

1959

# Serious domestic drama as tragedy : a study of the protagonist

Charles Turney

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarship.richmond.edu/masters-theses>

 Part of the [English Language and Literature Commons](#)

---

## Recommended Citation

Turney, Charles, "Serious domestic drama as tragedy : a study of the protagonist" (1959). *Master's Theses*. 1352.  
<https://scholarship.richmond.edu/masters-theses/1352>

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Student Research at UR Scholarship Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in Master's Theses by an authorized administrator of UR Scholarship Repository. For more information, please contact [scholarshiprepository@richmond.edu](mailto:scholarshiprepository@richmond.edu).

**SERIOUS DOMESTIC DRAMA AS TRAGEDY:  
A STUDY OF THE PROTAGONIST**

**A THESIS**

**Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements  
for the Degree Master of Arts in the Graduate  
School of The University of Richmond**

**CHARLES TURNEY, B. A.**

**THE UNIVERSITY OF RICHMOND**

**1959**

Approved for the  
Department of English  
and the Graduate School by

Lewis F. Ball  
Professor of English

B. C. Holgate  
Dean of the Graduate School

## PREFACE

A classification of a group of plays by different authors written at different times under a general title of domestic drama is of necessity arbitrary. A further classification of certain of these plays as tragedies and others as problem plays is also arbitrary; but while there may be little objection to the first classification, it is almost certain that some objection will arise over the second because there is a suggestion that those plays not included as tragedies must have some fault and are not as good as the ones selected. Such an impression is not at any time intended. All of the plays analyzed in this paper have been proven to be good drama. Therefore, there is no intent to disparage the abilities of the playwrights nor the value of the representative plays as good drama. Rather, an attempt has been made to ascertain exactly what is the one factor which all tragedies must possess; and by using this standard, which of course is also arbitrary, an attempt will be made to discover which of the included domestic dramas may be qualified as tragedies and which of them may not be.

There has been no intent to include a particular author's best work; but instead, that work which lends itself best to the purposes of this paper. Moreover, questions may arise over this choice of representative plays, or why certain plays have not been included. According to the limits of the paper, it would be impractical to include all the domestic dramas which have been written; therefore, the plays which have been chosen should be considered as a cross-section of domestic drama.

The supporting evidence for the conclusions found in this paper has been acquired by a careful analysis of the plays themselves balanced against the opinions of recognized critics of drama. Ideally, one should see each of these plays performed by some competent theatrical group instead of merely reading them. Perhaps a more accurate analysis would be the result, but such an opportunity is almost impossible to arrange. Thus, instead of seeing a living drama acted, it has been necessary to project the characters in the mind's eye as I imagined they would appear. This naturally makes my conclusions even more arbitrary. Therefore, I humbly offer this attempt at an analysis of the characteristics relative to tragedy, and if disagreement

arises over my conclusions, my wish is that at least the intent be recognized as honest.

I am deeply indebted to the critics cited in this paper and most especially to Allardyce Nicoll, upon whom I have relied heavily for background material necessary to transitional portions between the plays as well as to the analysis of the plays themselves.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER	PAGE
PREFACE . . . . .	111
I. CHARACTERISTICS OF DOMESTIC DRAMA AND QUALIFICATIONS NECESSARY FOR TRUE TRAGEDY .	1
EARLY DOMESTIC DRAMAS . . . . .	12
II. REPRESENTATIVE CONTINENTAL DRAMAS . . . . .	27
III. REPRESENTATIVE BRITISH AND IRISH DRAMAS . . . . .	83
IV. REPRESENTATIVE AMERICAN DRAMAS . . . . .	117
CONCLUSION . . . . .	149
WORKS CITED . . . . .	157
VITA	

## CHAPTER I

### CHARACTERISTICS OF DOMESTIC DRAMA AND QUALIFICATIONS NECESSARY FOR TRUE TRAGEDY

The domestic play has now become one of the primary means of expression for the serious dramatist. However, serious doubt exists as to whether these plays can be considered as the proper vehicle for true tragedy. Allardyce Nicoll restricts many of them under a general classification of drame; that is, "simply a serious problem play where emotions never rise to tragic height and where the dénouement is in harmony with the general atmosphere of the plot."<sup>1</sup> This is all too often true, but fortunately some domestic dramas rise above this level. It is the purpose of this paper to investigate some of the better domestic dramas and attempt to prove that these plays succeed or fail as tragedies because of the magnitude of the protagonist as a person. Before considering the plays themselves, it is necessary to examine exactly what constitutes this drama and attempt to establish the criteria by which these plays may or may not succeed as tragedy.

---

<sup>1</sup> Allardyce Nicoll, British Drama (London, 1946), page 363.



Drama is a changing art. It satisfies the wants of a particular age and must appeal to current taste in order to achieve success. Of course, great drama is timeless, but all dramatists of note have written with their audiences in mind; and if their particular work becomes established as a perennial favorite, it is because they have succeeded in creating characters with timeless qualities. Critics have continually endeavored to establish rules, harking back to Aristotle's Poetics. The neoclassic critics devised a definite list of qualifications which they felt tragedy had to possess. Such regulations will, of themselves, quite naturally stifle any development in drama; and further, if tragedy must conform to a strict formula, it will soon become an oddity, for there will be no room for development, and there will be no allowance made for changing tastes. This is not to say that centuries of criticism must be cast aside. But there must be a constant re-evaluation of the aims of drama in general and the qualities of tragedy in particular.

Perhaps the best starting place would be an investigation of domestic drama itself. Domestic drama, as the name implies, deals with family life--its difficulties and problems. The plays are realistic, and they are

concerned with the faithless husband, the erring wife, the arbitrary parent, the prodigal son, the common causes of domestic dissention, be it parental tyranny, jealousy, revenge, infidelity, boredom, selfishness, sex antagonism, or any other circumstance which may cause clashes within a family circle or with immediate associates.<sup>2</sup> There are also to be included within the scope of this drama the misfortunes caused by the direct influence of environmental circumstances beyond the control of the characters which may be natural or man-made. Under these qualifications Sophocles' Oedipus the King and Shakespeare's Othello are domestic dramas. Oedipus and Othello are persons who, in addition to their domestic difficulties, are involved in responsibilities of state. They are idealized personages, and their sufferings and passions are of a great magnitude.<sup>3</sup> This may be the chief objection to classifying domestic dramas as valid tragedies. Robert Metcalf Smith says of Othello and Oedipus that "they have the universality that distinguishes them as heroes of world tragedy."<sup>4</sup> The interpretation of the term "universality" causes certain difficulty. The most distinguishing feature of domestic drama is the universality of the characters

---

<sup>2</sup> Robert Metcalf Smith, ed., Types of Domestic Tragedy, (New York, 1928), page 1.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

in the sense that the man of today can identify himself with the characters in domestic tragedy. It can be either himself or his neighbor, and the forces operating within the play are those which may operate on him. Characters who have universality in this sense are suitable then as characters in real tragedy.

To return to domestic drama as a type, A. E. Morgan has noted that drama is greatest when kept close to common life, and the playwright who places too much emphasis on the beauty of his creation often loses contact with humanity. The natural result is that the art is removed from its source of nourishment.<sup>5</sup> Even a staid but practical critic like William Archer could firmly assert that it was the duty of the stage to "look life straight in the face and not from any predetermined angle."<sup>6</sup> Domestic drama does look life in the face and does it in an honest fashion. Neither special diction, except that which is in keeping with the personality of the characters, nor nobility of station, except the nobility of the human spirit, nor rigid form is required. Realism is achieved by a natural presentation of domestic life. Whether this is an advance or merely a transition according to the times

---

<sup>5</sup> A. E. Morgan, Tendencies of Modern English Drama, (New York, 1924), page 148.

<sup>6</sup> William Archer, The Old Drama and the New, (Boston, 1923), page 18.

and their demand for a certain expression in drama remains to be seen. Archer does continue to say that the progress in drama is not only negative by purging unnecessary elements, but it is also positive because there has been an attempt to acquire a technique whereby the audience will be interested in a "sober and accurate imitation of life."<sup>7</sup> Often because of the very accuracy of domestic drama, it becomes banal. The characters are often too petty and, when they are, the material for true tragedy is missing.

Another element of domestic drama is, as Smith puts it, the tendency to "moralize the age" and hold up for indictment and warning the sins of the erring parent, wife, husband, or lover, or to philosophize on the extraneous forces contributing to the plight of the characters in question.<sup>8</sup> This didacticism has greatly harmed many of the domestic dramas.

The chief detriment to many domestic dramas is, as mentioned before, the pettiness of the characters. They are too common as persons; they have no redeeming feature. However, Smith is very general when he concludes that since domestic problems are special, the

---

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., page 20.

<sup>8</sup> Smith, page 2.

main emotion aroused is pity.<sup>9</sup> But when domestic drama qualifies as tragedy, it does succeed in doing these things because of the dignity inherent in the protagonist. Further, what are special problems? Many of the problems encountered in the greatest tragedies are certainly special. Few of us experience the difficulties of an Oedipus or a Hamlet. The fall of states and kingdoms is difficult to imagine today as depending upon the fall of a single person. Life is no longer that simple. Everyone is caught in an inescapable mesh of forces which present a multitude of problems. These might be considered special if they do not immediately affect us, but they are quite personal--hence universal--in that they can happen to practically any member of the audience. Therefore, the concept of katharsis is as valid today as in the time of Aristotle. In a domestic tragedy the audience can identify itself with the characters, and there is a proper purgation of emotion during these few hours of quite intense, honest feeling. When this occurs, surely the domestic drama involved is worthy to be called great tragedy.

Nicoll cautions that there are certain aims which no dramatist can violate. He groups these aims proper

---

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., page 6.

to tragedy, comedy, and drame, and any confusion of these aims can only result in either failure or mediocrity.<sup>10</sup> But Nicoll goes on to say that tragedy "requires some atmosphere of what may be called majestic grandeur, and this in many domestic plays is entirely lacking."<sup>11</sup> An understanding of what is meant by majestic grandeur must be ascertained, and it may be helpful to turn to Aristotle's Poetics, which provides a very important point of departure for any analysis of tragedy. The following definitions establish a definite criteria which should aid in a differentiation between tragedy and drame. Also, these definitions provide a key to what actually constitutes majestic grandeur and from whence it may spring.

Tragedy then, is an imitation of an action that is serious, complete, and of a certain magnitude; in language embellished with each kind of artistic ornament, the several parts being found in separate parts of the play; in the form of action, not of narrative; through pity and fear effecting the proper purgation of these emotions.

.....

The plot then is the first principle, and as it were, the soul of tragedy: Character holds the second place.

.....

Tragedy is an imitation not only of a complete action, but of events terrible and pitiful.

---

<sup>10</sup> Allardyce Nicoll, The Theory of Drama (New York, 1923), page 174.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

. . .pity is aroused by unmerited misfortune,  
 fear by the misfortune of a man like ourselves.  
 . . . . .

The the protagonist must be one who is  
 highly renowned and prosperous. . . .  
 . . . . .

Tragedy is an imitation of persons who are  
 above common level.<sup>12</sup>

His observations are essential in any attempt to discuss the characteristics of tragedy, but it must be remembered that they constitute tragedy as Aristotle witnessed it. Values have changed, and audiences have changed in attitude and erudition; therefore, the drama must of necessity change. But in the best domestic tragedies all of the mentioned elements except the status of the protagonist are there.

If we may depart from the concept of princes and kings as being the only fit subjects for tragedy, it still remains to be discovered what tragedy should be. From where are to come the awe and grandeur? The difficulty may be attributed to the neoclassicists, who seem to have felt that the rules they formulated would prevent romantic notions from destroying the sternness of tragedy.<sup>13</sup> Granted, there should be something stern and

---

<sup>12</sup> Aristotle, Poetics, in Criticism: The Major Texts, ed. Walter Jackson Bate (New York, 1952), pages 22-9.

<sup>13</sup> Nicoll, The Theory of Drama, page 121.

majestic in this art. But in our present world, persons of a lower station of life are quite capable of being powerful enough within their own sphere of influence to give the impression of majesty, and by their acts provoke awe. Pity is not the emotion to be aroused, because pity soon becomes associated with the sentimental. Many domestic plays are guilty of this fault. However, those domestic dramas which should be included within the confines of tragedy do possess persons with sufficient potential. Hence, awe and majesty are evoked by observation of some affront to noble human dignity of such proportions that the person's station in life is of no concern. Such characters have counterparts widely spread throughout all strata of society, and the audience can identify itself with them. Nicoll agrees that there is a spirit of universality found in every great drama regardless of where or when that play was produced. Although this universality is often only symbolic, it raises a set of circumstances to a higher plane, and the tragic impression is aroused.<sup>14</sup> Nicoll is referring to the subject. The same observation applies when speaking of universality of character as herein defined. It

---

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., pages 101-2.



should be noted that the better domestic dramas, those that should legitimately be classed as tragedy, conform--with necessary adaptation to our times--to the cited portions of the Poetics.

There is one essential difference in domestic drama. Character is perhaps still second to plot, but often, especially in the domestic tragedies, it is the character who gives the plot its significance. His actions and reactions to extraneous or self-inflicted forces, which may be mental, physical, or symbolical, are of utmost importance. Herein is the very heart of universality. Awe and grandeur are provoked by the very nature of the character in question, and it may safely be said that in the best of these dramas katharsis is achieved. Ludwig Lewisohn felt that in modern tragedy man fails to achieve peace with his universe. There is a loss of certitude, a "crying out after a reconciliation with an uncomprehending world."<sup>15</sup>

It must be ascertained what sort of character might possibly fit into a domestic tragedy. He is no longer required to be a person of greatness as far as station is concerned; yet there must be some feature within his make-up which elicits the discussed attributes of a tragic figure. If we agree with Nicoll that "It is the

---

<sup>15</sup> Ludwig Lewisohn, The Modern Drama (New York, 1915), pages 4-5.

hero who gives significance and tone to a tragedy,"<sup>16</sup> then it is the actions of that character which deserve our attention. The important concept of the tragic flaw has been further confounded with the entanglement of external influences and wills with which the hero cannot cope.<sup>17</sup> Moreover, until the time of Marlowe, tragedy was a thing of princes and kings. Marlowe, through the influence of Machiavelli, developed the superman in Tamburlaine, Dr. Faustus, and Barabas. These characters overrode the common moral codes in their effort to realize their particular ideals.<sup>18</sup> After this came Hamlet and Macbeth, wherein, "The tragic hero is placed in a position no other character in the tragedy holds; he becomes not a superman, as with Marlowe's hero, but a figure standing high above his companions."<sup>19</sup> The stage was set for a man of lower station, but with certain attributes of greatness inherent in his own human dignity, to assume the role of a protagonist of a tragedy.

Regardless of the station of the protagonist, an essential factor in tragedy is the struggle. In the domestic tragedies it is not a struggle upon which the

---

<sup>16</sup> Nicoll, The Theory of Drama, page 147.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., Pages 147-52.

<sup>18</sup> Nicoll, British Drama, page 179.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

fate of nations depends; instead it is a struggle with unfriendly forces pertaining to domestic life. The forces have to be powerful, too powerful to overcome, but a tragic figure must have the chance to fail honorably. Most important is that we see this struggle with fate.<sup>20</sup> Lewisohn explains this change in the struggle when he says, "Thus the emphasis of the drama was shifted from what men do to what they suffer."<sup>21</sup>

#### EARLY DOMESTIC DRAMAS

In the very heyday of Elizabethan drama there appeared the first serious domestic play, Arden of Feversham. Its author was probably either Kyd or Shakespeare; and it was acted between 1586 and 1592.<sup>22</sup> This shift from royal themes was perhaps inevitable as the classical restraint of rules and precepts was broken. This play does make the first definite break with tradition.<sup>23</sup> In an age that loved blood tragedies, this play is in keeping with its theme of murder by a wife and her lover. The favorite element of revenge

---

<sup>20</sup> Barrett H. Clark, A Study of the Modern Drama, (New York, 1925), page 340.

<sup>21</sup> Lewisohn, page 3.

<sup>22</sup> John Gassner, Masters of the Drama (New York, 1940), page 202.

<sup>23</sup> Nicoll, British Drama, page 95.

is missing. It is a mediocre play of criminal passion in which the wife, Alice, is infatuated with Mosbie, and the two plot to kill Arden. The characters are unrealistic. Arden vacillates from weakness to strength with no precise delineation of character. Arden of Feversham fails as a true tragedy because it deals with a sordid event, and character development is subordinate to the story. If it is thrilling, it is only because of its graphic description that is without broader significance.

The play remains an oddity; but it is important, for it provided a definite opportunity for English drama to take a new tack with a new type of tragic endeavor.<sup>24</sup> Gassner has noted that although there were a few imitations during the Elizabethan period, like A Warning to Fair Women (1599) and The Yorkshire Tragedy (1608), the play is significant in foreshadowing the middle-class drama of a later age.<sup>25</sup> The Yorkshire Tragedy shows some advance over Arden of Feversham because there is an attempt at a loftier appeal. Neither play succeeds as successful tragedy. Tucker Brooke identifies their fault when he says that these plays are "fine instances of a class which, because it concerns itself primarily

---

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., page 95.

