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A COMPARATIVE STUDY
OF
SOME RECENT AMERICAN PLAYS
A THESIS
SUBMITTED TO THE GRADUATE FACULTY OF
THE UNIVERSITY OF NEBRASKA FOR THE DEGREE OF
MASTER OF ARTS

BY

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LINCOLN 1910

UMI Number: EP33076

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PREFACE

Of late years the acute interest taken by scholars in the drama and the future of the drama in America, has occasioned violent and varied controversies concerning American dramatic art. Assertions were made by Bliss Perry and others, and were ably championed by the New York World, that there was no dramatic art in America. Immediately equally positive assertions from Henry Watterson, B. R. Herts and many others, were forthcoming, declaring that American art not only rivalled but even surpassed that of Europe. In neither case, however, were grounds given to support the contention; consequently, both were taken for just what they were worth, mere statements.

Whether or not the American drama has artistic merit, the facts that American plays have produced the results for which they were written, have vitally interested and conveyed their message to audiences both at home and abroad, that they live and have been approved by the thinking public, bespeak for them a certain merit, dramatic

or otherwise. With Charles Frohman's London invasion, the American drama has been successfully produced in England, William Gillette's Secret Service has satisfied Parisian audiences. The Witching Hour has been included with the great dramas of the day.

With these facts in mind, together with the fact that practically no work has ever been done upon the so-called acting drama, a study of this field would seemingly not be without interest. It is not the purpose to enter into the controversy as to dramatic art in America, but merely to take the representative and approved American drama as it is, and by dissection and analysis, to make a study of literary and dramatic values, with particular reference to construction and technique.

In order to make the study, it was essential to secure the best American plays, concerning the merits of which there was much diversity of opinion and no authority. To have value for such a study as the following, the plays to be treated must have been successful from the audience point of view and, likewise, must have had the approval of critics. Accordingly letters were written to

some of the most eminent newspaper critics, actors, stage directors, theatrical managers and literary critics, as Henry B. Harris, Henry Miller, John Corbin, James O'Donnell Bennett, and many others of equal prominence, asking their personal opinion as to the best American play of the past fifty years. From the answers received, a list of four plays was compiled. The Witching Hour and The Great Divide had easy precedence over all others.

Of the plays chosen, each represents the work of a different author, each has been successfully presented and each has received universal approval.

The plays that were chosen, are:--

The Great Divide by William Vaughn Moody.

The Witching Hour by Augustus Thomas.

The Girl with the Green Eyes by Clyde Fitch.

The Wolf by Eugene Walter.

June 1910

INTRODUCTION

Although the point has been clearly set forth by eminent students of the drama, a wide-spread confusion of ideas concerning dramatic action and its relationship to pure literature, seems responsible, at least in part, for a great deal of controversy anent the artistry of certain plays.

Distinction
between
drama and
literature

Concerning this subject Brander Matthews says: "It is, perhaps, going a little too far to assert that the drama can be as independent of literature as painting may be, or as sculpture; and yet this is an overstatement only: it is not an untruth."¹ In support of this statement, he cites examples of the rudimentary drama of the Aleutian Indians as well as certain crude dramatic attempts of the natives of Australia.² In each case a complete dramatic action is presented. No words are spoken, yet each action is plainly understood. In the same connection may be mentioned the modern pantomime and the moving picture

¹Brander Matthews, The Development of the Drama, p. 15.

²Ibid., pp. 10-15.

exhibition, each of which presents a complete and self-explanatory dramatic action, without the aid of a spoken or written word.

What constitutes the drama is often a mooted question among dramatists and producers. Frequently plays are stolen and the dialogue partly or entirely changed, while the sequence of ideas remains intact. That the dramatic action is identical cannot be disputed, yet, its literary value is often wholly lost with the modification of the original diction.

The examples cited seem to prove conclusively, that drama and literature may be considered entirely independent and apart from each other. It is likewise as obvious, that the literary and dramatic arts may be two separate and distinct arts.

While it is undoubtedly true that drama and literature may be entirely distinct, it is also true that they are more or less closely related, in that they are often associated.

Much of the controversy seemingly arises from a confusion of terms. A drama may exhibit consummate dramatic craftsmanship and yet be devoid of literary value. Often the dramatic artistry of such plays is condemned, whereas, the lack is purely one of literary

merit.

