion, somehow must *become* the thing it would represent. Benn Michaels argues that naturalist prose writers like Frank Norris were attracted to writing precisely because it seems to escape this logic: “Neither a formal entity in itself nor an illusionistic image of something else,” writing “marks the potential discrepancy between material and identity, the discrepancy that makes money, painting, and, ultimately, persons possible” (Benn Michaels 169-70).

If writing, for these reasons, offers an “escape” from the logic of naturalism, drama and theatre offer unique opportunities to problematize this logic. Even more than prose fiction, drama resists being seen as *either* pure signification or “essential” reality. By its very nature drama raises disturbing questions about the relation of signs to the real. Viewed as a work of literature, drama is writing that seems to devalue writing; it is “the form of writing that strives to create the illusion that it is composed of spontaneous speech, a form of writing that paradoxically seems to assert the claim of speech to be a direct conduit to being” (Fuchs 109). As writing that attempts to disguise itself as “natural” speech, drama, much like money, is “ever the presence of the absence and the absence of the presence” (Fuchs 117).

Theatrical performance similarly resists a simple understanding of presence and absence, real and symbolic. Performed at a distinct point in space and time, the theatrical performance is at once the most “real” of the arts and the most radically deceptive – qualities that have often

precipitated a deep fear of theatre, or what Jonas Barish has called (in the title of his important work) an “Antitheatrical Prejudice” running through the Western artistic tradition, beginning with Plato. In a section of Barish’s study he calls “The Theatre against Itself,” the critic looks at the plays of modern authors like Ibsen, Shaw, Chekhov, and Pirandello to show how these playwrights would “build into their very plays a critique of the theater, redeeming their better characters from it as they wished to redeem society at large” (450). Kirk Williams notes that the fear of theatre’s “secondariness or supplementarity” informing the antitheatrical prejudice is closely related to anxieties regarding “the binarisms that set essence against appearance, feminine against masculine, writing against speech, fiction against truth” (95). Unsurprisingly given the genre’s obsession with these binarisms, Williams calls naturalist drama a “particularly stunning example” of the anti-theatrical prejudice (97). Through its interest in putting “real life” on the stage and its critique of the notion of identity as invented or performed in favor of one shaped by inexorable forces, naturalist drama betrays an anxiety over the very ambiguities that theatrical performance inherently foregrounds and that in turn make theatrical performance possible.

These special qualities of the theatre have made it a uniquely suited medium for exploring related qualities embodied in money. At the same time, the subject of money and the ontological and epistemological questions it raises have offered playwrights a means of expanding how we think about theatre, and ultimately how we think about the nature of representation and its relation to the real. This study begins with a reevaluation of a critically neglected play from the thirties. Largely forgotten today, Sidney Kingsley’s 1935 play *Dead End* was seen by many in the 1930’s as “the depression play” (Casty 234). The play can be read as a less revolutionary critique of capitalism than other plays of its era, and this likely has contributed to the work’s resonance with a mostly middle-class theatre- and movie-going audience. But I want to suggest an additional reason for the play’s success: *Dead End* is a much more complex meditation on the paradoxes of economic life than either the agit-prop of the earlier Theatre Union or the softened criticism leading up to America’s entry into the war. In dramatizing the complicated interrelations between identity and the cash economy in America during a moment of extreme economic and social crisis, *Dead End* identifies money and the increasing commodification of life as both that which traps characters and that which frees them, the fixer and the dissolver of stable identity, going beyond the more explicitly activist drama of the period to explore the existential effects of capitalism.

The naturalistic elements of *Dead End* and the play's thematic attention to money are inextricably bound. With the resurgence of the gold-standard debate in the 1930s (leading up to Roosevelt's effectively ending the gold standard in America in 1933), the issues were remarkably similar to those that characterized the earlier debate. "In both decades," writes Hildegaard Hoeller, "the discussion was not about the actual usefulness of gold reserves" but "about whether gold provided an essential value for money exchange as well as a universal standard of value. Gold stood for a fantasy about a stable referent or reified value; as such, it had become almost an idol or fetish" (766).<sup>3</sup> The Depression loomed large in the imagination of Arthur Miller in a manner that is hard to overstate. A period that saw Miller's father's failure in business and the consequent rapid downward spiral of his immediate family, Miller wrote that the Depression "was only incidentally a matter of money. Rather it was a moral catastrophe, a violent revelation of the hypocrisies behind the façade of American society" (*Timebends* 114). In *Death of a Salesman*, Miller elaborates his own vision of the relation of economic to psychic life by dramatizing the attempted "escape" from the money economy that so obsesses American naturalism – the attempt to "stage the disappearance of money" (Benn Michaels 144). The distinctions that obsess the characters of the play – between saying and doing, seeming and being, technology and nature – are themselves rooted in money.