<sup>25</sup> Gassner, page 203.

with actual physical horror, can scarcely rise to the level of high art."<sup>26</sup> The forces of romantic tragic-comedy and the horror tragedy brought doom to these early attempts at domestic tragedy. The heroic sentiments were to transport the minds of men from the contemplation of ordinary sorrows and joys.<sup>27</sup> The material for drama became restricted and conventionalized. Consequently, a love for the impossible, the stupendous, and the supernatural evolved. The criminal ramifications of illicit love had superseded the endeavors of Marlowe and Shakespeare to depict emotions with artful taste. Stock situations and stock characters became the vogue.<sup>28</sup>

In 1603 there appeared a play worthy to be called a domestic tragedy. This was Thomas Heywood's A Woman Killed With Kindness. It is an isolated piece and had no imitators, probably because of the above reasons. The theme of infidelity is nothing new, but as Otelia Cromwell states in her study of Heywood, "it is the judgement of the husband that raises the play out of

---

<sup>26</sup> C. F. Tucker Brooke, Ed., The Shakespeare Apocrypha (Oxford, 1908), page xii.

<sup>27</sup> Nicoll, British Drama, page 203.

<sup>28</sup> Ashley H. Thorndike, Tragedy (Cambridge, 1908), Pages 337-8.

out of the hackneyed."<sup>29</sup> The play offers a fine starting place for a detailed study of the character of the protagonist of the serious domestic dramas. In the theatre of the day, infidelity was sufficient grounds for blood revenge. Usually this theme was presented within the atmosphere of a court with its various intrigues among persons of noble lineage. In this play the setting is the household of a well-to-do businessman, Frankford; his wife, Anne; and his supposed friend, Wendoll. During Frankford's absence, Anne succumbs to Wendoll's amorous advances. On his return, Frankford is told by a servant of his wife's infidelity, but his faith in his wife is too strong for him to believe this. However, during a card game that night between him, Anne, and Wendoll, every play, every comment, and every gesture strengthens a growing suspicion. The symbolism and tragic irony of this scene contribute effectively to a state of dramatic suspense. It is finally too much for the tortured man, and he must quit the game.

Here is a new Hamlet who also must be sure before he acts. On the excuse of business out of town, he and his servant leave only to steal back into the house that

---

<sup>29</sup> Otelia Cromwell, Thomas Heywood, A Study of the Elizabethan Drama of Everyday Life (New Haven, 1928), page 55.

night, and they discover Anne and Wendoll in each other's arms. This would have been enough for Hamlet or for any other character in Elizabethan tragedy. Frankford, in a fit of passion, is about to kill Wendoll, but a moment's stay by one of the maids causes him to change his mind. It is evident that he is an uncommon man when he says:

I thank thee maid; thou, like the angel's hand,  
 Hast stay'd me from a bloody sacrifice.--  
 Go villain; an my wrongs sit on thy soul  
 As heavy as this grief doth upon mine!  
 When thou record'st my many courtesies,  
 And shalt compare them with thy treacherous heart,  
 Lay them together, weigh them equally,--  
 'Twill be revenge enough, Go, to thy friend  
 A Judas; pray, pray, lest I live to see  
 Thee, Judas-like, hang'd on an elder-tree!<sup>30</sup>

This is not the speech of a weakling, but rather, they are the words of a man who knows the insufficiency of death as revenge. Death only satisfies custom and provides escape for the guilty. A man of Frankford's introspection would not mete such punishment to a betraying friend. However, Wendoll is not of admirable character, and we remark this turn of events as merely worthy of contemplation of a man who acts differently from the prevailing custom. The horror and then the

awe and majesty evoked by his actions do not occur until we hear his pronouncement on his wife:

My words are regist'ed in Heaven already.  
 With patience hear me! I'll not martyr thee,  
 Nor mark thee for a strumpet; but with usage  
 Of humility torment thy soul,  
 And kill thee even with kindness.<sup>31</sup>

From the lips of another person this would be considered diabolical. But Frankford is a man with manifest love for his wife, and he is also to suffer, not with blood on his hands, but with compassion. Further, he is an ordinary man and not a king, and when Frankford exercises his power of human spirit, he transcends any titular station in life. A kingdom does not fall because of his fall, yet one feels it could happen to him or someone like him. This aroused fear is in true keeping with Aristotle's theory of purgation. In the world of reality, moral people are fully aware that murder and suicide are not condoned. What is to be done then? The alternatives mentioned are easy; Frankford's action rises above both. There is majesty in such a man, and it is his character alone that qualifies this domestic drama as true tragedy.

The play taken as a whole has numerous faults and should not be considered as great. The card game scene

---

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.



is worthy of note, for it is one of the stronger points. It primarily serves the purpose of bringing together the different figures in the play in one atmosphere as well as connecting them with both the audience and the world beyond. The effect is, therefore, that there are forces operating apart from those presented on the stage.<sup>32</sup> Many great tragedies contain that air of forces beyond the ken of ordinary human beings. These forces of destiny, if they may be called such, are part of what every person associates with any wrongs he suffers that cannot be identified readily. However, it is the character of Frankford which establishes this early domestic drama as tragedy and therefore demonstrates that this type of drama can rise above the level of the serious problem play.

Jacobean dramatists showed little concern for the domestic drama. The theatre after the death of Elizabeth was certainly active enough, but themes of political and religious satire became the favorites. The plays themselves were becoming more polished and less coarse, but quite often they were also more indecent.<sup>33</sup> The

---

<sup>32</sup> Nicoll, The Theory of Drama, page 117.

<sup>33</sup> Martha Fletcher Bellinger, A Short History of the Drama (New York, 1927), page 247.

theatre was thought of as a thing of kings and lords, and the jibes against the rising Puritans became food for arguments concerning the abolishment of the theatres. The playhouses were considered as breeding grounds for riots and disease; and this, coupled with the previously mentioned religious issues, caused Parliament to suppress stage plays in 1642. In 1648 all playhouses were ordered to be torn down. Bellinger has noted that in a city the size of London these ordinances could not be completely enforced, but for all intents and purposes, the playhouses were closed from 1642 until 1660.<sup>34</sup> Naturally, when writers do not have the opportunity for practical experience, the dramas written only for reading will suffer. Moreover, during these years no significant play treating a serious domestic theme was written.

It is difficult to say why taste shifted to more spectacular themes. Perhaps the middle class was tired of its drab existence and wanted to escape. At any rate the playwrights turned to the East and Oriental heroes, and the emphasis was placed on terror arising from physical action.<sup>35</sup> Certainly this is evident from the

---

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., page 248.

<sup>35</sup> Nicoll, British Drama, pages 296-297.

popular heroic plays after the reopening of the theatres.

Thomas Otway did write one domestic drama, The Orphan (1680), two years before his masterpiece, Venice Preserved.<sup>36</sup> The plot concerns the rivalry between twin brothers for the love of the heroine, Monimia, their father's ward. She secretly marries one, but by a trick the other substitutes himself on the marriage night. It is a shoddy situation with parallels in preceding plays, and interest is sustained, as Thorndike points out, only by "Otway's power to depict love and distress."<sup>37</sup> Although saved as a play, it is hardly a true tragedy. Monimia is a pitiful character who elicits our sympathy but is soon forgotten. Too infrequent are exchanges such as the one when her seducer, Polydore, suggests running away, and if they have a child, to kill it. Monimia protests, and the following exchange hints at the possible power of the theme:

Mon. No, sure, that may live?

Poly. Why?

Mon. To become a thing  
More wretched than its parents; to be branded  
With all our infamy, and curse its birth.<sup>38</sup>

---

<sup>36</sup> Gassner, page 248.

<sup>37</sup> Thorndike, page 217.

<sup>38</sup> The Orphan, IV.

Perhaps Nicoll's term drame would most aptly be applied to this play. It is serious and presents a problem, but because of the handling of character, it must remain as an isolated example of domestic drama during the Restoration, along with Southerne's The Fatal Marriage and Rowe's The Fair Penitent and Jane Shore.

It was not until several decades later that the middle class was scrutinized, and this was in George Lillo's The London Merchant or The History of George Barnwell (1731). This play may be accepted as definite proof that the merchant class by 1731 had a positive and respected place in the English social system.<sup>39</sup> In his dedication to the play Lillo expresses a didactic, moral purpose in writing the piece, for he felt that it was through the medium of tragedy that his end might best be accomplished. Most relevant is his opinion on the protagonist of tragedy because he insists:

If princes, etc., were alone liable to misfortunes arising from vice or weakness in themselves or others, there would be good reason for confining the characters in tragedy to those of superior rank; but since the contrary is evident, nothing can be more reasonable than to proportion the remedy to the disease.<sup>40</sup>

---

<sup>39</sup> Smith, page 81.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., Dedication by John Lillo to The London Merchant, page 83.

It was his intent to enlarge the province of tragedy by having characters which could come closer home to the audience. With such a definite moral aim, the subsequent scenes are often quite undramatic. Accordingly, Barnwell never rises to tragic proportions, but Lillo was daring enough to make the hero a mere apprentice and from his fate draw tears from a fashionable audience.<sup>41</sup>

The protagonist, Barnwell, is a young man who is no match for the clever prostitute Millwood. Lillo definitely asserts his theme when he has Barnwell say:

yet, for a moment's guilty pleasure, shall  
I lose my innocence, my peace of mind, and  
hopes of solid happiness?<sup>42</sup>

Barnwell is simply too petty a person to be a tragic figure. He might move some to pity and indeed still provoke a few tears as he did with an eighteenth century audience, but too much consideration is devoted to the moral implications of the play and not enough to the development of Barnwell. Thorndike's judgment that "Barnwell's repentance is much dwelt upon and the moral lesson is enforced in every line,"<sup>43</sup> is indicative of the inevitable flatness of character which

---

<sup>41</sup> Nicoll, British Drama, page 297.

<sup>42</sup> The London Merchant, I, 111.

<sup>43</sup> Thorndike, page 315.

ensues when an author uses his characters as mere mouthpieces for his own convictions.

An illuminating speech, which is perhaps a critique of the English middle-class mind of this time, is presented when Barnwell says:

Is virtue inconsistent with itself, or are vice and virtue only empty names? Or do they depend on accidents, beyond our power to produce or to prevent--wherein we have no part, and yet must be determined by the event?<sup>44</sup>

His confusion is evident as the confusion of a class of people now assuming more and more responsibility is evident. The forces which are not tangible enough to combat are to be later, as in this play, a vital feature of domestic drama. The cry of Barnwell is the cry of a class of people when he says:

But why should I attempt to reason? All is confusion, horror and reverse, I find I am lost, cast down from all my late erected hopes, and plunged again in guilt, yet scarce know how or why--<sup>45</sup>

Although this play was to have great influence on continental, especially German, drama, it is, as Gassner called it, "claptrap."<sup>46</sup> However, the importance of

---

44 The London Merchant, II, xiv.

45 Ibid.

46 Gassner, page 285.

this play exists in the influence of the theme and not of its characters. Thorndike called it, "The most important contribution to the general development of European tragedy in the eighteenth century."<sup>47</sup> Poor as the play may be, Nicoll believed that it "marked the downfall of the classical tragedy, drove outworn themes from the stage, and established the basis for the modern theatre."<sup>48</sup>

The type did not develop in England despite the popularity of this play. The Gamester by Edward Moore a quarter of a century later is only slightly better than The London Merchant. The most significant reason for this failure to arouse a larger following in this type of drama was that comedy had taken possession of both domestic sentiment and morality. The species of sentimental and tearful comedy which had appeared by 1730 in both England and France soon flourished in both countries.<sup>49</sup> The early eighteenth century reactions against the Restoration comedies inspired the sentimental comedies of Cibber, Steele, Colman, and Cumberland. According to Smith the reason for this was as follows:

---

<sup>47</sup> Thorndike, page 314.

<sup>48</sup> Nicoll, British Drama, page 297.

<sup>49</sup> Thorndike, page 319.

a perverted taste for sententious moralities, and high-flown sentimentalities, for tearful and penitent heroines in distress, rescued from catastrophe by a happy end, robbed domestic tragedy of its opportunity upon the stage. Only Lillo's George Barnwell and The Fatal Curiosity (1737), Moore's Gamester (1753) and Cumberland's Mysterious Husband (1783) remain as examples of what the eighteenth century domestic tragedy might have become if it had not been overwhelmed by the tradition of sentimental comedy.<sup>50</sup>

Then, as always, it was the audience which dictated the type of plays which would be popular. Excessive expenditure of money in the times preceding Queen Anne had impoverished the aristocracy, and they no longer hesitated to make alliances with the wealthier bourgeoisie. The sharp cleavage between tradesman and aristocrat was closed. Their union produced people who liked comedy, moralizations, sentimentalism, and pathos.<sup>51</sup> The power of appreciating tragic intensity was rapidly being lost, and sentimentalism inclined toward the drame instead of real tragedy.<sup>52</sup> The audiences became crude, and the plays became mere melodrama; and the better writers turned to plays to be read rather than acted.<sup>53</sup> As mentioned earlier, such a departure from the practical side of the theatre naturally causes

---

<sup>50</sup> Smith, page 4.

<sup>51</sup> Nicoll, British Drama, page 261.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid., page 299.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid., page 301.



a decline. Goldsmith and Sheridan checked it a little with their comedy of manners, but taste continued to run to Gothic plays, melodramas, and imitations of Shakespeare's histories. It was not until the later nineteenth century that domestic drama returned to England. Since the time of Pinero's The Second Mrs. Tanqueray (1893), the English stage has had scores of domestic dramas.

It is better to turn to the Continent before continuing with English domestic drama. The Continental realists proved themselves masters of themes which English writers were quite afraid to touch. However, once the English playwrights learned from such men as Ibsen, Strindberg, and Tolstoi, to name but a few, the methods of handling starkly realistic themes, the English stage became modern.

## CHAPTER II

### REPRESENTATIVE CONTINENTAL DRAMAS

With Frederic Hebbel interest in serious domestic drama on the Continent was begun. Prior to Hebbel's Maria Magdalena (1844), German dramatists were concerned with conflicts between the standards of the aristocracy and those of the middle class. In this play Hebbel breaks with tradition and confines his characters to the lower middle class, for he felt that they contained within themselves the elements necessary for tragedy.<sup>1</sup> The protagonist of the play, Master Anthony, governs his own life and the life of his family by strict codes: the codes of the lower-middle-class German who values honesty, hard work, class consciousness, and strict morality. He is adamant in maintaining these codes, and when they clash with the changing society, the result is the ruin of the entire family.

Anthony has no patience with his son Karl, who, though a hard worker, also loves to play and has incurred

---

<sup>1</sup> Robert Metcalf Smith, ed., Types of Domestic Tragedy (New York, 1928), page 151.

a few small debts at the village taverns. When Karl is accused of a jewel theft, Anthony readily accepts his guilt. Society in the form of the bailiff Adam collaborates in this tragedy because according to Anthony's code a bailiff was not the equal of an honest craftsman, and Anthony had once refused to drink with Adam. Adam naturally seizes the opportunity to avenge this slight by making a public display of Karl's arrest and the search for the jewels in Anthony's house. The mother, who has been ill, dies from the shock. Clara, the daughter, was to wed Leonard. He is a scheming young man who had intended to marry her because he knew her father had a large sum of money which he wished as a dowry. When he learns that Anthony no longer has the money, and then the thought occurs to him that having for a wife the sister of a thief would be disabling to the career of a town cashier, he breaks with her. Clara is pregnant with his child, but she knows she cannot tell her father because it would kill him. Instead, she commits suicide. Karl, when exonerated of the crime, returns home; but he is going to run away to sea because he is no longer able to abide with his father's tyranny and lack of faith in him. The entire family is ruined because of a combination of incidents in collision

with a code of ethics which is defined by convention and not by expedience or right.

The play is not a true tragedy. Anthony is representative of a class and is used more as a type than as a real character. His redeeming features are only abstract representative conventions, and his actions are directed toward satisfying these rather than a sincere concern for his family. He never tries to adjust to the changing times; but instead, he remains ensconced in this inflexible code of ethics which can only mean defeat. His stubbornness is not of a noble kind. It is a blind adherence to a code, and when he says at the end of the play, "I don't understand the world any more,"<sup>2</sup> one notices that it is a class of people who are confused and not only Anthony; he is of secondary importance. Therefore, the play is a serious problem play and nothing more. L. H. Allen, in his introduction to Hebbel's plays, noted that Hebbel felt that "tragedies arise not from the direction of the will as Christianity would have it, but from the will itself."<sup>3</sup> It is a shame that Hebbel did not execute this theory in

---

<sup>2</sup> Maria Magdalena, trans. Barber Fairley, III, xi.

<sup>3</sup> L. H. Allen, ed., Three Plays by Frederic Hebbel (London, 1914), page xiv.

María Magdalena. If Anthony had not merely conformed, but instead, if he had given his code an honest appraisal, the play might have developed to tragic proportions because of the potentialities for a great struggle. Despite the fact that this successful and impressive drama does not achieve tragic proportions, Hebbel's influence both with his naturalistic style and choice of theme is evident in later Continental dramas.