While the Greek drama is considered the progenitor of drama proper, the English drama Association of literature "burst forth in newness of life" during and drama the Elizabethan period, and the influence of those palmy days, even yet, remains. At that time the play house fulfilled a two-fold mission. It supplied the cravings of the patrons for literature as well as drama, and the plays of the day are found to supply both demands.

Shakespeare, the genius, most nearly approached the summit of drama in harmoniously blending the highest qualities of each art. He was a poet as well as a dramatist and, as proof of his excellence, his work still stands. The contemporary dramatists used the same method, i. e., combining dramatic action and literature. This period is the beginning of the, so called, literary drama.

The Elizabethan tendency to combine pure literature and dramatic action prevailed as the only form of drama until, as seen especially in Emile Effect of nineteenth century materialism Zola, the wave of materialism swept over Europe. Drama as well as other forms of art were similarly affected and changed. Pure lit-

erature and drama were separated. Although the older form of drama persisted, the new tendency was to present nothing but the real. The characters must be true to life in the smallest detail. They must be men and women, act only as men act and speak only as men speak, in real life. No more did Claude Melnotte declaim in extempore blank verse, or the in-keeper converse in the most polished diction. The characters must be men and must speak colloquially. The attempt was made to transplant real life into the drama.

The realization, however, soon came, that life in detail is not art, that the drama, as well as other forms of art, is made up of conventions and as a result a more sane balance was struck.

From the association of the literary and dramatic arts arise the widely varied forms of drama. Forms of drama
At the pinnacle stands the author who combines the highest literary art with the most consummate craftsmanship, giving the sublimest of poetic drama. At one extreme is found the poem having dramatic form but lacking in dramatic qualities; at the other, the dramatic action proper with little or no literary merit. Between the two extremes exist all degrees of combination of the two arts in dramatic form. There is drama having

great literary merit with few dramatic qualities, represented by the Plato dialogues, Byron's Manfred, etc.; and there is that, which combines the highest and best of each art, the plays of Shakespeare being the best examples. Lastly, there is the dramatic action in pantomime, or clothed with an unliterary or colloquial diction.

This degree of combination forms the basis for classification into two separate groups, the so-called "literary" and "naturalistic" drama.

In using the term literary drama, it must be remembered that it is used only as a name. The literary drama
It does not assert that other forms of
drama may not have literary qualities. This would
involve the determination of what may be included and
what may be excluded from the broad and not definitely
defined boundaries of the literary field.

By the term literary drama, however, is meant that form in which the dramatic action is not the only and vital aim, but, which is written from the viewpoint of literature, and may combine dramatic qualities in varying degree.

It has been pointed out that the Elizabethan drama was all drama of this type, the best examples of

which have a complete logical dramatic action, clothed in either poetry or an exalted literary diction. The subsequent English drama adhered to this form, and through the works of Dryden, Rowe, Addison, Goldsmith, Sheridan, Knowles, Lytton, as well as other authors, the style prevailed. While the blank verse and poetical drama is of necessity of the literary variety¹, yet English drama, until about the middle of the nineteenth century, came under this head. On the continent the same condition existed, and the dramas of Schiller and Goethe, as well as those of French and Spanish dramatists furnish examples of the literary type.

The literary drama differs widely in itself, according to its relative literary and dramatic merits. It may be simply a poem in dramatic form, or it may have much dramatic merit with a literary diction.

Shakespeare approached a harmonious combination of excellence in each art. Byron's Manfred and Cain and Coleridge's Remorse were literary and had little dramatic value. Knowles' Virginus, although of the liter-

¹ See Walter Pritchard Eaton's article, The Dramatist as Man of Letters, Scribner's Magazine, Apr. 10, 1910.

ary type, lacked literary value¹, while it exhibited a certain dramatic strength. Lytton's Lady of Lyons and Richelieu each presented a dramatic action, of more or less merit, embellished by a mingled blank verse and exalted literary dialogue.

This form of drama, which was admittedly a blending of the two arts, tended to make the characters unnatural and stilted and could not conform in any way with the new materialistic tendencies.