Throughout the seventies and eighties, no American writer more thoroughly investigated the phenomenology of money than David Mamet, whose work for the stage and the screen relentlessly revisits the theme of economic life and its relation to moral, ontological, and epistemological concerns. In *American Buffalo*, his earliest full-scale investigation of these themes on the stage and what is usually regarded as his first "mature" play, Mamet thematizes the anxieties that will inform all his future work. A careful reading of *American Buffalo* finds what will become the familiar Mamettian conflicts between talk and action, seeming and being, as rooted in the playwright's own complex and often conflicted relationship with a dramatic and literary naturalism informed by the paradoxes of economic life.

The second work in his "Pittsburgh Cycle" chronicling the African American experience throughout the twentieth century, August Wilson's 1984 play *Joe Turner's Come and Gone* is set in the second decade of the century. Wilson's play investigates the interrelated "logics" of money and race, their shared obsession with the relation of immanence to appearance, material value to "face" value.

Suzan-Lori Parks's play *Topdog/Underdog* debuted on Broadway in

2001, during the fourth of Greenspan's unprecedented five terms as Fed Chairman. As a play that investigates, among other subjects, the intersection of "business" and "family" values, *Topdog/Underdog* stands with at least one foot in the naturalist tradition of works by playwrights like Kingsley, Miller, and Mamet. The naturalist obsession with the paradox of human freedom that drives the work of these writers appears again at the heart of Parks's play, and once again money and the confidence game is at the center of that obsession. Throughout the play's often hauntingly repetitive action, money repeatedly emerges as the site of familiar naturalist conflicts between free will and determinism, present and past, the authentic and the mimetic. Through her depiction of two brothers' attempts to variously "escape" the money economy and to become money themselves, Parks elaborates her own vision of the dialectical interdependence of these seeming opposites. In her two "Red Letter" plays, *In the Blood* and *Fucking A*, Parks goes even further to investigate the way money, sexual, and reproductive economies determine each other.

A reading of these five playwrights' work finds not only an increasingly sophisticated treatment of the subject of money, but also an increasingly complex relationship with the tradition of dramatic naturalism. In keeping with a tendency of much American drama of the thirties, Kingsley's *Dead End* is highly naturalistic in its portrayal of the power of economic forces to deform the characters of the play both physically and morally; at the same time, the play's ambivalence regarding the alienating, morally neutralizing effects of money seems to undercut its own naturalistic tendencies. Money monstrously deforms the "self-made," surgically altered, and symbolically orphaned gangster Baby-Face Martin, just as it threatens to deform the group of children who emulate Martin's "ethics." At the same time, Kingsley renders money as vital to the refiguring of the new American family that, at play's end, may point the way out of the "Dead End" of the play's title. Miller's *Death of a Salesman* likewise combines a naturalistic portrayal of economic forces and the moral deformities of "business" values with a complicating of the logic of naturalism. Miller's watershed play answers Kingsley's pragmatic view of economic life with an impassioned critique of American business; yet, that critique is complicated by Miller's almost postmodern treatment of distinctions such as present and past, action and "talk," hard value and soft currency. Mamet's *American Buffalo* is at once more relentlessly naturalistic – in its focus on members of the criminal underclass claustrophobically trapped within their own limited perceptions – and more postmodern in its elaboration of the complex relation of talk to action, seeming to being. *American Buffalo* is perhaps, of all the plays in

this study, the angriest at economic life; it is also, oddly, the play that goes furthest to justify money and business. Like the plays by Kingsley, Miller, and Mamet, August Wilson's *Joe Turner's Come and Gone* ultimately must transform the realist mode in order to transcend its positivism concerning these relations. Thus Wilson's play mixes a realist/naturalist style indebted to writers like Dreiser and Norris with what critics have called either a mythic or a magical realist mode. Finally, Parks's plays, again focusing on members of the "lowest" social strata colliding with forces that threaten to proscribe their identities, nevertheless convey a vision of identity, and specifically of racial identity, as *both* "essential" and performed, determined and freely created, complicating a distinction at the heart of literary naturalism.