The effects of Scandanavian, and especially Norwegian, drama are still being felt in all creative literature. In theme, method of exposition, conception of character, and style a whole new vista was opened. Although Ibsen and Strindberg are perhaps the most popular, Björnstjerne Björnson's importance in the rise of Scandanavian drama cannot be overlooked.<sup>4</sup> Moreover, Björnson must be given credit for writing the first truly successful social reform play, The Bankrupt (1874). As Gustafson has noted, this play probably encouraged Ibsen to continue with this type of drama which he had only halfheartedly worked with previously.<sup>5</sup> The Bankrupt (En Fallit) is a serious domestic drama which was dismissed as dry and trivial by early critics,

---

<sup>4</sup> Alrick Gustafson, "The Scandanavian Countries," in A History of Modern Drama, ed. Barrett H. Clark and George Freedley (New York, 1947), page 44.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., page 45.

but it soon became one of the great successes of the Scandanavian theatres.<sup>6</sup> The play is neither a tragedy nor Björnson's best work. However, it is important for the purposes of this paper because the play contains a conception of character as well as the effects of circumstances on a group of people which were to play a vital role in later domestic dramas.

At the opening of the play, the Tjælde family is presented as an idle, upper-middle-class family. The daughters, Signe and Valborg, care only for the sham and pretence of social position. Valborg disdains the displays of affection by Sannaes, her father's confidential clerk who has uncouth "red hands." The mother's whole concern is to prepare varied meals that will give credit to the house and thus enable her husband, Henning, to make a good impression on his business associates. The foreboding of tragedy is introduced, however, for the other businessmen in the area are failing. It is apparent that Tjælde will also fail. The following speech by Valborg is constantly remembered as the play proceeds because of its powerful irony:

---

<sup>6</sup> R. Farquharson Sharp, Introduction to Three Dramas by Björnson (London, 1912), pages x-xi.

Well, I cannot imagine how one could be more cruelly wronged than to be allowed to assume a position that was nothing but a lie, to live up to means that had no real existence but were merely a sham--one's clothes a lie, one's very existence a lie! Suppose I were the sort of girl that found a certain delight in making use of her position as a rich man's daughter--in using it to the fullest possible extent; well, when I discovered that all that my father had given me was stolen--that all he had made me believe in was a lie--I am sure that then my anger and my shame would be beyond all bonds!<sup>7</sup>

It is soon apparent that all really is a lie, and not even a last moment appeal to a Mr. Line, a rich banker, can save the Tjaelde business. Tjaelde has cheated; he has kept false accounts; he has practiced poor business ethics; he has deceived his friends; but he has worked like a demon to hold it all together. Under the ruthless investigation of Berent, all this is discovered, and Tjaelde is doomed. Tjaelde considers running, shooting Berent, and shooting himself; but after listening to Berent's terrible argument, he rises above these things. The second act, which contains Tjaelde's desperate sparring with Berent, is a masterful bit of work. From the standpoint of finance, the heart of the play is provided by Berent, who says, "You have mixed up falsehood and truth for so long that you have

---

<sup>7</sup> The Bankrupt, trans F. Farquharson Sharp, I.

forgotten the simplest laws of commerce."<sup>8</sup> However, this is not the true importance of the play. Tjaelde has lost himself, and in doing so, he has lost his family. The possible course for salvation is made clear in the following exchange:

Tjaelde. Oh! --How shall I ever dare to look any one in the face again? --I, who have defiled everything and deceived every one?

Berent. The man who has enjoyed the respect which he did not deserve must some day undergo the humiliation which he has deserved. That is a law; and I cannot save you from that.<sup>9</sup>

Tjaelde gives in and calls for his wife to comfort him, and the curtain comes down at the end of a tremendous act.

During the ensuing action, humiliation is heaped upon the man, but the family is drawn together. They, with the faithful help of Sannaes, agree to work as one; and in the final act the bankruptcy has been paid off; Valborg and Sannaes are to be married; Signe becomes a useful human being; the mother is cared for; and all is sweetness and inspirational light. In fact, it all becomes rather common melodrama with the reunion of friends and the regained respect of all. The lesson

---

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., II

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.



that a "united family is invincible!" is voiced,<sup>10</sup> and true as this may be, one has the feeling that nothing was really lost; no sacrifice was really made; no odds were really very strong.

Of course, with such an ending the play would not be called a tragedy under any reasonable definition. All has paid off; patience, humility, hard work, and love have triumphed. There is a definite tragic air at the termination of the second act when Tjaelde actually does become ennobled in the eyes of the audience. If the play had ended there, or if Björnson had continued in a different vein, the play could have possibly developed into a tragedy. Such was obviously not his intent. The play is very important, however, in light of what Björnson demonstrated could be done. It took Ibsen to extend what Björnson started into tragedy.

Henrik Ibsen must be considered next, for all serious, modern domestic drama is in one way or another indebted to his influence. In addition to Hebbel and Björnson, Ibsen undoubtedly owed much to Eugene Scribe's concept of la pièce bien faite. Early in his career Ibsen was stage manager in Bergen, and he staged many of Scribe's plays. This contact with the practical side of the

---

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., III.

theatre is evident in Ibsen's craftsmanship. But Ibsen went beyond a mechanical presentation of time-worn plots and entered into the realm of psychological realism.

Domestic drama is Ibsen's forte, and the intensity he instills in his characters as they struggle against problems which are often commonplace, but vital and relevant in that they are integrally associated with both the tangible and intangible world of his own times, allows some of them to be worthy of consideration as true tragedy. Heywood and Lillo anticipated his treatment of these themes, but as Nicoll has noted,

Ibsen wove together the tragedy of the individual soul with the tremendous forces which move in social life like some blind destiny searing and destroying, mankind in their path seeming no more than an insect fluttering ineffectually against the mighty barriers which loom up against it. In Ibsen we have not merely domestic tragedy, but social tragedy, the forces of life forming dominating dramatis personae who move unseen across the stage and raise the whole work to the level of the greatest tragic passion.<sup>11</sup>

While Ibsen demonstrated that tragic character did not have to be remote, he also realized that the dramatist had to have characters of a sufficient magnitude in themselves; and further, he had to know each of his

---

<sup>11</sup> Allardyce Nicoll, British Drama (London, 1946), page 340.

characters inside and out. James Huneker referred to Ibsen's plays as soul dramas, for in them the human soul was both a shadowy protagonist and a stake for which the characters gambled.<sup>12</sup> It is because Ibsen knew his creations, knew their subconscious as well as their conscious thoughts, and then knew the relation of each character to his surrounding society, that Ibsen was able to portray such vital, living persons. It was the will of these people, the individual will struggling against the forces of society embodied in other people, that could be recognized; and hence there is the universal concept that permits his dramas to be considered as more than the exposition of a problem.

Although Ibsen is concerned with an immediate social problem in his plays, in general all of his plays are concerned with the individual's total relation to society. In unfolding his story and developing his characters, Ibsen characteristically employs what Alrik Gustafson called "retrospective analysis"; that is, he begins his action in the middle of a crisis and reveals in the subsequent dialogue with telling dramatic skill the whole of the circumstances leading up to this crisis.<sup>13</sup> It is

---

<sup>12</sup> James Huneker, Iconoclasts (New York, 1909), page 1.

<sup>13</sup> Gustafson, In Clark and Freedley, pages 9-10.

by his subtle analysis of character that Ibsen created living dramas. Moreover, it is through the subsequent greatness of these characters--even when diabolical--that the impression of witnessing the fall of a truly worthy figure provokes awe. If the term "universality," as defined earlier, can be taken in a more limited sense, Archibald Henderson, when speaking of Ibsen's plays, has precisely identified the focal point of greatness inherent in them. He said, "Ibsen's plays, his greatest plays, are universal because they are laid in the inner life, the region of moral consciousness."<sup>14</sup>

In Rosmersholm (1886) Ibsen created two principal characters, Rebecca West and Johannes Rosmer, who in their broadest sense may be thought of as representing rebellion and liberalism in the former, and tradition and conservatism in the latter. If Ibsen had presented these two people as types, the play would never be more than a serious problem play. But Ibsen created two real persons whose wills clash with each other as well as with society. Further, he placed his setting in an ultraconservative atmosphere, Rosmersholm, wherein no rebellion could be endured.

---

<sup>14</sup> Archibald Henderson, European Dramatists (Cincinnati, 1918), page 156.

Rebecca West is a very complex character. Huneker's interpretation may cause one to miss her greatness. He said, "As cunning as Becky Sharp, as amorous as Emma Bovary, as ambitious as Lady Macbeth, Rebekka [sic] West is the most complete portrait of a designing woman that we know of."<sup>15</sup> At first glance Rebecca is all of these things. But one cannot forget that she is also an idealist. She is the emancipated woman who can allow nothing to stand in her way. Rebecca believes in a new freedom, political and social, and she has had no restraining background to inhibit her from promoting her purpose. Chandler has noted that she is unmoral rather than immoral, for she is true to her inner convictions despite her sins.<sup>16</sup> Rebecca chooses Johannes Rosmer as the vehicle for her ideals because she intends to achieve her purposes through him. Rosmer's wife, Beata, was in the way, and Rebecca persuaded Beata to commit suicide, thus removing herself to permit Rosmer to achieve greatness unhampered. Rebecca almost succeeded, except for two things which led to her fall. First she fell in love with Rosmer, and it is doubtful she ever originally

---

<sup>15</sup> Huneker, page 85.

<sup>16</sup> Frank Wadleigh Chandler, Aspects of Modern Drama (New York, 1918), page 22.

intended that to happen; second, she did not count on the tremendous force of tradition inherent in Rosmer's character.

At the opening of the play Rosmer is almost totally under the power of Rebecca. He has broken with the Church, and shortly after, he announces his intent to join the liberal party. He has agreed with the ideals of the party's cause, but he has no concept of the practical side of revolt. Confused by a rebuff by the editor of the liberal newspaper who wants Rosmer's name as a conservative Christian only, and later the painful knowledge that Rebecca was responsible for Beata's death, he naturally retreats within the traditions which are so much a part of him. Rosmer is not, and could never be, a fighter. The past is too much with him, and he can never break completely with it. This same past--Rosmersholm itself--also breaks Rebecca.

There is no room for conscience in Rebecca's mind. It would appear strange, then, that she could have such an altruistic outlook--such a dedication to ideals. Perhaps that is the blind spot in all revolutionaries--and a necessary one. Only the end is important, not the means. She would have succeeded with Rosmer if he had been a man with a weaker tradition behind him. But

then there would have been no tragedy. Rebecca is faced with invincible odds, and her supreme will does not allow for compromise. Chandler has noted, however, that sheer individualism can only defeat itself. Once fierce individualism acquires a sense of moral responsibility, a person who wills must also will to renounce.<sup>17</sup> Compromise is impossible because of the pagan strength behind Rebecca's will. When she sees that nothing more can be done with Rosmer, she remains firm in her convictions and chooses to leave rather than accept his offer of married love. Henderson has expressed her plight most aptly when he said, "we feel that her spirit, not her conviction is broken."<sup>18</sup>

It is doubtful that the sympathy of the audience is consciously with Rebecca until the last act. Certainly many of her actions have been far from admirable. But near the end of the play she is crushed and quite ready to bow out and return to the North. One does not know just what her purpose means to her until she tries once more to prod Rosmer into the fight. She still believes that if he would try, he could ennoble men's minds, and he protests:

---

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., page 23.

<sup>18</sup> Henderson, page 140.

Oh Rebecca--I, who no longer believe in my own mission!

To this Rebecca answers:

But your mission has stood the test already. You have ennobled one human being at least--me you have ennobled for the rest of my days.

However, Rosmer must have proof, and he demands:

Have you the courage--have you the will--gladly, as Ulric Brandel said--for my sake, to-night--gladly--to go the same way as Beata went?

Rebecca, who can never compromise, will do it; and the audience at this point feels exactly as Rosmer, who says:

There is a horrible fascination in this--!<sup>19</sup>

When Rosmer realizes she is in earnest, he knows he too must die. Only through death can he break the bonds with which Rosmersholm holds him. George Bernard Shaw analyzed this turn when he said, "What has really seized Rosmer is the old fatal idea of expiation by sacrifice."<sup>20</sup>

Rosmer pronounces Rebecca his wife and voices his desire to go with her. Rebecca, true to her will, must know if she has succeeded--if it has not all been in vain. The play ends thus:

---

<sup>19</sup> Rosmersholm, V.

<sup>20</sup> George Benard Shaw, The Quintessence of Ibsenism (New York, 1905), page 112.



Rebecca. Yes, but tell me this: Is it you who follows me? Or is it I who follow you?

Rosmer. We shall never think that question out.

Rebecca. But I should like to know.

Rosmer. We go with each other, Rebecca-- I with you and you with me.

Rebecca. I almost think that is the truth.

Rosmer. For now we two are one.

Rebecca. We are one. Come! We go gladly.<sup>21</sup>

They go to their end together, and what could not be accomplished in life was accomplished through union in death. Rebecca did not completely lose, even though destroyed. She is thus ennobled in the eyes of the audience. One rather wishes that she could have succeeded in life. Everyone has certain ideals, and too often one must compromise these ideals to remain alive. At one time or another everyone faces some decision of this sort; thus, one cannot help identifying oneself with Rebecca's plight. Ibsen said in a letter to a debating club:

The play deals with the struggle which all serious minded human beings have to wage with themselves in order to bring their

---

<sup>21</sup> Rosmersholm, V.

lives into harmony with their convictions; the heroine Rebecca West after such a struggle rises to the standards of true nobility, preferring to die rather than win by cheating.<sup>22</sup>

It is evident that Ibsen did just that with Rebecca, and the play succeeds as a true tragedy.

A later play by Ibsen, Hedda Gabler (1890), invites comparison with the one just discussed. Once again the central character is an emancipated woman. Hedda, however, has no purpose in life. Vague aspirations and dreams of a glamorously intoxicating life stir her, but she is too sterile to face them in actuality. Gassner has described her perfectly as "a crystal clear example of a maladjusted woman."<sup>23</sup> In using the title Hedda Gabler, and not Hedda Tesman, Ibsen showed that he wished to present an independent being and not a wife. Her husband is a plodding scholar who she feels can not possibly understand her. Life is an impossible bore, and she craves excitement. Basically, the thesis is: What does a person do who has renounced old responsibilities

---

<sup>22</sup> Henrik Ibsen, Letter to a student's debating chapter, Number 197, in The Correspondence of Henrik Ibsen, quoted by A. E. Zucker, Ibsen-The Master Builder (New York, 1929), page 205.

<sup>23</sup> John Gassner, Masters of the Drama (New York, 1940), page 377.

but cannot or will not assume new ones? Ibsen presents the destiny of such a person within the framework of the society of the day; but characteristically, he goes far beyond the surface of his characters by vividly portraying their emotions, reactions, and attitudes, both conscious and unconscious, with penetrating skill.

Hedda never rises above the repulsive, but there is fascination in watching her just as there is in watching a snake. Utterly malicious, she destroys the reformed Løvborg and shatters the love between him and Mrs. Thea Elvsted, though she can gain nothing by it. When forced by her deeds into an intimacy with Brack to prevent discovery, she cannot face the reality of this, and she shoots herself. Like Rebecca West, Hedda has no scruples; but unlike Rebecca, she is not capable of any spiritual growth. She is, as Gustafson has noted, "as inwardly empty and limited as she assumes her environment to be."<sup>24</sup>

The play offers an excellent example to prove the point of this paper. If presented as a serious drama, with an audience anticipating a serious problem play, Hedda's plight is pathetic despite her maliciousness. It becomes a condemnation of the empty people of the

---

<sup>24</sup> Gustafson, in Clark and Freedley, page 17.

world who, given freedom to act as they choose, can do infinite damage before they are stopped. Their seemingly motiveless actions are an indictment of a whole group of people who have no honest reason for existence. Perhaps Henderson was right when he said that the play sought "the moral regeneration of the individual and indirectly of society."<sup>25</sup>

The play never assumes tragic proportions because Hedda, herself, is not a tragic figure. She is incapable of any noble deed. Her death comes as just retribution for one who does not struggle honestly to raise herself from the doldrums of boredom. The audience can sympathize with her plight and feel sorry that she never found herself, but there is never a feeling of horror because she commits suicide. If her will were guided toward self-realization, which is a universal struggle, perhaps an honest identification could be made. There is no indication that Ibsen ever intended such a thing. At the first pressure of adverse circumstance, Hedda gives in without a struggle, and no possible admiration can be aroused for such a person.

---

<sup>25</sup> Henderson, page 153.

Moreover, this drama has been presented as a comedy and quite successfully. When one analyzes the play, Nicoll seems right when he says, "Hedda is really not frightening; she is mordantly funny."<sup>26</sup> After Hedda has shot herself, her husband characteristically says:

Shot herself! Shot herself in the temple!  
Fancy that!

Judge Brack then exclaims:

Good God! --people don't do such things.<sup>27</sup>

Certainly such sentiments would be quite out of place in the great hightragedies when the hero finally succumbs. But once again, Nicoll has analyzed this turn when he said, "instead of aiming at the tragic, Ibsen has written what in effect is high comedy."<sup>28</sup>

This, then, is in essence what constitutes the difference between true tragedy and a problem play. Depending upon the attitude taken, a problem play can be serious or light or a combination of the two. A true tragedy has no room for a conflict in emotions on the part of the audience. A true tragedy may have

<sup>26</sup> Allardyce Nicoll, World Drama (New York, N.Y.), page 541.