As a result, from a partial blending of the literary with the materialistic ideas, a new and independent drama was evolved.

This new form of drama clearly indicated the permanent effect produced by the wave of materialism, in that it has a decided leaning toward the materialistic dramatic ideas.

The natural-
istic drama

This drama is primarily the dramatic action (action used in a sense not to mean movement, but the progress of the plot itself).² The characters and action although not true to life in detail, appear so

¹See Calvin S. Brown, The Later English Drama,
Introd., p. 16.

²Brander Matthews, The Development of the Drama,
Chap. I. p. 20.

to the audience. The spectator is, with the rise of the curtain, plunged into a new environment, and the characters before him are living moving beings.

The materialistic influence is evidenced in that this drama seems to portray life in detail. This however is not the case, the appearance is merely such to the spectator. This form of drama relies solely on dramatic artistry with no supports from the literary field. While it cannot be said that the naturalistic drama may not have literary value, it is true that the drama is primarily the dramatic action, the literary purport being purely secondary and accessory and in many cases wanting. The diction is no more colloquial and natural than are the characters and actions. It is dressed up for a purpose and is therefore, in a degree, literature. Since in each of these two types of drama the dramatic and literary artistry is blended, much difficulty is experienced in drawing hard and fast boundary lines between them. Yet wide differences exist. The distinction really lies in the purport, the naturalistic drama being written from a dramatic view-point solely.

The wide difference appears in the naturalistic effect. In the literary drama the literary diction

robs the character to a certain extent of its reality. The characters are made to appear unreal and unnatural. Their discourse is that of books rather than of human beings. The author does not sacrifice the literary effect for the sake of naturalism.

In the other form the naturalistic effect is the all in all. Incidentally it may be literary, but not at the cost of its apparent realism.

To the naturalistic school belongs the large part of modern drama. The works of Ibsen, Pinero, as well as of the German and French dramatists, are written for the stage rather than the study. Their realism is not allowed to be marred by the fact that the diction is exact and literary. Apparently the characters speak as men speak, think as men think, act as men act. The action is presented in such a way as to seem that a block of life had been taken out and placed before us. The materialism of the age demands a naturalistic drama, a drama which embodies only such poetry or literature as may be found incidental in every day life; a drama written without literary purport and divorced from elevated diction and literary digressions, which would tend to mar the illusion of life itself.

Modern tendencies in drama

Although the modern tendency is toward naturalism, yet the advent of the naturalistic drama has not exterminated the older form. They can and are made to flourish side by side. In France, Rostand has given us the poetic drama in Cyrano. In England, Stephen Phillips has signally succeeded in combining poetry and drama in Ulysses, while in America, Percy Mackaye has produced drama which likewise successfully combines the two arts.

In a recent magazine article John Galsworthy has not only set clearly forth the two prevailing forms of drama, but he has also shown the modern tendency by a speculative statement as to the particular forms that our nascent drama is likely to assume. Concerning which he has said:--

"To me, at least, it seems that these main channels will be two in number and situate far apart. The one will be the broad and clear cut channel of naturalism, down which will course a drama poignantly shaped and inspired with high intention, but faithful to the seething and multiple life round us; a drama such as some are inclined to term photographic, gulled by a seeming simplicity into forgetfulness of the old proverb, 'Ars est celare artem,' and unable to perceive that, to be vital, such drama is in every respect as dependent on imagination, construction, selection, and elimination--the main laws in fact of artistry--as ever was the romantic or rhapsodic play. The other of these two main channels will, I think, be a twisting and delicious stream, which will bear on its breast new barks of poetry, shaped, it may be like prose, but a prose

incarnating through its fantasy and symbolism, all the deeper aspirations, yearnings, doubts and mysterious stirrings of the human spirit; a poetic prose drama, emotionalizing us by its diversity and purity of form and invention, and whose province will be to disclose the elemental soul of man, and the forces of nature, not perhaps as the old tragedies disclosed them, or in epic mood, but with a certain freakish beauty, and the spirit of discovery."¹

In America, as elsewhere, are found the two schools of drama, the naturalistic drama, however, predominating to a much more marked degree.