As does their subject matter, so does the stagecraft of these plays both borrow from and problematize the naturalist tradition. Kingsley's use of subtly metadramatic elements such as role-playing within the role; Miller's (and director Kazan's) use of expressionistic scenery, music, and lighting; Mamet's trademark dialogue at once poetic and realistic; Wilson's emphasis on the performative body and the limits of language; and Parks's use of both metadrama and silence and stage business to convey the "pure true simple state" of the characters: all these techniques work to complicate naturalism's "hard" distinction between signification and the real ("Elements of Style" 17).

Several critics have noted that unlike what has happened in the theatre of other countries, the American theatre has remained dominated by the modes of realism and naturalism throughout the twentieth century, and into the twenty-first. Brenda Murphy, for instance, looks not only at dramatic structure and its persistent realism, but at that same persistent realism in American acting theory (especially the Method), stage design, and costuming (*American Realism and American Drama*). William Demastes, in his book *Beyond Naturalism: A New Realism in American Theatre*, considers the link between this American dramatic realism and the naturalist and positivist philosophies of the nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries. Demastes sees a gradual divergence between American realism and naturalism and some of those movements' philosophical foundations, an evolution toward a "new realism" that could accommodate a philosophy that transcended nineteenth-century positivism to encompass Einsteinian relativity and quantum physics. Demastes points out that instead of abandoning realism and naturalism in the face of a more complicated view of perception, in America, the genres have adapted to make room for this new view. This "new realism" is *self-consciously* naturalistic, and aims to subvert the very model of perception that

naturalism has historically reinforced. The new realist playwright uses naturalistic structures toward the end of undermining the positivist view of the world that once gave rise to those very structures.

This study attempts to trace the evolution of the treatment of money and economic life across this route Demastes maps, as the naturalist and realist American play becomes *self-consciously* naturalist and realist with the ultimate aim of undercutting the foundations of these very modes. What we find however is far from a straightforward move from a realism based on nineteenth-century positivism to one encompassing what is essentially a postmodern outlook. Rather, the works discussed here more often express a deep ambivalence regarding money and the logic of naturalism – a desire to transcend that logic and a sense of almost mourning it. The characters demonstrate the performativity of identity, the absence of a stable, “hard” value underneath their money *or* their language. At the same time, they are often haunted by a need to show what’s “inside” them, what (in the language of Mamet’s salesmen) they are “made of.” In this way the characters of these plays resemble the money that they are alternately (sometimes simultaneously) chasing, running from, spending, and hoarding.



## CHAPTER TWO

### BLOOD MONEY AND BAD PENNIES: MONEY AND IDENTITY IN SIDNEY KINGSLEY'S *DEAD END*

Sidney Kingsley's play *Dead End* appeared during what many critics see as a "middle period" of Depression-era drama, both chronologically and ideologically. R.C. Reynolds divides thirties drama into three phases: "hard-line Marxist drama" of the period 1929-1933, social criticism with a Marxist flavor of the period 1933-1936, and a Popular-Front-era "softening" of the Marxist position in favor of themes of unity and social cooperation on the eve of the second World War (xvi-xxvii). Appearing during Reynolds's second phase, Kingsley's most important work is seen by the critic as "synthesizing the militant ideals of the left with the palatable drama of the commercial theatre" (Reynolds 59). Malcolm Goldstein divides thirties drama into two periods, the second of which, beginning with the 1935-36 season which saw the debut of *Dead End*, is characterized by "a resurgence of optimism caused by New Deal pump-priming measures" as well as a Popular-Front-era softening of the Marxist critique of capitalism that characterized earlier thirties drama (vii-viii). Similarly, Rabkin places the productions of the Group Theatre – of which *Dead End* was one – in the ideological middle ground between the more stridently Marxist Theatre Union and the less revolutionary Federal Theatre Project (29).