<sup>27</sup> Hedda Gabler, IV.

<sup>28</sup> Nicoll, World Drama, page 540.

comic relief, but it is never funny as a whole. Neither the setting nor the station of the characters is important; these are subordinate. It is the basic stuff of which the protagonist is made--a nobility of character struggling honestly for what he believes despite the means used, coupled with a positive identification that is universal in that all thinking people are capable of comprehending the tragedy of this person's demise.

This is not to detract from Hedda Gabler as a great play. Construction is perfect, and the characters are drawn realistically, emerging as living human beings. Ibsen presents a picture of life that is wholly believable. Hedda is brilliant in her own way, but she has nowhere to direct her energies except in malicious deeds. She is bored as any person is bored who has nothing but emptiness to look forward to; therefore, she is doomed. Also, Ibsen ironically gives the victory to the stupid, unimaginative George and Thea. Perhaps Huneker's criticism describes both the failure of the play as a tragedy and the power of the play as a careful analysis of domestic life. He said, "It is all piteous, all hopelessly banal--and it is also daily life to its central core."<sup>29</sup>

---

<sup>29</sup> Huneker, pages 105-106.

Gunnar Heiberg should be considered as being in the tradition of Ibsen and Björnson. Like these men, he also had a firm background in the practical side of the theatre, because he was at one time the theatrical manager at Bergen. However, despite these origins, with their corresponding emphasis on social problems and stark realism, his work may be thought of as representing a break with the traditions of the eighties, for it corresponds more closely to Strindberg's experimental expressionistic drama.<sup>30</sup> The old method of a carefully conceived plot is absent in his work; instead, Heiberg concerns himself with character. Gustafson has identified the theme of The Tragedy of Love (1904) as being "a conflict between love and man's striving for higher cultural ideals."<sup>31</sup> Therefore, the drama is a problem play with a serious domestic setting. The play is also a tragedy in the truest sense.

As the play opens, the two principals, Karen and Erling, have met in a cattle herder's hut. They had agreed a year before, neither to see nor to write each other as a test of their love. But they are again together and deeply in love. Erling sees himself as being

---

<sup>30</sup> Gustafson, in Clark and Freedley, pages 51-52.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., page 53.

ennobled by this love--now he can do anything because the thought of Karen comforts him and drives him on. However, Karen sees this love as being a physical bond, nothing more than a thing of isolation which insulates them from the rest of the world. Then Hartvig Hadeln, a wandering poet, enters; and in speaking to them, he outlines the theme of the play: the battle of love, wherein "he who loves most is always the loser, for he loses the loved one."<sup>32</sup>

Hadeln continues, attempting to explain that the transports of the early romantic love must soon die. He suggests that something deeper and more profound must develop between the two lovers. When the physical aspects of sexual love are identified, consummated, then there must be a growth in relationship. Heiberg propounds this philosophy in the following speech of Hadeln:

The soul is a later invention, madam. The feeling of shame springs from the transports of the body. That feeling produces secrecy. And from the secrecy comes what we call the soul of love. But when we divulge the secret, then there is not much left of the soul. And that's the way love dies, poor thing--sacred love, man's most beautiful dream, the great poem of life, the sublime stupidity, the divine madness. Pooh--gone as soon as the secrecy vamosed!<sup>33</sup>

---

<sup>32</sup> The Tragedy of Love, trans. Edwin Bjorkman, I.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.



A few months later when Karen and Erling are still on their honeymoon, it is clear that the battle has begun. The gay round becomes boring to Erling. He wants to get back to his work. Karen, however, is filled with joy; she sees a perfect balance of love between them which she wants to continue forever. Two years later it is apparent that a breach has widened between the two. Erling is about to leave for an inspection tour to the plantations. He is happy, absorbed in his work, and he more or less takes the love of Karen for granted. But within Karen fires of torment are burning. Erling has not realized this, but when it is forced upon him, he attempts to explain what has happened.

Our life is real life, Karen. You, who have such a refined nature and who are so quiet and sensible in all your ways, don't you feel that the softer and more subdued note characterizing our life lately has a far greater human value, than the--the sensual transports of that first time? It seems so strange that I should have to ask such a question. Think for yourself. All that we have lived together these years, all that we have in common--does it mean nothing at all to you? Our common joys and our common mishaps--all the inertia with which I have had to contend, all the ill-will and stupidity? And our memories? Our secrets? Our work? Our common faith in the future? Our place here? Our home?<sup>34</sup>

---

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., III.

Karen can see none of this. Erling has developed far beyond her. The only think that matters to her is that he loves her, constantly and completely. She possesses a monomaniacal attitude which forces her to say:

When you loved-me--not now, when you go  
around in the woods longing for me--then  
I had a feeling of life--of splendid,  
perilous life, with death close at hand.  
Then everything was grand and glorious.  
Then everything was luminous and logical,  
and I understood everything.<sup>35</sup>

Without arriving at any definite understanding, Erling goes off on his tour, and immediately after he leaves, Hadeln arrives. Karen, in her torment, attempts to seduce Hadeln, though it is quite obvious that it is not Hadeln whom she desires. She is almost mad with her frustration, and when Erling returns unexpectedly, she taunts him by telling him she has been unfaithful. He reacts as a normal husband would, inquiring who it was and where he went. This is the final blow. Karen kills herself at the termination of the play.

Karen struggled against odds too invincible to overcome. These odds were an integral part of herself--the basic nature which cannot be altered. She struggled, both with her own feelings as well as in her attempt

---

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

to make Erling understand. But it was an impossible fight, and she was crushed. Hadeln tells Karen shortly before the end of the play that love kills

The one that cannot dole it out grain by grain--the one that has not turned love into a habit. And you have not done so. You cannot do it. You are strong. But love is stronger than you. You are at its mercy. And it will triumph over you.<sup>36</sup>

It is a true tragedy when the emotions aroused are those of awe and not the lesser feeling of pity, and in Karen's situation, such is the case on the part of the audience. There is horror in realizing that a person, fundamentally good and filled with love, is going to be destroyed by that love. One can argue about the rationality or maturity, if such a word can be applied, of Karen's love; but one cannot argue with the integrity and sincerity of her feelings. For that reason there is a true purgation of emotions on the part of the observer in watching a person such as Karen, wrong as she is, struggle for what she believes. Furthermore, her struggle means her doom.

Also, as is the case in many tragedies of the first order, there is exultation at the end. Hadeln, who

---

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., IV.

believes it is more beautiful for love to kill than for it to die, says to Erling at the play's end:

Be proud, Erling Kruse. Make a cross on your door. A cross of blood. As a sign that love has visited your house. Behold the stars--  
her stars!<sup>37</sup>

It is strange that this drama is not better known. It is carefully constructed. The philosophy and argumentation is never didactic or heavy; but rather, these things evolve naturally as a part of the action. Even in translation the poetry of the lines breaks through. Further, this early example of shrewd psychological insight into the deepest feelings of married people has seldom been surpassed. Despite all these virtues, the play is rarely performed today. Moreover, it does not even appear in many anthologies. Perhaps it is too difficult. Whatever the reason, it cannot be denied that one of the finest tragedies written with a domestic setting exists as proof that no more is required for tragedy than the inherent potential of the dramatis personae regardless of station of life or setting of action.

Dramatists still return to the plays of August Strindberg in search of the key to unlock the mystery.

---

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.,

of creating living, intense characters. In Strindberg's The Father (1887) there exists, as Smith has noted, one of the first dramas "to present unflinchingly the psycho-physical intricacies and struggles of sex-antagonism which, in Strindberg's view, predetermine domestic tragedy."<sup>38</sup> Perhaps to understand the "why" of Strindberg's dramas, one must first understand Strindberg, for much of his work is definitely autobiographical. But a play must be taken for itself and not be dependent upon an intimate knowledge of the mood or background of the dramatist. In The Father Strindberg created the wife Laura who invites comparison with Hedda Gabler and Rebecca West, for she, though she destroys her husband, is as much a failure as they are. Gassner has called her an "emotionally hip-wrecked woman."<sup>39</sup> She is very shrewd, diabolical, and utterly lacking in morals when dealing with her husband; yet she is ignorant of the worth of his work, displays orthodox morals to others, and can be quite kind to all save her husband.<sup>40</sup> On the surface the theme of this play seems to consist of a struggle

---

<sup>38</sup> Smith, page 213.

<sup>39</sup> Gassner, page 391.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

between Laura and her husband, the Captain, over the possession of their daughter. A deeper interpretation, which also may be correct and would give a proper tone of tragedy, has been offered by Archibald Henderson. He said that the play represented

the terrible plea of the elemental male for the rights of fatherhood, the patriarchal functions of a man as the ruler of the family holding within his hand the directive control of the future of his posterity.<sup>41</sup>

Strindberg certainly conceived of his characters in such a way that there could be no doubt of the outcome. The Captain is intelligent, essentially good, and sensitive. Laura is less intelligent, but also less moral and more thick-skinned. Although they both possess powerful wills, the Captain is no match, for as Gustafson has said, "The weapon she employs with a deliberate, satanic skill to gain her end is that of mental suggestion."<sup>42</sup> No Iago ever used such poisonous suggestion with more skill than does Laura. She artfully implants the idea in the Captain's mind that he is not the father of his own child. This becomes a mania with him, and he is driven insane. Although the Captain does put up a

---

<sup>41</sup> Henderson, page 48.

<sup>42</sup> Gustafson, in Clark and Freedley, page 28.

vigorous fight, he must struggle against a complete matriarchy; his wife, his old nurse, his daughter, and even the memory of his mother. When Laura has triumphed and has the Captain in a strait jacket, she asks if he thinks she is his enemy; he answers:

Yes, I do think so. I do believe that you are all my enemies! My mother, who did not want to bring me into the world because I was to be born with pain, was my enemy when she deprived my embryonic life of its nourishment and made a weakling of me. My sister was my enemy when she taught me that I was to be obedient to her. The first woman that I embraced was my enemy, for she gave me ten years of illness in payment for the love I gave her. My daughter became my enemy when she had to choose between me and you. And you, my wife, you have been my arch-enemy, because you have never left me until I lay here lifeless.<sup>43</sup>

While the struggle is still in progress at the end of the second act, Laura tells the Captain that she has means of putting him under control, and one is filled with a sudden horror when there comes the realization that she means to destroy him by committing him as insane. In this short, intense drama there are elements of great tragedy; and yet the play is only a near-great tragedy because, to quote Ludwig Lewisohn, "There is no lifting of the soul to a larger vision from the bondage

---

<sup>43</sup> The Father, trans. Edwin Björkman and N. Erichsen, III, vii.

of immediate pain, that is his [the Captains's] limitation."<sup>44</sup> Strindberg simply put too much in the path of the Captain for him ever to try to rise above the immediate fight. Strindberg's intent is clear that he intends that the Captain is never to stand a chance. There is never the element of hope that the Captain may win or that Laura may change her mind. Perhaps Strindberg's own personal rancor made it impossible for him to present it in any other manner, but there can be little doubt that he knew what he was doing. He has the Captain and Laura recall their early life together, and the Captain says:

Think how beautiful life was, and what it is now. You did not wish to have it so, and neither did I, and yet it happened. Who then rules over our life?<sup>45</sup>

The answer is clear enough, but this is the society of Strindberg's creation.

In 1882 Henri Becque wrote Les Corbeaux. In this domestic drama Becque combined naturalism and the practical elements formulated by Scribe. However, as S. A. Rhodes has pointed out, Becque stands equally apart from pure naturalistic drama and from the thesis play, for Becque

---

<sup>44</sup> Ludwig Lewisohn, The Modern Drama (New York, 1915), page 28.

<sup>45</sup> The Father, III, vii.



never had "a great liking for assassins, hysterical and alcoholic characters, or for those martyrs of heredity and victims of evolution."<sup>46</sup> There is no single protagonist, but rather a whole family is concerned. Basically, the play concerns the fate of a totally unprepared widow and her children at the hands of her late husband's business associates. It must be called a serious problem play despite the fact that the members of the family possess some of the very traits essential for a true tragedy. They struggle, their plight is universal, and the daughter Marie's consenting to marry the sordid Tessier is a noble act which saves the rest of the family; yet, in all the struggles, there is a negative quality of resignation which evokes pathos and nothing more. The audience knows what is to happen to these people and can sympathize with their plight, but these are little people and their struggle is commonplace.

The play is competent and entertaining drama arising from the clash of temperaments and circumstances. A whole family is affected, but there is no attempt to present a definite thesis except the one that "life is like that."<sup>47</sup>

---

<sup>46</sup> S. A. Rhodes, "French Drama," in Clark and Freedley, page 242.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

Perhaps Rosalie, the maid, best sums up what happened to this family in her answer to Merkins' inquiry. She says:

Ruinées, mon cher monsieur, ruinées, la pauvre dame et ses demoiselles! Je ne vous dirai pas comment ça s'est fait, mais on ne m'ôtera pas mon idée de la tête. Voyez-vous, quand les hommes d'affaires arrivent derrière un mort, on peut bien dire: v'là les corbeaux, ils ne laissent que ce qu'ils ne peuvent pas emporter.<sup>48</sup>

It was a vital problem, a problem bound in the growing complexity in which the rising middle class was becoming ensnared, and one can feel a definite impotency in oneself at watching this drama. Pity, and perhaps a sense of being glad that it is not happening to the viewer, is aroused, but no awe or horror is possible. It remains as a serious problem play and nothing more. However, Huneker asserts that Les Corbeaux became the Bible of the dramatic realists.<sup>49</sup> Becque used a modified realism, it is true, but the character and the exposition emerge from the atmosphere. Therefore, he constructed, and it is to his credit that his construction is close to life. Of course, Les Corbeaux is often classed as a comedy, and since characterization was of prime importance to

---

<sup>48</sup> Les Corbeaux, IV, 1.

<sup>49</sup> Huneker, page 180.

him, this play provides an excellent example to show how the characters he created were suitable for comedy and not tragedy.

After the Franco-Prussian War, triumphant and united Germany looked forward to a great literary movement which proved slow to appear. However, Germany's writers were learning from the other Continental playwrights. Before the founding of the Freie Bühne, literary magazines, such as Die Gesellschaft (1885), edited by Michael Conrad, a Zolaist, and then Durch (1886), which declared that the writer must give creative embodiment to the life of the present, and the passions of flesh-and-blood human beings must be shown with fidelity.<sup>50</sup> There was a rather tense atmosphere in the theatre of searching and adjusting to the progress made in other lands. Fortunately, a young German dramatist, Gerhart Hauptmann, came of age; and in 1899, with his first drama, Vor Sonnenaufgang (Before Dawn), he achieved great success. Even the often caustic Ashley Dukes claimed that there is some truth in the statement that Hauptmann was the only dramatist who had passed Ibsen.<sup>51</sup> Lewisohn also praised the great originality

---

<sup>50</sup> The Dramatic Works of Gerhart Hauptmann, ed. Ludwig Lewisohn (New York, 1912), Vol. I, pages xiii-xiv.

<sup>51</sup> Ashley Dukes, Modern Dramatists (London, 1911), page 79.

and power of Hauptmann's dialogue by claiming that the dramatic speech found in the works of Ibsen, Tolstoi, and Finero seemed conscious and unhuman in comparison.<sup>52</sup>

Before Dawn is not Hauptmann's greatest play; surely The Weavers and The Sunken Bell are finer pieces of work. But for the purposes of this paper, it is perfectly suitable. Basically, it is a study of a newly rich family which, finding itself unable to cope with the freedoms of wealth, has sunk into depravity. The father, Krause, has become a drunkard. His second wife carries on an affair with a stupid churl who is to become her step-daughter's husband. One daughter is a dipsomaniac whose first child supposedly inherited a love of alcohol and died from cuts sustained breaking a vinegar bottle which he thought contained rum. Her husband, Hoffmann, is a shallow, money-grabbing chap who is not beneath making a pass at his sister-in-law, Helen.

Into this atmosphere comes Alfred Loth, an old friend of Hoffmann. Loth is an idealist who wishes to change the very system for which Hoffmann stands, the exploitation of the Silesian coal miners. Loth becomes infatuated

---

<sup>52</sup> Lewisohn, ed., The Dramatic Works of Gerhart Hauptmann, page xix.

with Helen, and they fall in love; but when Loth hears from a doctor, who is also an old friend, that the dipsomania of Helen's sister may be inherited from the drunken father and that this may also be passed on to any children which may result from a union with Helen, Loth deserts. He is an idealist also in the sense of a proponent of the pure race, and he refuses to take a chance with Helen. Perhaps the following speech made in another situation by another person would have an air of the tragic, but here it is only hateful when he tells the doctor that he has to leave. Loth considers all angles and decides

that kind of thing can't help me, Schimmel. There are just three possibilities in this affair: Either I marry her and then...no, that way out simply doesn't exist. Or--the traditional bullet. Of course, that would mean rest, at least. But we haven't reached that point yet awhile; can't indulge in that luxury just yet. And so: live! fight! Farther! farther!<sup>53</sup>

It is ridiculous, but it adds terrific irony to the situation. Helen, who is truly a tragic figure, has struggled against this household which is rife with iniquity. She finally sees her chance for what she hopes will be happiness with Loth--a clean, wholesome

---

<sup>53</sup> Before Dawn, V.

life away from all this depravity. She had honestly tried to explain the entire situation to Loth, but the fatuous scamp did not want to hear, and she thought that he understood. When Helen discovers that Loth is gone, she kills herself. However, this is not done with the conventional off-stage scream. Instead, Hauptmann creates an atmosphere of electric intensity as Helen utters sharp expletives indicative of her deteriorating mind while in the background is heard the drunken, returning father singing a bawdy song.