Not only does this form predominate but in the American drama the naturalistic tendency is accentuated to the extent of making it individual. The drama in America This drama is solely the dramatic action. Some examples may have merit as pure literature, in many however the literary qualities are lacking. In any case its literary merit is incidental. It is the work of the dramatist, not the author, and is born of dramatic, and only dramatic, insight. This drama is the sequence of thoughts or ideas given to the spectator, by whatever means. The value depends upon the thoughts themselves and how logically, clearly and forcibly they are presented. As all purely dramatic

¹John Galsworthy, Some Platitudes concerning Drama, Atlantic Monthly Magazine, Dec., 1909.

work, it was written for stage presentation.¹ It is powerful in its reality. To the spectator it is life itself. Its characters are human brothers, having kindred joys, sorrows, and ambitions, which are shared by the audience. Its truths forcibly strike home by being presented through the powerful swaying of men's emotions. It is the American drama, the naturalistic drama, "the most fastidious and poignant of all dramatic forms," intensified.

As has been noted,² the poetic drama likewise exists in America and, when of merit, does not fail of appreciation. But in all events it must be judged solely as poetic or literary drama. It is a combination of the craftsmanship of the two arts, and the whole must be judged according to the relative merits of the results of each, and the harmony of their conjunction.

It has its proper sphere in the broad artistic field and in no case should it be confused with the more prevalent form, nor can they be judged by the

¹Brander Matthews, The Development of the Drama, Chap. I. p. 30.

²Supra. . . . p. 10

same standards. Each is individual. One is dramatic action, which may or may not be clothed in dialogue having merit as pure literature; the other is ostensibly a union of pure literature and drama. That a confusion of ideas concerning the two forms of drama, does exist is evidenced by a article from The New York World.¹ The contention is here made that there is no dramatic art in America, and in support of this argument, is cited the fact that "school boy orators" will not "spout passages", nor "use for copy book mottoes" selections from the modern American drama, as has been done from The Lady of Lyons or Richelieu. Confusion concerning the two forms of drama

That this is true, only supports the contention that this drama is not literature. It in no wise shows that it may not be dramatic. The art of the dramatist has been condemned because of a lack of literary qualities. The naturalistic drama has been judged by the standards of poetical drama.

The same statement might be made concerning the plays of Ibsen or Pinero, yet their dramatic artistry

¹Henry Watterson, (Louisville) Courier Journal,
Dec. 1909.

is universally admitted.

The plays to be studied in the following pages are all examples of the naturalistic drama. Each is primarily the dramatic action and was written for the theatre, in which case the audience is the sole judge of its merits.

Nature of the American dramas to be examined

That these plays have vitally interested and held thinking audiences, have indelibly photographed their truths upon the consciousness, by powerful emotional appeals, is evidence of their virility and strength. Critics, men of letters, and audiences have pronounced them good drama.

That they have merit is obvious. It is also as obvious that their value does not arise from their position in the field of pure literature. Their worth must therefore be a dramatic worth. Their artistry, dramatic artistry. Their strength and virility, a result of the craftsmanship of the play-wright, a result of dramatic insight.

The following study of this drama must therefore be a study of dramatic rather than of literary qualities. The merit must lie in one or all of a few points, the materials used, the authors' skill in put-

ting these materials into proper form, or the authors' ability to make living character. Considering the present uncertain state of criticism, and the diversified opinions of equally eminent authorities, this seems the logical way to make a study of the subject. The plays have been tried and proved. Whether or not they conform to critical canon in either materials, construction or characterization, it seems safe to assert that a play may be correctly based on these principles. It is the American drama as it is, and is accepted.

PREVIEW

I

THE WITCHING HOUR

by

Augustus Thomas

In this play, which has not only been highly praised by the theatre going public,¹ but has been called the greatest American play of the past twelve years,² Mr. Thomas has gone into the realm of the occult.

Of late, the scientific world has vitally concerned itself with the problems of experimental psychology. Harvard College, The University of Chicago and many of the best universities, are conducting investigations along this line. Medical science has accepted and is making use of mental suggestion and hypnosis. Not only the scientific investigators but the thinking world has deeply concerned itself in the workings of the human mind. Whether or not Mr. Thom-

The materials

¹Henry Watterson, The (Louisville) Courier Journal, 1909.

²Louis DeFoe, The Green Book, Dec., 1909.