Despite, or perhaps because of, Kingsley's being (along with Elmer Rice, Robert E. Sherwood, and Irwin Shaw) a writer of the ideological "middle ground," *Dead End* in its original Broadway production was an unqualified popular success. It followed by two years the playwright's Pulitzer Prize-winning debut, *Men in White*, ran for a very impressive 687 performances on Broadway, received mostly favorable critical reviews at its premiere, and was turned into a successful film.<sup>4</sup> A careful consideration of *Dead End* shows that it offers no easy answers, no clear way forward precisely because its great power is to expose the paradoxes of life in an America where everything and everyone is a commodity. The *Dead End*

of the title is not simply the poverty that the play's dual protagonists seem hopeful of escaping by play's end. The term also characterizes, and problematizes, that "escape," the success of which necessitates embracing the very values that lead to the characters' entrapment. At the heart of this paradox is money.

*Dead End* is, as one reviewer called it, a "Story of Wealth and Poverty Living Together" ("Explosive Play" 17). The setting is a spot on New York's Upper East Side where the squalid poverty of a tenement house abuts the rear entrance of a newly erected luxury condominium complex. It is also, in keeping with the naturalism of the American stage in the thirties, a study of the determinative effects of such inequality. Accordingly, the play focuses on two generations produced by the tenements: a gang of adolescent and pre-adolescent boys, and the adults Pete Gimpty, Baby-Face Martin, and Drina. Each generation possesses a character with a strong sense of decency and honor: Tommy, the leader of the gang of boys; and Gimpty, an out-of-work and slightly crippled architect who dreams of building decent housing for the poor. And in each generational group, the honorable character is opposed by a dishonorable one: the malign Spit among the boys; and Baby-Face Martin, a gangster with a reward on his head who has returned to the "old neighborhood" to try to reconnect with both his mother and an old love, among the adults. In each generational group, this honor is tested, and the highly ambiguous results reveal the difficulty, if not impossibility, of escaping poverty with one's honor intact. Tommy eventually forgoes vengeance on Spit for the latter's selling him out to the authorities for the promise of cash, and turns himself in. Gimpty, on the other hand, resolves his difficulties by collecting reward money for providing information that leads to the police's killing of Baby-Face, his childhood friend. At play's end, the parallel plots come together when Gimpty plans to marry Drina (Tommy's sister and guardian), and use his reward money to get Tommy the best lawyer money can buy – a "happy" ending, but a morally ambiguous one given the play's themes of honor and the corrupting influence of money.

From beginning to end, the world of the play is one in which nearly all relations between people involve economic transactions. The gang of boys, Kingsley is careful to show, gain their sense that everything in life has a price from adults. Early in the first act, this is made clear when Angel – the most innocent member of Tommy's gang – cannot produce information sought by Baby-Face Martin's goon and then asks for money. The goon's reply, "Nuttin' fer nuttin," characterizes the life of the play's characters more succinctly than any other single line (100). The sickly boy T.B has learned a similar lesson in reform school: he explains in Act II

that there, inmates get "slop" to eat "unless dey git some dough tuh smeah' da jailies wid" (150).

The boys clearly take lessons like these to heart. While on one level they share a degree of camaraderie not seen among any of the adult characters in the play, as they spend their days swimming in the polluted waters of the East River, hatching plots to acquire money or food, and taunting their rich neighbors, their relations are also characterized by a certain lack of trust that is repeatedly associated in the play with economic relations. Nothing is freely given. When Milty, a new boy, wants to enter their gang, he must pay cash to the gang leader, Tommy. Tommy obviously likes and respects Milty; but business is business, and the payment must be made (95). When Spit steals a "boy-scout knife" from Angel, Tommy intervenes and returns the knife to its rightful owner. But even this seemingly generous act becomes part of an economic transaction, through Tommy's pointed remark to Angel: "Don' say I nevuh gave yuh nuttin!" (94). The comment seems to make Tommy's action less the giving of a gift than the establishing of credit to be called in at some later date. Add to these instances the nearly constant accusations that one or another of the boys is "holding out" by not sharing some real or imagined bit of cash, and the instances where one boy physically searches another for money, and it becomes clear that money, on one level, functions naturalistically in this play as a force that has "corrupted" the boys' otherwise easy-going and "innocent" relations. The boys' "fall" from innocence into experience is likewise a fall into the economic.