This play is not really a tragedy according to the restrictions of this play. However, it must be noted that the concept of the naturalistic hero often precluded his even being considered as a tragic figure. But this play does come very close to being a tragedy, and the play fails as a tragedy because Helen becomes a haunted, furtive animal at the end, and she does not achieve any sense of understanding of what has happened to her. She simply does not know where to turn when she is deserted by Loth, and she is probably mad when she kills herself. There is horror in this situation, but there is no concept of the undaunted protagonist struggling with overwhelming odds that evokes dry-eyed fear. Instead, when Helen is crushed, one feels only sorry

that she chose a weakling such as Loth on whom to base her hopes of escape.

Hauptmann does not state his moral lesson in so many words, but what he is driving at is evident throughout the play. Gassner has identified the flaw in this play when he said, "Adolescent doctrinairism on the subject of heredity vitiates this Tobacco Road play, and Hauptmann's approval of Loth's conduct smacks of smugness."<sup>54</sup>

Hermann Sudermann invites comparison with Hauptmann, for he too was a leader in the German theatre who wrote excellent domestic dramas. Sudermann was solidly apprenticed in the practical side of the theatre, and with this firm background he matured into a skilled dramatist--a flawless Techniker. However, his work is imbued with the intellectual ideas of the time, and thus he often wills his characters into a mould of his own making, and he causes his atmosphere to blend with his thesis. Hauptmann, on the other hand, is just the opposite; he portrays the lost souls in whom there is great spiritual stress. The basic difference between these two contemporaries is that Sudermann was cerebral while Hauptmann was emotional.

Probably the best example of Sudermann's work in

---

<sup>54</sup> Gassner, page 453.

domestic drama is in Magda (1893). Ibsen's influence is evident, as is also Hebbel's, for the theme of revolt of the new against the old is propounded. The entire first act is in preparation for the prodigal daughter's return. Twelve years before Magda was given a choice by her stern Prussian father of obeying his wishes or leaving. She left and became a famous opera star. Ever since she departed, her father has not permitted her name to be mentioned in his presence.

Old Schwartz, Magda's father, believes in the old order. He has rejected Magda, but he still remembers her; and he endeavours to maintain his code that he, his wife, and his other daughter shall not make the same mistake. He, unlike old Anthony in Maria Magdalena, knows what he is up against, and he asserts his determination to resist when he says:

And shall we not hold together, we three?  
 But the age goes on planting rebellion in  
 children's hearts, putting mistrust between  
 man and wife, and it will never be satisfied  
 till the last roof-tree smokes in ruins, and  
 men wander about the streets, fearful and alone.<sup>55</sup>

Further, when it is disclosed that Magda is indeed back, Schwartz thinks that she has returned to humble her father by showing him how she rose in the world by treading filial duty in the dust.

---

<sup>55</sup> Magda, I.



Sudermann carefully constructs his frame by stressing what is to be the conflict. He has Pastor Heffterdingt present the new--that which Magde has accomplished and represents.

My dear Colonel, I might ask, what speaks in you? A father's love? You could make no pretence to that. Your rights? I think rather it would be your right to rejoice in the good fortune of your child. Offended custom? I don't know-- Your daughter has done so much through her own strength that even offended custom might at least condone it. It appears to me that pride and arrogance speak in you--and nothing else.<sup>56</sup>

Magde finally arrives home, but she is condescending to her family and makes ironic speeches spiced with Italian phrases. She prates on about the world outside this provincial former home of hers. The pastor prevails upon her to stay at her father's house; but during their talk Sudermann has Magda give an explanation for her being at the town festival and why she returned home. She felt she had to return because she had an inner compulsion which told her:

Go in the twilight and stand before the parental house where for seventeen years you lived in bondage. There look upon what you were. But if they recognize you, show them that beyond their narrow virtues there may be something true and good.<sup>57</sup>

---

<sup>56</sup> Ibid.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid., II.

Heffterdingt's arguments are strong, and she agrees to stay if she will not be questioned on her past.

It is later disclosed that a friend of Schwartz's, the pompous Concillor Von Keller, had fathered a child of Magda's when she was still a struggling actress. Magda detests him, but she also promises not to disclose the secret. However, when Schwartz questions Von Keller on Magda's life in Berlin, he does not answer certain questions, and he gives the impression that Magda led a wild life. Immediately, Schwartz forces Magda to tell him everything, and despite her efforts she becomes once again a browbeaten child in his presence. She does not want him to do anything; but he, with his code of honor, feels that the whole family is shamed, and he is going to avenge her name. Von Keller offers to marry Magda, which would seem to solve everything; however, he is a very self-centered person, and he wants Magda to become servile to him and his career. She could give up her career, but then he refuses to acknowledge their child. This is too much, and Magda refuses him.

Sudermann becomes didactic and again says the new is far superior to the old. Magda speaks for the new freedom in glowing terms, and it is too much for the

old man. He has an attack, and although he blesses his other daughter, he refuses to forgive Magda before he dies.

It is a well-wrought play, propounding a valid thesis in a convincing manner, and it contains some convincing dramatic action. But the characters are not really flesh-and-blood people; they are mechanical. Sudermann presents a situation, places his characters in it, and forces them to perform as he wishes. This can result in good theatre if skillfully done. It does not result in good, or valid, tragedy. Magda struggles, and struggles well, but the odds are not natural. They appear with the regularity of those in a melodrama. Schwartz, Von Keller, and the rest are all types. The conflict between types can perhaps momentarily arouse sympathy, and the total situation may indeed be pathetic, but it is not tragic. It is all too analytical to arouse any transport on the part of the audience. There is no real ennoblement of any character in the play; there is no growth to a high state of human dignity before the fall when the odds are such that the protagonist cannot win. Magda is a victim of circumstances, just as her family is a slave to the same circumstances. Disaster ensues when they collide; although it is pathetic, it is not tragic.

The Russian dramatists also found a fertile field in domestic drama. Although Russian drama dates from the simple, religious folk plays of the sixteenth century, it was slow to develop. It is only during the last one hundred and fifty years that the Russian people have evolved a theatre of their own. The remoteness of Russia, the strict Tsarist censorship, and the Russian Orthodox Church all contributed to retard the development of a national theatre.<sup>58</sup> To trace the development of Russian drama and the contributions of such men as Knyazhin, Pushkin, Gogol, Turgnev, and many others is a study in itself which extends beyond the limits of this paper. Therefore, two of the great names of Russian literature, Tolstoi and Chekhov, along with two of their representative domestic dramas, have been chosen to demonstrate the work in this genre in Russia.

Leo Tolstoi was not content merely to present the social scene in a realistic manner; he set out to reform society. Gassner has noted that Tolstoi was intentionally didactic, and only his great talent and vigorous personality enabled him to rise above the level of didacticism which is often a part of the realistic theatre.<sup>59</sup> Tolstoi

---

<sup>58</sup> H. W. L. Dana, "Russia," in Clark and Freedley, page 372.

<sup>59</sup> Gassner, page 505.

did not write The Power of Darkness until 1886; but when it was performed that year, students waited outside the theatre after the performance to catch sight of Tolstoi and to kiss his hand.<sup>60</sup>

It is a grim play, starkly realistic, and the setting is the very dregs of Russian peasant life. A young laborer, Nikita, has an affair with his master's wife, Anisya. Nikita's mother Matryona convinces Anisya that she should poison her husband, and she does. After Nikita and Anisya are married, Nikita seduces Akoulina, the half-witted stepdaughter of Anisya; and when she has a child, it is decided that the child must be killed before she can be married off. Matryona forces Nikita to crush the child with a board. However, Nikita is overwhelmed with remorse, and he confesses his guilt at the wedding of Akoulina. The action is certainly sordid and horrible, but it was not Tolstoi's intent to present a photograph merely for the sake of an accurate picture. Gassner observed quite accurately that to this tragedy of sin and expiation, Tolstoi added the dimension of humanitarianism.<sup>61</sup>

The play is definitely a tragedy, perhaps the greatest folk tragedy ever written, because of Tolstoi's portrayal

---

<sup>60</sup> Bellinger, Page 348.

<sup>61</sup> Gassner, page 506.

of Nikita. He is first presented as a simple, ne'er-do-well, lazy churl who, because of his good looks, is able to attract women. He is dominated by his mother, and he readily agrees to marry Anisya for the financial gain. He has no moral scruples; in fact, he hardly conceives of the moral ramifications of his acts. However, when he is forced to kill Akoulina's child, the whimpers of the infant reach even his callous soul. This is more than just being afraid of being caught and punished by the law. In his torment he learns from Mitritch, a drunken laborer, that it is foolish to fear men; there is something far greater. Nikita goes to the marriage ceremony and confesses everything. But he confesses exultingly when he asks forgiveness of his father, Akim:

Father, dear father, forgive me too,--fiend that I am! You told me from the first, when I took to bad ways, you said then, "If a claw is caught, the bird is lost!" I would not listen to your words, dog that I was, and it has turned out as you said! Forgive me, for Christ's sake.

Akim answers him:

God will forgive you, my son! You have had no mercy on yourself, He will show mercy on you! God--God! It is He!<sup>62</sup>

It is to Tolstoi's everlasting credit that he could take

---

<sup>62</sup> The Power of Darkness, trans. Louise and Aylmer Maude, V, 11.

a completely despicable character and present him as such during the first part of the play and then change him in a logical and believable manner--endow him with a moral regeneration. Only a writer with the tenderest of feelings for his people, the peasants, could do such a thing. Only a writer with the greatest of skill could make this convincing. Nikita struggles with his greedy mother and his avaricious wife; this is a struggle on one level. But Nikita also struggles with his soul, and the inherent good, which has long been dormant because of the sordid surroundings, finally breaks through and triumphs. This play is a tragedy because Nikita achieves a nobility by coming to grips with both levels of antagonists; and although he will be destroyed, he has achieved a peace with his world and with God.

Ashley Dukes, who does not think The Power of Darkness is a great drama, dismisses the play as having "certain grand barbaric simplicity, and that is all."<sup>63</sup> In criticizing this play Dukes has unwittingly identified the very thing that makes it great. It is barbaric, and it is life on its simplest level. It also concerns people existing in their most elemental state; thus there

---

<sup>63</sup> Dukes, pages 183-184.

can be displayed a more honest good, a good not confounded by convention, but instead, a good founded on the feelings of the heart and the basic relationship to God and to family. There is a complete purgation of emotions in watching this simple soul find himself before his imminent destruction. His life has been a horror, but by dint of human nobility he has risen above all of that. No more can be asked of a tragedy; no more can be closer to the truth of life and human existence with its constant riddle.

A repeated criticism of Anton Chekhov is that nothing happens in his plays. This is valid criticism; it is also life. Chekhov's characters talk, eat, argue, laugh, and think. They are sometimes driven to despair; but they do not kill themselves. In real life people do the same things, and while some people do kill themselves, when they realize that their whole life has been a sham, the majority do not. This is at the heart of domestic drama; it is also at the heart of domestic comedy. Uncle Vanya (1899) is titled a comedy. It is a comedy when one examines Uncle Vanya, who often makes one laugh at his foolishness. But the play also has a tragic air because of the pathos elicited by the knowledge of what life has done to him. Therefore, the play is a good example of the confluence of tragedy and comedy--mixing the two as



is the case in life--and while the total effect is not that of high tragedy, the feelings for Uncle Vanya go beyond those of mere sympathy for an apparent bungler.

In brief, the action opens with the return of Professor Serebrakoff and his young wife, Helen, to the family estate. Uncle Vanya, Serebrakoff's first wife's brother, and Sonia, Serbrakoff's daughter by the first marriage, have slaved to produce enough from the estate to enable him to continue his career as a scholar. Vanya falls in love with Helen, and he realizes that he has dedicated his life to supporting an incompetent man. Sonia, too, feels the impact of these people when her admirer Astroff, the village doctor, also falls in love with Helen. When Vanya learns that Serebrakoff intends to expel him from the farm, Vanya goes berserk and tries to shoot him, but naturally, he misses. Serebrakoff and Helen leave and life on the estate continues much as it was before they came. However, this is not to say that it is really the same. The concept that nothing happens in Chekhov's plays is found to be erroneous when one hears Vanya say to the departing Serebrakoff, "Everything will be the same as before,"<sup>64</sup>

---

<sup>64</sup> Uncle Vanya, IV.

One knows full well that this really cannot be, though it may appear that way on the surface. Vanya has changed--his idol has turned to clay. He will work as before, but his old purpose has been destroyed; life is now empty.

The total impact is not of tragedy, nor is it of comedy--if used in the sense of comedy meaning something humorous. It is the tragic comedy of humdrum, ordinary life, of life that has been wasted. Uncle Vanya has given his life for another; he has effaced his whole personality to gain vicarious pleasure from the expected attainments of Serebrakoff. When Vanya learns that it has all been in vain, he cries out:

My life has been a failure. I am clever and brave and strong. If I had lived a normal life I might have become another Schopenhauer or Dostoeffski.<sup>65</sup>

Perhaps he would have, but not now. He has given too much of himself, and he has been disappointed by the failure of the one to whom he gave it all. It is sad; it is pathetic; but it is not tragic. One feels immensely sorry for Vanya, but emotions never reach the same peak which they reach in high tragedy. Rather, it is resignation and acceptance at seeing life with

---

<sup>65</sup> Ibid.

ordinary people in a society that is decaying, wherein there can be little more than mediocrity and final oblivion in boredom. However, there is still hope, a quiet hope, which reaffirms a faith in life and a sense of peace after seeing this slice of life for a fleeting moment. All the characters have been affected, but they are not destroyed. Sonia speaks of their ultimate future at the end of the play.

What can we do? We must live our lives?  
 Yes, we shall live, Uncle Vanya. We shall live through the long procession of days before us, and through the long evenings; we shall patiently bear the trials that fate imposes on us; we shall work for others without rest, both now and when we are old; and when our last hour comes, we shall say that we have suffered and wept, that our life was bitter, and God will have pity on us. Ah, then, dear, dear Uncle, we shall see that bright and beautiful life; we shall rejoice and look back upon our sorrow here; a tender smile--and--we shall rest. I have faith, Uncle, fervent, passionate faith. We shall rest.<sup>66</sup>

Neither tragedy nor comedy, the play is none the less, one of the finest dramas of domestic life ever written.

No summary of Continental drama would be complete without mention of Arthur Schnitzler. He was a doctor and a Viennese. He also possessed a more than ordinary skill as a playwright. It is necessary to keep in mind

---

<sup>66</sup> Ibid.

that at the turn of the century German and Austrian drama were two entirely different things. Vienna was more cosmopolitan than most German cities, and its inhabitants were less bound to stern traditions than their German neighbors. Schnitzler had great power in constructing atmosphere, or as Dukes called it, "the dim twilight atmosphere as of autumn evenings crowded with reminiscence."<sup>67</sup> Also, Schnitzler wrote for an enlightened audience, one that was sophisticated enough to understand his subtleties. However, his characters always act like human beings, naturally, and not according to any preconceptions. It is simply that Schnitzler delved deeper into his characters and had these characters follow their innermost instincts. Moreover, Schnitzler chose to pervade his dramas with a melancholy which alludes to the feeling of life's transitory and vanishing happiness.

Intermezzo (1904), which is called a comedy, is a comedy only in the sense that it is an ironic picture of domestic life; the outcome of mutual misunderstanding on the part of the husband and wife borders on the tragic. Edwin Björkman believed that this play could be interpreted as an attack on the new material conventions

---

<sup>67</sup> Dukes, page 153.

which abolished the former demand for mutual faithfulness by substituting mutual frankness. Thus it is really a discussion of just what constitutes true honesty in the ever delicate relationship between wife and husband.<sup>68</sup> But Björkman's words, true as they may be, would be misleading if one fails to mention that the presentation of this theme is in a wholly natural setting with real people.

In this play the husband Amadeus Adams is a composer, and his wife Cecilia is an opera singer. They both follow their separate careers, and they must often live apart. Also, because of the nature of their work, they are often very close to members of the opposite sex. Amadeus has had affairs before, but he insists that he and his wife are people apart from the ordinary, between whom there can be no secrets. He knows that Cecilia walks often with Prince Sigismund, but he is also sure there is nothing between them. When his friend Albert questions him on his own indiscretions, Amadeus, who has carefully displaced them from his mind, can answer:

Your worry is quite superfluous! Haven't you known us long enough--me and Cecilia--to know that our marriage is based, above all else, on absolute frankness?<sup>69</sup>

---

<sup>68</sup> Edwin Björkman, Intro. to Three Plays by Arthur Schnitzler (New York, 1915), page xxv.

<sup>69</sup> Intermezzo, I.

He can add further:

And besides, it would be quite hopeless for Cecilia or me to keep any secrets. We know each other too well--I don't think two people ever existed who understood each other so completely as we do.<sup>70</sup>

This is the tragic element in the play. Admadedus never does understand his wife. He fatuously blocks from his mind his own indiscretions, and he refuses to admit to himself that his wife could ever keep anything from him. Therefore, he can suggest to Cecilia that they enter into a relationship of just friends, chums between whom there is complete faith and no secrets. He does not wish to lose her; in fact, it is unthinkable to him. Therefore, by having this new relationship, they can proceed to greater things without the encumbrances of love in the normal sense. In the following speech he outlines a plan, which he cannot admit to himself that he shall ever keep, and which Cecilia completely misunderstands:

All right. We'll discuss everything frankly, just as we have been doing--nay, we shall have more things than ever to discuss. Truth becomes now the natural basis of our continued relationship--truth without any reservation whatsoever. And that should prove highly profitable, not only to our mutual relationship, but to each one of us individually.

---

<sup>70</sup> Ibid.

Because...you don't think, do you, that either one of us could find a better chum than the other one?...Now we shall bring our joys and sorrows to each other. We shall be as good friends as ever, if not better still. And our hands shall be joined, even if chasms open between us. And thus we shall keep all that we have had in common hitherto: our work, our child, our home--all that we must continue to have in common if it is to retain its full value to both of us. And we shall gain many new things for which both of us have longed--things in which I could take no pleasure, by the way, if I had to lose you.<sup>71</sup>

This is, of course, an impossible thing. Moreover, this demand for a frankness to exist between man and wife existing only as close friends must end as Albert says:

Friendship between two people of different sexes is always dangerous--even when they are married. If there is too much mutual understanding between our souls, many things are swept along that we would rather keep back; and when our senses are attracted mutually, the suction affects much more of our souls than we would care to have involved. That's a universal law, my dear chap, for which the profound uncertainty of all earthly relationships between man and woman must be held responsible. And only he who doesn't know it, will trust himself or

72

Admadeus wants to eat his cake and have it too. He cannot face the stories that Cecelia may divorce him for Prince Sigismund. He even seeks a duel with Sigismund, but they

---

71 Ibid.

72 Ibid., III.

talk it over, and the Prince agrees to step out of the picture. Admadeus things that he once again has Cecelia to himself.

Cecelia is the true protagonist of the play. It is around her that the deepest struggles are waged. Admadeus does not take into account her thoughts on the subject, for he is so sure of her. But she knows that the proposed experiment is doomed to failure. She knows full well that they have never really been honest with each other. Frankness is one thing; but honesty, honesty in displaying the true emotions is something quite different. She rises to an almost tragic figure when she answers Admadeus' avowal that they have always been honest.

No, I can't think so any longer. Let everything else have been honest--but that both of us should have resigned ourselves so promptly when you told me of your passion for the Countess and I confessed my affection for Sigismund--that was not honest. If each of us had then flung his scorn, his bitterness, his despair into the face of the other one, instead of trying to appear self-controlled and superior--then we should have been honest--which, as it was, we were not.<sup>73</sup>

And this is precisely why the play is not a true tragedy. Amadeus and Cecelia made an agreement wherein they were to approach in a civilized, sophisticated manner affairs alien to normal married love. It simply did not work. However, although the two probably really did love each

---

<sup>73</sup> Ibid.



other, they did not struggle in an honest fashion. It was all too analytical. Emotions on the part of the audience can never be aroused to the plane of transport by such a presentation. Instead, there is only pity for these people who were ruined by mutual misunderstanding.

The Continental dramatists demonstrated the potentialities of domestic drama for tragedy. Their influence, though often indirect, was quite profound on the English dramatists. In turning back to British drama it is important to keep in mind that although there is no intent to show how domestic drama developed, if it can really be said to have developed, any creative work is not a thing of isolation. Extant ideas, methods, and techniques plus a cognizance of all that went before are an integral part of a dramatist's heritage; and the English writers, even of today, owe a great deal to their fellow craftsmen on the Continent.

## CHAPTER III

### REPRESENTATIVE BRITISH AND IRISH DRAMAS

During the latter part of the eighteenth century and on through most of the nineteenth century, British drama in general was in a state of decline. The Licensing Act of 1737, which restricted dramatic performances to two main theatres, Covent Garden and Drury Lane (although there were many outlaw houses), seriously curtailed dramatic development. The theatres were too large; the crowds were very rough; and the plays made little appeal to the intelligence.<sup>1</sup> With the Act of 1843 other theatres were permitted to open, and as a result smaller houses were built wherein the actors no longer had to declaim in ranting voices to be heard. The rising middle class began to attend the theatres, and the coarser elements were removed. The great, gaudy presentations of melodrama and vaudeville were gradually superseded by more artistic productions. But the new theatres did not immediately gain fresh

---

<sup>1</sup> J. W. Marriot, Modern Drama (London, n.d.), pages 2-4, passim.

interpretations. The long run was one retarding factor. Another factor was that the managers of the new theatres were often men interested in making money rather than producing "good theatre."<sup>2</sup>

This is not to say that there were not dramatists during this long period of decline who were interested in art. Such men as Tennyson, Browning, and Swinburne tried, but as George Freedley has pointed out, "these Victorian writers lacked dramatic passion, sincere curiosity as to people's motives, and conscious application to the psychology of man's actions."<sup>3</sup>

In 1865 Thomas Robertson's comedy Society was produced. It is not a great piece and is of no relation to this subject at hand except that it demonstrates how Robertson's ideas were to revitalize the theatre. His craftsmanship was superb, and he demanded natural acting along with a realistic production. This was a significant step from artificiality to naturalism. Perhaps most important was his interest in real people; moreover, these people were of the same middle class as were the majority of the audience. Nicoll has said

---

<sup>2</sup> Allardyce Nicoll, British Drama (London, 1946), pages 234-238, passim.

<sup>3</sup> Barrett H. Clark and George Freedley, ed., A History of Modern Drama (New York, 1947), page 160.

that Robertson demonstrated that "ordinary life could be brought into the theatre for the good both of the drama and the spectators; that the problems of social existence were clamouring for expression in literary form."<sup>4</sup>

The influence of Ibsen at this time must also be mentioned. Edmund Gosse in an article in The Fortnightly Review (1873) first introduced Ibsen to the British public.<sup>5</sup> Thomas Dickinson has pointed out that with Ibsen it was necessary to take a strong position, either for or against him, but that strangely, his direct influence has never been great.<sup>6</sup> It was Ibsen's indirect influence, or what his great promotor, William Archer, called "pervasive influence" that was most important.<sup>7</sup>

The theatre was ready for the talents of such men as Sidney Grundy, Henry Arthur Jones, and Arthur Wing Pinero. Grundy made a crude attempt at domestic tragedy in A Fool's Paradise (1892). Although worth mention as a pioneer in this sort of drama, he did not completely

---

<sup>4</sup> Nicoll, British Drama, page 348.

<sup>5</sup> John W. Cunliffe, Modern English Playwrights (New York, 1927), page 37.

<sup>6</sup> Thomas Dickinson, The Contemporary Drama of England (Boston, 1922), pages 63-64.

<sup>7</sup> William Archer, The Old Drama and the New (Boston, 1923), page 307.

break with the harsh characterization of melodrama, or as A. E. Morgan has pointed out, "There is till the harsh contrast between white virtue and black vice."<sup>8</sup>

Henry Arthur Jones is a significant figure in the development not only of domestic drama, but in a larger sense the whole of British drama. Morgan calls his early play, Saints and Sinners (1884), a "van of dramatic development" because it was an attempt to consider English life in a serious manner, and at the same time it was a condemnation of English puritanism. Further, Jones was active in promoting the Copyright Bill, for he felt the practice of printing plays was beneficial to theatrical development.<sup>9</sup> Although Jones recognized what Ibsen was trying to do, the tradition of melodrama was too strong, and his attempt to drive home a point results in an inevitable collection of types rather than real people. Dickinson agrees, for "when he builds a play around a character, that character is an embodied point of view, a crux in the social fabric."<sup>10</sup>

---

<sup>8</sup> A. E. Morgan, Tendencies in Modern English Drama (New York, 1924), page 25.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., page 29.

<sup>10</sup> Dickinson, pages 93-94.

With an immediate aim of attacking hypocrisy and commercialism inherent in the English middle class, Saints and Sinners achieves this through the medium of domestic drama. Honest, naive Jacob Fletcher, an unassuming pastor of a small chapel, has two loves, his religion and his daughter Letty. He is simply too good. When his daughter has been ruined and he loses his position, he does not struggle. His action in resigning from his chapel because of Letty's shame is admirable and so is his allowing the merchant, Hoggard, who caused his downfall, escape from the violence of a mob at the end of the play. Somehow one cannot identify oneself with him. Perhaps it is simply because he is too good to be true; or it may be because Jones' villains are too bad. When Fanshawe says, "You turned me out of your house yesterday, you may find your daughter has left it tomorrow--,"<sup>11</sup> one can imagine the stock villain twirling his mustachios, and the impulse is to hiss as in an old melodrama. All of the dramatis personae are types, and tragedy demands characters--real flesh-and-blood people. The play is not even a serious problem play, but instead it must be called melodrama in spite of its vigorous theme. The author himself said in the preface to this play,

---

<sup>11</sup> Saints and Sinners, II, 1.

I have fulfilled my main design in presenting this play, for I do not claim any great merit for Saints and Sinners apart from that of representing with some degree of faithfulness, and with due regard to the requirements of the modern stage, some very widely-spread types of modern middle-class Englishmen.<sup>12</sup>

Perhaps Jones tried too hard. Even in his later, and much better, Michael and The Lost Angel (1896) he is still too sentimental. Nicoll believes Jones was too serious and "because of that seriousness refused to move rapidly enough to keep in touch with his age."<sup>13</sup>

Arthur Wing Pinero was a successful actor and playwright. He also was a master technician in stagecraft who possessed the ability to exhibit life in a realistic manner with realistic characters. At the height of his career he wrote The Second Mrs. Tanqueray (1893), which is a definite break with the formula plays of his earlier career. He discarded the soliloquy and the aside and blazed the way in a new and powerful direction. Clayton Hamilton felt at the time of the original production of The Second Mrs. Tanqueray that it was the only great play written in the English language for 116 years.<sup>14</sup>

---

<sup>12</sup> Henry Arthur Jones, preface to Saints and Sinners (New York, 1914), page xxv.

<sup>13</sup> Nicoll, British Drama, page 367.

<sup>14</sup> Clayton Hamilton, ed., The Social Plays of Arthur Wing Pinero (New York, 1917), vol. I, page 3.

On all counts it is the best play since School for Scandal (1777), but it is not a tragedy--instead, it is only a serious problem play.

The problem or theme of the play is this: Can a prostitute be redeemed by marriage to a good man who knows her past and is willing to help her? Pinero is quite able to give us a definite no; for as Paula Tanqueray says, "I believe the future is only the past again entered through another gate."<sup>15</sup>

Herein lies the reason for both the potentiality of tragedy as well as the play's failure as a tragedy. Paula can never escape from the past. But she does not really attempt to break the grip the past has on her; she does not really change. It is too much with her, and life with her husband soon becomes a bore. Not long after her marriage to Aubrey there is the following exchange:

Paula. Exactly six minutes.

Aubrey. Six minutes?

Paula. Six minutes, Aubrey dear, since you made your last remark.<sup>16</sup>

---

<sup>15</sup> The Second Mrs. Tanqueray, IV.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., II.



Paula, like many people, feels unwanted. She has universality (as defined in this paper), for if we have not met someone like her, we can certainly conceive of her. Boredom is the bane of her existence, but the rebuffs she receives at the hands of Aubrey's daughter Ellean offer her a challenge for a successful life as a respected and accepted member of the family. But she does not know how to go about it. Her struggles become mere weak protests. Jealousy soon arises within her as she sees the affection between Aubrey and Ellean and then the easy manner with which Mrs. Cortylyon takes charge of Ellean. Finally, the past--the ever-present past--confronts her again in reality in the guise of her former lover, who wishes to become the husband of Ellean. Rather than do more damage she commits suicide.

True, this is a noble gesture, and she becomes a very sympathetic character. The result is pathos, which has no place in a tragedy. There are tears, but something more than tears is desirable: dry-eyed fear and awe. It is doubtful that Pinero actually saw Paula as a tragic figure. He portrayed a single instance, what feasibly could be a problem in modern, domestic life; and he created characters in proportion to it. If Pinero believed in Novalis' doctrine that character is

fate, then we must agree with Clayton Hamilton's assertion that "destiny is nothing but another name for character, and the only tragedy in life is the tragedy of failing in the future by reason of the fact that we have failed already in the past."<sup>17</sup> The dice are loaded against a play which contains a character whose past forbids the ability to struggle. Tragic height cannot be achieved, and Paula is such a person. She is only an average human being--really no better or worse than anyone else. She is merely an unfortunate, who, whether she is on the stage or in real life, evokes sympathy but nothing else.

In Mid-Channel (1909) Pinero once again has bored characters. The playwright employs a raisonneur in the form of Peter Mottram, who provides the thesis of the play: Married life is like crossing the English Channel from Folkestone to Boulogne; at the half-way mark there is a ridge which affords rough sailing. Zebe and Theodore Blundell are thoroughly bored with each other. Early in their marriage they resolved to have no children, and now there is no common bond between them. Selfishness, vulgarity and, after separation, sordid affairs on both

---

<sup>17</sup> Hamilton, page 46.

sides can lead only to eventual disaster. It is a serious play concerning modern society, but it is certainly no tragedy. Both of the principals are petty persons, unintelligent, selfish, and dissatisfied. In a word, they are shallow. The characters do not struggle honestly with their problem. Any attempt at understanding or at doing a single decent, noble thing is half-hearted. Again the misfortunes of the characters in the play create an atmosphere of pathos, but that is all. William Archer pinpointed the problem when he called this play a tragedy of empty people "without any of what might be called the shock absorbers of life."<sup>18</sup>

In fact, there is no climactic incident leading to Zŕe's suicide. Rather, there is a chain of events of which the infidelity is only the final stroke.<sup>19</sup> Thus it is a fine problem play, but not a tragedy. Everything is too mechanical with characters subordinate to the plot. Finero had the opportunity to create much stronger characters, but he may not have wished to. Many critics agree with George Freedley, who claims, "He aimed at tragedy, but never achieved it because his serious

---

<sup>18</sup> Archer, page 320.

<sup>19</sup> Frank Wadleigh Chandler, Aspects of Modern Drama (New York, 1918), page 176.

plays were mundane affairs which never purged the audience."<sup>20</sup> Intent on the part of the author and later classification of his creation by critics are two different things. One cannot deny Pinero's ability as a playwright, and a great dramatist does not have to write great tragedies. If his plays are not tragedies, it is because of the characters he created to people them. Usually the human stuff of his characters is too mean. There is no pity and terror at seeing their downfall. A. E. Morgan conceived of them as lacking "that grandeur which is necessary to elevate the psychological struggle to a sufficiently high level."<sup>21</sup>

In the midst of a host of domestic dramas which in the final analysis are only problem plays is to be found a true tragedy--John Masefield's The Tragedy of Nan (1908). Dickinson has said of this play, "Masefield has harmonized the point of view of old tragedy with modern circumstance. . . . Nan is a majestic figure. Her tragedy glorifies her sordid fate."<sup>22</sup> In the preface to this play Masefield expressed his theory of tragedy, which is relevant to this study.

---

<sup>20</sup> Clark and Freedley, page 165.

<sup>21</sup> Morgan, pages 38-39.

<sup>22</sup> Dickinson, page 217.

Tragedy at its best is a vision of the heart of life. The heart of life can only be laid bare in the agony and exultation of dreadful acts. The vision of agony, or spiritual contest, pushed beyond the limits of the dying personality, is exalting and cleansing. It is only by such vision that a multitude can be brought to the passionate knowledge of things exalting and eternal.

Commonplace people dislike tragedy because they dare not suffer and cannot exult. The truth and rapture of men are holy things, not lightly to be scorned. A carelessness of life and beauty marks the glutton, the idler, and the fool in their deadly path across history.