While this corrupting aspect of money seems clearly meant to shock the play's 1935 audience by showing the morally crippling effects of capitalism, especially on the young, Kingsley wants to present another side to the representation of money in this play. When, in the next act, Tommy tries to use the credit he established earlier by asking to borrow Angel's knife, the latter refuses to lend it. When the situation threatens to become violent, Milty, the new boy who bought his way into the gang, solves the problem by *buying* the knife from Angel and then *giving* it to Tommy. This one gratuitous act is almost more than Tommy can process. "Yuh mean yuh givin' it tuh me?" asks Tommy in disbelief (122). Tommy's surprise at the very idea of a gift speaks much about the brutally calculating nature of the boys' world. And when Milty shrugs off Tommy's appreciation, insisting, "dat's nuttin,'" Tommy insists "dat's a whole lot" (122-23). Aside from the play's concluding scene, where Tommy declines to punish Spit for betraying him, this gift-giving represents the sole episode in the play where one of the boys gives something to another without demanding something in return. Yet this gift

is only made possible through an economic transaction – Milty’s buying the knife from Angel. In this instance, Kingsley seems to want to show that the fact that everything in the boys’ world has a price is not necessarily incompatible with selfless and altruistic acts between people. In fact, Milty’s ability to buy the knife seems to make the violence, threatened or real, that normally characterizes the way the boys get what they want unnecessary. Similarly, Milty’s buying his way into Tommy’s gang brings Milty and Tommy together and avoids Milty’s being harassed by the boys, while in another sense reducing that coming-together to a business transaction.

In *The Philosophy of Money* Simmel locates several of the paradoxes Kingsley would explore in *Dead End* as both the symbolic content and practical consequence of money. In a money economy, notes Simmel, a certain coolness or objectivity must exist if goods are to acquire *prices*, which presuppose their being bought or sold in the marketplace rather than simply taken at will. For Simmel, this coolness represents the distance that allows the individual human subject to perceive an objective, “real” world existing outside his own subjective consciousness. Economic exchange is “the representative of the distance between subject and object which transforms subjective feelings into objective valuation” (90). Money thus becomes a symbol of both desire and the necessary cooling of desire. Simmel’s analysis offers insight into the paradoxical nature of money in the world of the children of *Dead End*. While in one sense money represents a certain coldness or distance in the relations of each boy to the other – a kind of loss of innocence – in another sense Kingsley seems to want to show that money facilitates social freedom and provides an alternative to violence and theft.

But these benefits come at a cost. In the money-centered world of *Dead End*, where all relations take on the properties of economic relations between commodities, identity emerges as a major problem. One way this is manifest is a near-constant suspicion and mistrust among the characters. No one’s identity can be certain; no one’s word can be trusted. When Tommy, near the end of the play, threatens to hurt Angel if the latter reveals his plans to catch Spit, Angel protests, “Aw, Tommy, yuh know me . . . yuh know me!” But this is not good enough: Tommy repeats his threat and Angel repeats his plea (153). Similarly, when Tommy’s older sister Drina pleads to Mr. Griswald to accept Tommy’s word and not press charges for the boy’s having injured him with a knife, Griswald refuses:

Drina: But you heard him. He swore he wouldn’t ever do it again.

Griswald: I’m afraid I can’t believe that. (163)

The newspapers, we are reminded at least twice, cannot be trusted either: "I'm not here," Martin tells Gimpty, "I'm out West. Read da papers" (102); and later, Francey tells Martin, "They said yuh wuz out aroun' Coloradah—th'noospaubs!" (138).

The play's association of money with an arbitrary relationship between appearance and reality finds its most powerful and uncanny manifestation in the gangster Baby-Face Martin. Appearing in the first act with a surgically altered face, dyed hair, and an assumed name, he is also a man, we are told in the stage directions, "*given to sudden volcanic violences that come and are gone in a breath*" (90). This frightening volatility and inconstancy characterize most of his interactions with other characters throughout the play. Related to his own lack of a stable identity is Martin's difficulty recognizing anyone else. It takes Gimpty a few lines in the first act to jog Martin's memory: "Don't you remember me? . . . I'm Gimpty . . . Remember? . . . We were kids here. Don't you remember?" (100). In this encounter, Martin's failure to see contrasts sharply with Gimpty's recognition of Martin, despite the gangster's radically altered physical appearance. Martin, of course, doesn't want to be recognized and insists, "I ain't Martin, you bastard!" and, a few lines later, "My name's Johnson. Git it? Johnson" (100). In this play, Martin is a walking manifestation of the radical break between appearance and essence, face value and material value represented by money.