The poetic impulse of the Renaissance is now spent. The poetic drama, the fruit of that impulse is now dead. Until a new poetic impulse gathers, playwrights trying for beauty must try to create new forms in which beauty and the high things of the soul may pass from the stage to the mind. Our playwrights have all the power except that power of exultation which comes from a delighted brooding on excessive, terrible things. That power is seldom granted to man; twice or thrice to a race perhaps, not oftener. But it seems to me certain that every effort, however humble, toward achieving of that power helps the genius of a race to obtain it, though the obtaining may be fifty years after the strivers are dead.<sup>23</sup>

Masefield justified his own criticism. In this play he has created real characters. The Fargetters are so grasping, selfish, and mean that they make one cringe when they appear. In the sordid atmosphere of their home, Nan is like a rose in a swamp. She is doomed to

---

<sup>23</sup> John Masefield, Introduction to The Tragedy of Nan, in The Plays of John Masefield (New York, 1918), vol. II, page 144.

suffer because her father was hanged for sheep-stealing. Love is denied her; yet she loves others. She can trust no one; yet she trusts. Cuffs and maltreatment cause her only to turn the other cheek. Nan can bear anything except false love and false kindness. She believes that the shallow, spineless Dick Gurvil loves her; and she believes her piety has been rewarded, but then the jealous Mrs. Pargetter tells Dick of Nan's past, and he scorns her for Jenny Pargetter. It is the blow which Nan cannot take, and all her tragedy is contained in the line "I thought I was a 'appy woman, Dick."<sup>24</sup>

Already there is horror at seeing a pure and noble person in such a predicament. This horror is heightened when Nan revolts and forces Jenny to eat a poisoned meat-pie. Later, what could be called a theatrical trick in a lesser play, or the final blow to a lesser person, occurs when Nan receives fifty pounds from the government as retribution for the execution of her father, who has since been proven innocent. The intensity of the action is almost unbearable, filling one with awe when she tells Mrs. Pargetter:

Don't you speak. Don't you threaten, You'll  
listen to me. You 'ad me in your power, And

---

<sup>24</sup> Tragedy of Nan, II.

wot was good in me you sneered at. And wot was sweet in me, you soured. And wot was bright in me your dulled. I was a fly in the spider's web. And the web came round me and round me, till it was a shroud, till there was no more joy in the world. Till my 'eart was bitter as that ink, and all choked. And for that I get little yellow round things. (Pause and change of voice.) And all of it--No need for any of it. My dad's life, and your taunts, and my broke 'eart. All a mistake. A mistake. Somethin' to be put right by fifty pound while a gentleman waits for a coach. 'E though nothin of it. 'E thought only of gettin the coach. 'E didn't even pretend. (A cry within.) It were a game to 'im. 'E laughed at it. (A cry within.) Yes. She has seen herself. No wonder she cries. She sees the parish death-cart coming.<sup>25</sup>

Nan kills Dick and goes to drown herself in the incoming tide.

She is truly a tragic figure. Masfield has demonstrated that it is the stature of the protagonist as a person that is the most vital factor in a true tragedy. There is a majesty about Nan. Her fall, if it can be called a fall, simply enables her to soar to greater heights--as great as the nobility of the human spirit is capable of. Masfield has added another element to this play which is worth mention--the symbolic sounds of the sea and the coach horn and the musings of Old Gaffer. There is an unreal sense of destiny that is almost tangible,

---

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., III.

and yet projects the piece beyond the limits of the household, the stage, and even life. Once again A. E. Morgan provides an excellent analysis of what Masefield has accomplished.

By moving his persons on a high social plane, by magnifying his characters to a superhuman size, or by removing his theme to a far-off land or distant time, the tragic writer has lifted his drama above the level on which his audience normally lives and feels. By these methods the dramatist fulfills an essential condition of tragedy. He sublimates the person he evokes, purging it of that personal quality which it will possess if it is too close to the ordinary conditions of life. It enables him safely to produce deep passion without risk of dragging down the spirit to the level of our everyday experience and mingling it with the sorrow that pertains to our own lives. On the contrary it opens a window through which the soul may see wider vistas of human woe, and above all, if it be great tragedy, it will show a vision of the indomitable greatness of humanity. The effect will not be depression but elevation, not debasement but ennoblement of spirit.<sup>26</sup>

Never again was Masefield able to equal this play. Cunliffe has said that critics see it as "a leading modern example of domestic tragedy, worthy for its artistic restraint and imaginative power to be compared to Synge's Riders to the Sea."<sup>27</sup>

In this brief play, Riders to the Sea (1904), J. M. Synge created a masterwork which in one sense is a

---

<sup>26</sup> Morgan, page 265.

<sup>27</sup> Cunliffe, pages 181-182.



domestic drama, and in another sense has a quality of unreality that defies category. However, in all respects it is a true tragedy. By placing his setting in the Aran Islands, he created naturally a remoteness wherein life is stripped to the very essentials of man and nature. Of principal interest to this paper is the character of the mother, Maurya, who, as Chandler noted, "through stress of suffering, has acquired a Stoic strength of soul."<sup>28</sup>

Maurya is a poor, uneducated woman who lives to see all her menfolk lost to the sea. In referring to her remaining son, Bartley, and his trip to sell some horses, she says prophetically:

He's gone now, God spare us, and we'll not see him again. He's gone now, and when the black night is falling I'll have no son left me in the world.<sup>29</sup>

Later, when she speaks of her vision of the lost Michael, one sees in this simple woman the quiet resignation to what must be. She has known a lifetime of losing those dearest to her, for as she says:

In the big world the old people do be leaving things after them for their sons and

---

<sup>28</sup> Chandler, page 264.

<sup>29</sup> Riders to the Sea,

children, but in this place it is the young men do be leaving things behind for them that do be old.<sup>30</sup>

Although Maurya accepts her losses with a calm resignation, she has a valiant will. It is her will to go on living in deep humility and accepting losses as her lot that projects her plight to tragic proportions. Her philosophy is expressed in the closing speech:

Michael has a clean burial in the far north, by the grace of the Almighty God. Bartley will have a fine coffin out of the white boards, and a deep grave surely. What more can we want than that? No man at all can be living for ever, and we must be satisfied.<sup>31</sup>

There is no room for tears. Instead, one is filled with awe at Maurya's quiet dignity that lends a tone of majesty to the play. Freedley believes that katharsis is achieved in this drama and that it is a "modern example of the tragic impulse."<sup>32</sup> Perhaps Edward J. O'Brien best expressed the significance which this play holds:

The pity and the terror of it all have brought a great peace, the peace that passeth understanding, and it is because the play holds this timeless

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> Clark and Freedley, page 220.

peace after the story which has bowed down every character, that Riders to the Sea may rightly take its place as the greatest modern tragedy in the English tongue.<sup>33</sup>

Elizabeth Baker presents a powerful critique of the growing discontent in the middle classes of her time in Chains (1909). Charlie Wilson, a clerk with a "safe" job in the city, has vague stirrings of discontentment. He is tired of his regimented life, tired of living in a row of identical houses, tired of catching the same train every morning, and tired of waiting for slow advancement in his job. Charlie desires liberty--the liberty, as he sees it, of working with the soil. He has a small garden, but the earth is poor, affording little satisfaction toward easing his need for self-expression. A boarder in the house, Tennant, is quitting his job--also "safe"--and is heading for Australia to try his luck. Charlie sees his chance, and at the close of the play, he resolves to go with Tennant. Then his wife Lily tells him that she is going to have a baby, and his hopes are shattered.

It is a serious problem play developed with great skill. Baker provides a sharp contrast between the

---

<sup>33</sup> Introduction to Riders to the Sea by Edward J. O'Brien (Boston, 1911), page 3.

unimaginative Lily and the romantic Charlie. Lily says of Tennant's pending departure, "And he really is mad. Throwing up a most excellent situation. My dear, I call him just stupid."<sup>34</sup> Charlie, on the other hand, sums up the thesis of the play and his own feelings as well when he argues thus with his in-laws:

I'm not a scoundrel just because I got an idea, am I? But I'll tell you what, marriage shouldn't tie a man up as if he was a slave. I don't want to desert Lily--She's my wife and I'm proud of it--but because I married, am I never to strike out in anything? People like us are just cowards. We seize on the first soft job--and there we stick like whipped dogs. We're afraid to ask for anything, afraid to ask for a raise even--we wait until it comes. And when the boss says he won't give you one--do we up and say, 'Then I'll go some where I can get more?' Not a bit of it.

.....

Why can't a man have a fit of restlessness and all that without being thought a villain?<sup>35</sup>

The play is not a tragedy. One is interested in Charlie's predicament and can identify oneself with him, but he is a small man who, prodded by his imagination, feebly struggles but soon succumbs to the chains of circumstance. Cunliffe has called it the "life of the Ignobly decent."<sup>36</sup> The play does have power as a

---

<sup>34</sup> Chains, I.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., III.

<sup>36</sup> Cunliffe, page 161.

problem play, but its weakness as a tragedy has been shown by Nicoll. "Here once more we come upon a Galsworthian drama, one to which not the characters, but the circumstances and the forces of society give greatness."<sup>37</sup> This is fine if the intent was to aim at something lower than tragedy, but if tragedy was intended, greater characters should have been created to cope with the circumstances.

Waste (1907), by Harley Granville-Barker, is basically a domestic drama. Much of the action is concerned with high politics, but this is done to develop the protagonist, Trebell, in the light of his importance in English politics at the time of the play, and then to show how the adultery by Trebell leads to his final downfall. Henry Trebell is a well-conceived character. He can be considered as the embodiment of what a layman thinks of as the power behind politics and perhaps also the embodiment of the type of man those in politics would like to have working with them. Trebell is a brilliant man whose life is devoted to his work. Other people do not enter into his life except as puppets whose strings he masters and then employs to his own purposes. He does not love

---

<sup>37</sup> Nicoll, British Drama, page 382.

Amy O'Connell, but he has an affair with her to prove himself in something outside politics. She insists he tell her he loves her, but when he answers, "I'll say whatever's necessary,"<sup>38</sup> one realizes that with him, feelings never enter into affairs with other people.

Trebell is cold, of necessity cold, and this coldness has won for him both loyalty and hatred, but at the same time admiration from each faction. Political setbacks do not worry him because he is not personally involved. His perfect self-confidence and sublime knowledge of the people with whom he works enable him to continue to enjoy his power. Even when confronted with the fact that Amy is pregnant with his child, he is sure he can handle the situation. Amy tells him that her husband will seek a divorce and then raise a great row. The following exchange is indicative of the characters of both, and at the same time it is a hint of what will finally ruin Trebell:

Amy.           And that'd smash you.

Trebell.       At the moment. . . yes.

Amy.           I'd be so sorry. Still. . . you'd  
                  marry me.

Trebell.       That is the usual thing.

---

<sup>38</sup> Waste, I, 11.

Amy. Then you'd hate me the more, I suppose, for being the smashing of you. But we could get along. People do. I'm good company. . . and I'm still pretty. I can't see why you don't love me. . . just a little.

Trebell. I can say that I love you. It's easily said.

Amy. You never once said it. . . you'd no need. That's pretty shameful. Did you think I wouldn't notice?

Trebell. It's a sort of thing I dislike. . . using words that have no meaning to me.<sup>39</sup>

Trebell does not actually hate Amy; rather, he hates to have made a mistake. However, his greatest mistake is not realizing what a stupid, shallow person Amy is. Because he will not say he loves her, she has an abortion and as a result, she dies. Further, he has made the mistake of having written her a letter which falls into the hands of her husband, Justin O'Connell. Within an atmosphere of arguing and cajoling, politicians interested only in saving their leader and thus saving their own party from ruin, a far greater battle is waged. O'Connell and Trebell both realize they have been harmed by Amy. O'Connell promises not to reveal Trebell's letter at the inquest, but that no longer matters to Trebell. He

---

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., II, 1.

has lost something much greater, and his loss is indicated in his words to Cantilupe, the churchman who is concerned over Trebell's adultery and the moral issues which are involved:

Oh, I can repent. . . the thing done. . . the folly of it. But the thing that I am . . . to repent that is to die.<sup>40</sup>

Trebell concludes that he has erred as a person and not as the political machine he hoped he was. Because he has thus erred, he knows he must be judged as a man. However, to the politicians he casts the challenge of whether or not they will keep him as their leader. They later refuse to take the chance with him because scandal may leak out, and his political career is ruined.

This is a hard blow. Perhaps he could bounce back again. He could fight them; or later, when people have forgotten, he could start again. But then he knows he cannot ever walk the same path. His brilliance is intact, but he has had a glimpse inside himself. The child, his child, which Amy was carrying represents to him how easily all of man's creations and aspirations may be snuffed out. He has had at last an insight into the timeless problems

---

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., III, 1.



of humanity and creation and knows he is a part of them. He also knows that he is a failure by their standards. There is nothing else for such a man to do but to die.

The play is not a real tragedy. Seldom do we find a character of such strength and wholeness, but Trebell's lack of human sympathy on a personal level causes him to fail as a tragic figure. It is a pity that he is ruined, but one cannot help feeling that it was his own fault and that he deserved it. Assuredly, it is a waste that a man of his abilities must be lost because of a silly woman, but one feels that she too is entitled to happiness and to life. The title of the play affords the reaction of the audience; it is a waste but of no greater consequence.

St. John Ervine created in John Ferguson (1915) one of the noblest figures in domestic drama. John Ferguson with his humble dignity faces the vagaries of fate and a multitude of misfortunes with a head unbowed except to God. It is the character of old John which qualifies this play as a true tragedy because, despite his being a poor farmer, there is universal identification with him. In the preface to this play Ervine wrote:

John Ferguson is a tragic play, but I think I may claim that it is not a depressing play. It does not disgust with humanity those who

read it or see it performed. An audience should leave a theatre, after seeing a tragedy in a state of pride. . . . proud that they are human and of the same species as the tragic figures. . . .<sup>41</sup>

This is a high standard to achieve, and Ervine has succeeded.

It is necessary to take into consideration the importance attached to owning one's land in Ireland. It has never been as customary to pick up and move to one place or another in Ireland as is customary in America. The family holdings were sacred; they were, indeed, all that people like the Fergusons had. In this play, because of ill-fortune, the farm has been doing poorly and is heavily mortgaged with the notes due. At any moment a letter is expected from John's kin in America with enough money to relieve the debt. Henry Witherow, the antagonist, will write off the mortgage if John's daughter Hannah will marry him. Salvation of a sort is offered by James Caesar, a piddling little grocer, who will pay off the debt if Hannah marries him. John Ferguson will not force his daughter to marry, nor will he attempt to persuade her to do anything against her

---

<sup>41</sup> St. John Ervine, Preface to John Ferguson (New York, 1928), page ix.



something I done that's  
brought calamity on us.  
I'd be willing to pay  
what ever price was de-  
manded of me. . . but  
Andrew!

Andrew Ferguson. Da, a man must clean him-  
self mustn't he?

John Ferguson. Ay, ay, son!

Andrew Ferguson. It's no good other people  
doing things for him. He  
must do them himself.<sup>42</sup>

Andrew and Hannah go to the police. He intends to turn  
himself in. A struggle of the soul has been involved,  
and righteousness triumphs.

The family, although it still possesses the farm, is  
ruined. A. E. Morgan believes that John Ferguson is  
all but dead. The final note is not unalleviated pain,  
but instead, one feels that human nature has been justi-  
fied--that the soul is indestructible.<sup>43</sup>

John and his wife, Sarah, sit talking in a masterful  
and dignified close:

John. We've been married a long while, Sarah,  
and shared our good fortune and our bad.  
We've had our pride and our humiliation.  
God's been good to us and He's been  
bitter hard. But whatever it was we've  
born it together, haven't we?

---

<sup>42</sup> John Ferguson, IV.

<sup>43</sup> Morgan, page 241.

Sarah. Ay, John.

John. And we'll bear this together too,  
woman, won't we?

Sarah. It is a hard thing for any one to  
bear. Your own son to be taken  
from you. . . .

John. Ay, wife, it is, but we must bear  
it, for God knows better nor we do  
what's right to be done. (He takes  
up the Bible again.) Listen to  
God's word. . . .<sup>44</sup>

He then reads David's lament for Absalom and the play closes. One is filled with awe at the power of such simple people, and especially the raw strength of a man close to the soil who thinks of life in the fundamental relation of his responsibility to God. One is indeed proud that there are such people who, despite the greatest of tragedies, continue to struggle in an honorable and humble fashion and strive to redeem themselves before their God. The audience is both drained by the emotion of the play and ennobled by what they have seen. The play is a true tragedy.

Although not strictly a domestic play, Sean O'Casey's The Plough and the Stars (1926), which has as its setting the Easter Week Rebellion in Ireland, is related with

---

<sup>44</sup> John Ferguson, IV.

reference to the effect of the rebellion on the residents of a tenement house in Dublin. Bessie, one of the tenement people, sees the futility of the fight when she says:

There's th' men marchin' out into the' dhread  
dimness o' danger, while th' lice is crawlin'  
about feedin' on the fatness o' the land!  
But yous'll not escape from th' arrow that  
flieth be night, or the sickness that wasteth  
be day. . . . An' ladyship an' all, as some  
o' them may be, they'll be scattered abroad,  
like th' dust in the darkness!<sup>45</sup>

It is not a pretty picture, and at first the message of the play was completely misunderstood. When it was produced by the Abbey Players in Dublin, on February 8, 1926, the audience rioted because they thought it was anti-Irish.<sup>46</sup>

Jack Clitheroe and his wife, Nora, are of especial significance to this paper. Jack is an idealist, one of that breed of Irishmen who actually fight and do not merely talk about it. Cunliffe has noted that Jack was neither coward nor hero, "simply a poor human being torn in opposite directions between genuine patriotism and love for his young wife."<sup>47</sup> Nora is really the most powerful figure in the play and is the true idealist.

---

<sup>45</sup> The Plough and the Stars, I.

<sup>46</sup> John Gassner, Masters of the Drama (New York, 1940), page 569.

<sup>47</sup> Cunliffe, page 248.