Martin's calling Gimpty a "bastard" is interesting in that it questions Gimpty's origins and identity. But of course, the irony is that it is Martin who is in an important sense a bastard, rejected as he is by his own mother in the second act. Martin's failed attempt to reconnect with his mother begins with a failure of recognition (Martin: "It's me. *No recognition*. I had my face fixed"[127]) and ends with a *refusal* to recognize: "Don't call me Mom!" responds Martin's mother, "Yuh ain't no son of mine" and later "Why don't yuh leave me ferget yuh?"(127). Martin's mother's failure to either visually or existentially recognize Martin as her son is a powerful instance of the play's association of money with monstrosity. Denied as he is by his own mother, the "self-made" and cosmetically transformed Martin becomes disturbingly self-generating: he bears no discernable trace of his origins and appears to have been bred out of his own "barren" metal. Faced with this dilemma, Martin ironically and tragically tries to reconnect with his mother via the very medium that marks his separation, as he tries to trade money for his mother's love; but Mrs. Martin refuses to take what she calls his "blood money" (128).

"Blood money" is an interesting idea given the play's exploration of money's "neutrality" or "lack of character." The notion that money can

carry a moral taint as a result of the way in which it was earned seems to run counter to the very idea of money as elaborated by thinkers like Simmel and Shell. The idea of blood money denies money's lack of character, and therefore seems to represent what a postmodern perspective might view as the repression of money. In other words, if it is the alienating and neutralizing effects of money that one is bothered by, then the notion of money that takes on the character of its user can be seen as comforting. But interestingly, just a few lines earlier, Martin's mother invokes just those qualities of money her later comment will deny, when she tells her son to leave and "not come back like a bad penny!" (128). On one level, Martin's mother's words indicate the gangster's physical change by comparing him to counterfeit money – he appears to be what he is in fact not. There is also an obvious moral connotation in her use of "bad," reflecting her disgust at Martin's degraded humanity. At closer inspection however, it seems clear that the line expresses horror not at the commodification of Martin, but just the opposite: Martin's mother blames her son for not *fully* becoming a commodity. He has "come back" to his mother, has refused to be "spent" the way a bad (i.e. counterfeit) penny might come back to its would-be spender. On this level, what is counterfeit or false about Martin is not the persona he has adopted; what is counterfeit is his trying to be again what he once was. As money and nothing else, Baby-Face in no way reflects morally on his mother. If she lets her son reconnect with her on what she perceives as a more fundamental level, she is forced to share the blame in what he has become. This is dramatized in the play by her "*clutching her stomach,*" and crying "in here! Kickin'! That's where you come from. God! I ought to be cut open fer givin' yuh life . . . murderer!!!" (128). Rather than live with this guilt, Mrs. Martin seeks the only comfort available to her in what Simmel calls the distanced or "cool" relations that result from the commodification of life and that find their most powerful symbol in money. Yet the horrifying spectacle of Martin's rejection by his mother surely problematizes the play's tendency toward a rather pragmatic view of the morality of money relations.

Money plays a similarly important role in Martin's next failed attempt to reconnect with his past. Like the encounter between Martin and his mother, this one also begins with a failure of recognition. In the second act, Martin manages to locate his old lover Francey, but refuses to see what is obvious to both the audience and other characters in the play: that she has become a diseased prostitute. Kingsley's stage directions tell us Francey is "*an obvious whore of the lowest class, wearing her timeless profession defiantly*"; yet Martin refuses to see and is puzzled by

Francey's obvious embarrassment, until, finally, the stage directions tell us he "sees her. *The nostalgic dream is finished. His lips begin to curl in disgust*" (139). When Martin asks Francey why she didn't get a job or even "starve" rather than become a prostitute, Francey asks him why *he* didn't do the same; yet Martin seems oblivious to the extent to which he has sold himself just like Francey (140).

As it did in the confrontation between Martin and his mother, in this one between Martin and Francey once again money figures paradoxically as that which creates distance between characters, and, tragically, as the only available means for overcoming that distance. Francey's turning herself into a commodity has led to her illness. Now, "*clutching at hope,*" she suggests that perhaps Martin's money can pay for a doctor to make her healthy again. But this time it is Martin who is more pessimistic about the powers of money. Still, Francey's eyes are "*glued to the money*" in Martin's hand, and her attempts to wheedle more and more out of him leave him ever more disgusted (140).

A version of the self-made man, Martin has lived by his own rules. He justifies his life of crime to Gimpty in the first act, explaining that he couldn't wait around "fer Santa Claus tuh take care a me" and had to act (102). And he has made a kind of success of himself. But in being *self-made*, he trades a "deeper" sense of identity, of place (the "old neighborhood"), and of connection with others (Francey and his mother) for money. When Gimpty expresses disapproval of what Martin has done to earn his money, Martin answers by rattling off the prices of various items of expensive clothing he is wearing (103). In Kingsley's moral equation, the freedom from his past, the overcoming of his environment Martin has gained has come at the cost of his own humanity, and at play's end the transition from human being to commodity is complete when Gimpty cashes in on the reward money for helping to kill Martin. The complete erasure of Martin's identity, the total transformation from man into monster is dramatized at the end of the second act as a medical intern called to the scene remarks, "They certainly did a job on him! Nothing left to look at but chopped meat" (145). Hal Foster reads the prominence of "images of corporeal fragmentation" in American literature of the thirties as evidence of an anxiety over "the becoming machine and/or commodity of the body" (qtd. in Solomon 14). The description certainly fits the character of Baby-Face Martin, who is both commodity and (through his plastic surgery) a piece of technology. Arriving on the scene, Mulligan the police officer reads off Martin's height, weight, and marital status, and remarks with admiration on Martin's diamond ring and "roll of bills" (145). The man who bought his way out of the "dead end" of the ghetto

ends up as cash and *nothing else*.

The polar opposite of the calculating, pragmatic Martin, Pete Gimpty, the out-of-work architect whose lame leg symbolizes his inability to escape the ghetto, is (at the beginning of the play) the idealist almost to the point of caricature. If Martin personifies a modernist, commodified present irrevocably cut off from the past, Gimpty conversely seems oblivious to present realities and lives entirely in recollections of the past and utopian plans for the future – the latter represented by his architectural drawings for housing that, he seems to believe, will never be built. Kingsley's stage directions describe Gimpty as a "*sensitive-faced young man*" with a drawing board in his lap. They also tell us, "*Occasionally he will work feverishly . . . , then he will let the pencil droop, and stare out over the river with deep-set eyes, dream-laden, moody*" (86). In a way Gimpty's distractedness from present reality allows him to see through what deceives others: he recognizes Martin despite the gangster's greatly changed appearance, explaining the recognition by the fact that he knew Martin as a child (155). On the other hand, Gimpty's refusal (or inability) to live in the present leaves him oblivious, most of the time, to Drina's obvious attraction to him and to the downward moral spiral of the kids from the neighborhood.

Once he recognizes him, Martin remembers Gimpty as an honorable and trustworthy kid (100). And the difference between Gimpty's idealism and Martin's pragmatism is demonstrated in at least two scenes. In the first act Martin sneeringly points out that Gimpty, who followed society's rules for achieving success by getting an education and learning a profession, is on home relief while Martin got rich by taking what he wanted and breaking the rules (102-103). In the second act, Gimpty strongly objects to the advice Martin gives to the gang of boys regarding how to conduct a fight with a rival gang: "when yuh fight, dee idee is tuh win. It don' cut no ice how" and "If yuh wanna win, yuh gotta make up yer own rules, see?" (121).

In the course of the play, the idealism Kingsley is careful to associate with Gimpty receives a series of blows, and money figures in each. The first blow comes in the form of Baby-Face Martin, whose moral pragmatism and materialism seem to have provided a path out of the same ghetto that traps Gimpty. The next blow comes in the form of a failed relationship. Gimpty is in love with Kay, an upwardly mobile resident of the luxury high-rise building that towers over Gimpty's "old neighborhood." But Kay soon recognizes that she is not willing to give up money and the life it makes possible to marry Gimpty, and instead will marry the wealthy Jack Hilton, whom she does not love. She explains to Gimpty, "I've