All she desires is to get away from the drab tenement, away from the fighting, and live a happy life with her husband. She pleads with Jack to stay, but he cannot; and she, out of fear that he may be killed, gives birth prematurely to a dead child. She becomes insane, and as the fighting swirls around the tenement, she can only poignantly cry, "O Jack, Jack. Where are you?" completely oblivious to all that goes on about her.

None of the figures is great enough to warrant calling this play a true tragedy. It is a serious study, interspersed with humor, of Irish life; it is also a condemnation of war. The characters are little people who do not realize the significance of the issues being fought. Their only struggle is for a happiness they are unable to realize. One can pity them but do little else, for there is never dry-eyed fear at seeing their fate. It is a well-written and memorable play, but the plight of the characters never rises to the tragic level.

As the final British domestic drama to be considered, T. S. Eliot's The Family Reunion (1939) affords the greatest difficulties in evaluation. Freedley has noted that while it has been called the greatest English tragedy since Elizabethan times, the fact that Eliot tried to force a modern English domestic tragedy into

the ancient Greek mold resulted in his failure to do justice to either.<sup>48</sup> Moreover, the drama is written in verse. Eliot has argued that poetry must justify itself dramatically, and if it is only an embellishment for the pleasure of those who like to read verse, it is superfluous.<sup>49</sup> It seems that, although Eliot's use of verse is at times effective, most of the poetry is stilted and unnatural and inevitably causes the characters to lose

Certainly Eliot has employed, except in the case of the Eumenides, contemporary characters. The setting is domestic, but the inhabitants of the old English manor house, Wishwood, live in a rarefied atmosphere. The past is in constant collision with the present--a favorite Eliot theme. The protagonist, Harry, Lord Monchensey, returns home after a long absence. Whether or not he is responsible for his wife's death is unimportant; he believes that he has killed her, and he is tormented by the pursuing Eumenides. Harry thinks that all is quite hopeless at the beginning of the play, for in speaking to his cousin Mary, he says:

---

<sup>48</sup> Clark and Freedley, page 215.

<sup>49</sup> T. S. Eliot, Poetry and Drama (Cambridge, The Harvard University Press, 1951), page 10.



One thing you cannot know:  
 The sudden extinction of every alter-  
 native,  
 The unexpected crash of the iron cateract.  
 You do not know what hope is until you  
 have lost it.  
 You only know what it is not to hope:  
 You do not know what it is to have  
 hope taken from you,  
 Or to fling it away, to join the legion  
 of the hopeless  
 Unrecognized by other men, though  
 sometimes by each other.<sup>50</sup>

Furthermore, Harry seems to blame his mother for what he is. He hardly knew his father, and during his entire youth, as is true even at the time of the play, everything was done to please her. What one is or will be is the result of all that went before, because

How can we be concerned with the past  
 And not with the future? or with the future  
 And not with the past?<sup>51</sup>

Family affection was only a duty, and this attitude must have been transferred to his relationship with his late wife. However, he was only dimly aware of this until he returned to Wishwood. There the past, present, and future become one; and Harry finally realizes that he need not run from the Eumenides any longer. Rather, he will now follow them--presumably to his destruction,

---

<sup>50</sup> The Family Reunion, I, ii.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., II, i.

but with an accompanying expiation. Raymond Williams is probably right in thinking that Harry's experience is the search for redemption.<sup>52</sup>

The play may be called, if such a term is valid, a cerebral tragedy. The odds are overwhelming, and in his struggle Harry rises to a noble state when he comes to terms with himself--when he emerges from "a world of insanity." He exults that he no longer runs from, but now pursues, his fate. But is Harry ever a flesh-and-blood person? Does his plight ever arouse awe and horror in the audience? Are they ever transported by identification with his plight until their own emotions are purged? No. The play is much too analytical. Eliot presents a scientific evaluation of the problem, and arguments are presented less on an emotional basis than as a rational solution to a problem. This is hardly drama; it is certainly not effective tragedy on the stage.

Although the traditions behind these representative English and Irish plays are close enough to permit grouping them in one chapter, American drama requires

---

<sup>52</sup> Raymond Williams, Drama from Ibsen to Eliot (New York, 1953), page 236.

separate consideration. Naturally American drama has been partially dependent upon both British and Continental dramas, but the subject matter and the conception of the characters in American drama have a distinctness of their own. However, with our greatly accelerated transportation and communication, the people of the world are becoming much closer in both ideas and attitudes. Perhaps in the future it will be difficult to differentiate between the domestic dramas of different countries.

## CHAPTER IV

### REPRESENTATIVE AMERICAN DRAMAS

The American theatre has also had its share of domestic drama, but the early examples of the eighteenth century had little dramatic content.<sup>1</sup> The type, in fact all of American drama, developed very slowly. It was not until Mrs. Henry Ward's East Lynne (1865) that an attempt was made to present a serious problem in a domestic setting.<sup>2</sup> Later James A. Herne in his Margaret Fleming (1890) further developed the type. In this play he attempted to present his characters as he saw them rather than to write parts for the popular actors of the day.<sup>3</sup> Clyde Fitch, especially with his The Girl with Green Eyes (1902), also made significant contributions. Of course, the efforts of Steele MacKaye, Percy MacKaye, Bronson Howard, and many others also deserve mention, but it was not until after World War I

---

<sup>1</sup> Margaret G. Mayorga, A Short History of the American Drama (New York, 1932), page 44.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., page 112.

<sup>3</sup> Barrett H. Clark and George Freedley, ed., A History of Modern Drama (New York, 1947), page 650.

that American drama came into its own. The great touring companies were broken up, and the Theatre Syndicate was abolished. In their stead, small companies like the Provincetown Players and The Neighborhood Playhouse came into existence. The commercial theatre centered in New York City, but dramatic activity was being carried on in colleges, on labor stages, and in Little Theatre groups all over the country. John Gassner has noted that, although the American stage had lost its tremendous following, at the same time, "American drama became a genuine art."<sup>4</sup> Inhibitions had been removed and strict censorship had almost vanished. Significantly the theatre became a true vehicle for the expression of typically American ideas rather than those dictated by foreign influence.

Eugene O'Neill is perhaps the most imposing writer of the post-World War I period. Although he is now better known for some of his other plays, Beyond the Horizon (1920) won for him the Pulitzer Prize, and it is still a favorite of the Little Theatres.<sup>5</sup> For the purposes of this study it is his most representative domestic

---

<sup>4</sup> John Gassner, Masters of the Drama (New York, 1940), page 632.

<sup>5</sup> Arthur Hobson Quinn, A History of the American Drama (New York, 1945), page 173.

drama. Robert Mayo, a dreamer who is ill-suited to farm work, marries the girl, and he casts aside his opportunity to go to sea and learn something of the world beyond the confining limits of the farm. His brother Andy, a stolid, practical, but unimaginative person, departs in his place. Robert cannot manage the farm, and soon his small family sinks into poverty. Only their daughter keeps him and his wife, Ruth, together; for after their initial passion, they no longer love each other.

Robert made the mistake of believing that he would find a happiness with Ruth that would compensate for his yearnings to discover what was beyond the horizon. The daily drudgery of farm work in which he cannot hope to succeed, the alienation and lack of understanding by Ruth, his poor health, and the constant misfortunes on the farm all conspire against him. He again returns to dreams of adventure, of escaping from what is now to him a prison. At the same time he does his best to preserve the farm, but it is useless. However, his pride prevents his appealing to the now rich Andy for aid. It is only at the end, while dying of a lung disease, that he knows he will receive his release--though death. The play ends on a note of exaltation when Robert tells Ruth and Andy:

You mustn't feel sorry for me. Don't you see I'm happy at last--free--free!--freed from the farm--free to wander on and on--eternally. Look! Isn't it beautiful beyond? I can hear the old voices calling me to come--(Exultantly) And this time I'm going! It isn't the end. It's a free beginning--the start of my voyage! I've won my trip--the right of release--beyond the horizon. <sup>6</sup>

The play is obviously an immature work. Some of the scenes lag, and the play often becomes melodramatic. Although not a great tragedy, it is nevertheless a true tragedy. Gassner, who also recognized the weak spots of the play, calls it a "sardonic and poignant tragedy of attrition."<sup>7</sup>

Robert's plight is universal because we feel we would like to break away from some established order to experience something new. Although thoroughly frustrated, Robert is a dignified and noble character who struggles decently against circumstances from which he cannot honorably escape. Even in the very depths of despair and in the knowledge that he is incurably ill, he becomes magnificent when he says to Andy:

You--a farmer--to gamble in a wheat pit with scraps of paper. There's a spiritual significance in that picture, Andy. I'm a failure, and Ruth's another--but we can both justly lay some of the blame for our stumbling on

---

<sup>6</sup> Beyond the Horizon, III, 11.

<sup>7</sup> Gassner, page 649.

God. But you're the deepest-dyed failure of the three, Andy. You've spent eight years running away from yourself. Do you see what I mean? You used to be a creator when you loved the farm. You and life were in harmonious partnership. . . . But part of what I mean is that your gambling with the thing you used to love to create proves how far astray--So you'll be punished. You'll have to suffer to win back . . . .<sup>8</sup>

Only when Robert knows that Andy has returned for good and will assume his obligations does Robert succumb.

This play proves an exception to Lewisohn's claim that the protagonist of modern drama fails to achieve peace with the world. The very exaltation at the end relieves one of the mere sense of pity for Robert. He has a certain grandeur about him as he goes to meet the unknown--the unknown he has always yearned to meet. The audience cannot disregard this contagious feeling and thus is uplifted through watching his final triumphant release from his suffering. A purgation of emotions is achieved, and it is a valid purgation because there is an accompanying feeling that life really is not in vain.

The Hero (1922) by Gilbert Emery poses two inter-related problems. In a sociological sense it concerns the problem of the place for the returned hero in

---

<sup>8</sup> Beyond the Horizon, III, 1. .



American society. In a domestic sense it concerns the problem of what the family does when the hero comes back into the home. The play is just as timely today as it was when first presented. Although a dual problem pervades the play, Emery never comes right out and expresses either one. Instead, he allows the problems to develop naturally through the action of the play; moreover, he never does give an answer to either one. The play is powerful because he deals with real people and not with illustrative types.

The prodigal hero son Oswald returns from France to his brother Andrew's home. He had run away from home years before, leaving some bad debts which his brother assumed. He is really an undesirable peacetime citizen. Accustomed to a life of action, taking what he wants with little moral reflection, he simply does not fit in. Routine work is not for him; mundane daily affairs only bore him. He seduces a young Belgian refugee whom his brother has taken in, captures the heart of his brother's wife--and then spurns her, and in the end steals the church collection, for which his brother is responsible, to enable him to return to France. Yet he is not all bad. The love and affection he shows his nephew, little Andy, is engaging, and Oswald does die saving Andy from a fire.

The play cannot be called a tragedy. Further, it cannot even be called a serious problem play because of the technique employed. Perhaps it could best be classified as a serious portrayal of a "slice of life." It has a rather contrived plot, but it is saved from melodrama by the interest created in the characters, which goes far to excuse the ending. None of the characters is of a type worthy of tragedy. Oswald is universal: there are many like him around who are personable as long as one does not get to know them too well. But he is really still quite savage; or if not that, immature. He does not want responsibilities. His noble deeds are done less from thought than on impulse. There can be no majesty about a person like him; there can be no horror at seeing him fall. There might be some sympathy for the Oswalds of the world, but there should be more for the Andrews.

Andrew, who assumes his responsibilities without complaining, who is not very intelligent but not stupid, who pathetically tries to be funny with stale jokes, but who exists within a moral frame of reference and does the best he is capable of, is perhaps the noblest creature in this play. In the following tender exchange, after Oswald has perished in the fire with the church

money which must be repaid, Emery's irony is evident, and one feels both pity and admiration for Andrew:

Andrew. Why, of course, there doesn't anything matter much, dear, as long as I got you and the boy. Thank God for that! . . . Now I must go an' find ma. Poor ma! And then-- go back there to--him . . .

Hester. You are a good man, Andrew! Now I know! A good, good man.

Andrew. Me? I'm just old Andy, I am. But Os--Os was a hero.<sup>9</sup>

It is a good play and succeeds in its intent. Moreover, it is doubtful that Emery ever wished to create a tragedy. Because he could create characters so well, he must surely have realized what he was doing with Oswald. Therefore, it may be that while Oswald comes to life on the stage and is soon forgotten as a person, what he represents in the form of the other heroes in real life, with whom members of the audience may come into contact, is remembered; and the result is that the same members of the audience may see their unjust heroes in a different light. In that way it does succeed as a problem play perhaps much better than the more obvious problem plays. Yet another facet of domestic

---

<sup>9</sup> The Hero, III.

drama has been presented, but in this case the results, though sympathetic, are not tragic. No one in the play is of sufficient stature as a human being; and one, while interested in them, is not moved.

Sidney Howard in The Silver Cord (1925) created one of the most memorable figures in American domestic drama; Mrs. Phelps is the epitome of the overpossessive mother. S. Marion Tucker believes the creation of Mrs. Phelps reflects the influence of the school of psychoanalysis on Howard,<sup>10</sup> but she is such a readily identifiable person, a type of person the entire audience can understand. Her whole life centers on her love of her two grown sons, David and Robert, both of whom are still her "little boys" At the opening of the play, David returns home married to an intelligent and strong-willed woman, Christina. Robert intends to marry Hester, a high-strung, sensitive girl. The struggle immediately begins between Mrs. Phelps and the girls over the possession of David and Robert. Mrs. Phelps discredits any of the abilities of the girls--even their ability to love her sons. To her, the girls are only playthings for them. But when the girls make their respective

---

<sup>10</sup> S. Marion Tucker, ed., Modern American and British Plays (New York, 1931), page 63 .

bids for Robert and David, she employs the powerful argument of mother love. She really believes she has given her all to what she considers the sacred duty of motherhood. It is her purpose, shield, and justification for all her actions with and about her sons. She succeeds with the weaker Hester and Robert, but Christina is stronger, and David finally throws off his mother's bonds and goes with his wife.

It is a serious problem play about a tender subject, and it is executed with superb skill. The dialogue is full of significant double meanings charged with emotion. Scenes such as Mrs. Phelps' placing David in his own room (with his wife in a separate room) and then coming in to tuck him in, or the climatic scene when Hester is drowning and Mrs. Phelps' only concern is for her sons who may catch cold while rescuing her are done subtly yet with unmistakable venom. Howard does slip into the didactic in the following argument between Christina and Mrs. Phelps:

Mrs. Phelps. What have you to offer David?

Christina. A hard time. A chance to work on his own. A chance to be on his own. Very little money on which to share with me the burden of raising his child. The pleasure of my society. The solace of my love. The enjoyment

of my body. To which if have reason to believe he is not indifferent.

Mrs. Phelps. (Revolted.) Ugh!

Can you offer so much?

Mrs. Phelps. I offer a mother's love. Or perhaps you scoff at that?

Christina. Not if it's kept within bounds. I hope my baby loves me. I'm practically certain I'm going to love my baby. But within bounds.

Mrs. Phelps. And what do you mean by within bounds?

Christina. To love my baby with as much and as deep respect as I hope my baby will feel for me if I deserve its respect. To love my baby unpossessively; above all, unromantically.<sup>11</sup>

However, this is in keeping with the development of the play. The attitude of the audience is receptive to it, and it is natural that the two should express their feelings.

The play is certainly not a tragedy. Perhaps one can feel sorry for people like Mrs. Phelps, although she becomes despicable at times. David and Robert are sympathetic characters, but they are not worth fighting over. Somehow one cannot help feeling that Christina

---

<sup>11</sup> The Silver Cord, III, 1.

will be saddled with a weakling like David. Furthermore, the suffering happens to the wrong people. Mrs. Phelps does not suffer; for, although she loses David, she still has Robert. One can see with a degree of horror what the eventual life between Mrs. Phelps and Robert will be, and at the same time Mrs. Phelps assumes a certain air of majesty which provokes awe at her self-righteousness when she says to Robert at the close of the play:

And you must remember what David, in his blindness, has forgotten: that mother love suffereth long and is kind; envieth not, is not puffed up, is not easily provoked; beareth all things; endureth all things. . .  
At least, I think my love does?<sup>12</sup>

Robert, who is engulfed forever, can only answer with a submissive yes. There is no purgation by experiencing these things. Rather, there is perplexity on the part of the audience as to what one does with a woman such as Mrs. Phelps. Howard does not give an answer to this; perhaps no one else can either.

Clifford Odets, one of the most active playwrights of the thirties, presented Awake and Sing in 1935. In the opinion of many critics it is his masterpiece.<sup>13</sup>

---

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Gassner, page 690.

In this problem play Odets is concerned with the disintegration of a family because of the demands of modern life under a capitalistic system. As in many of his other plays, Odets presents very powerful scenes, but he does not achieve much impact with the play as a whole. Actually, there is no real hero. Bessie Berger figures in all the action as the dominating person. She seems unimaginative and is a retarding factor which prevents the other members of the household from breaking the bonds that keep them in near poverty in a tenement house. The family has few pleasures because she insists they must work to better themselves. She explains her position when she says:

My whole life I wanted to go away too, but with children a woman stays home. A fire burned in my heart too, but now it's too late. I'm no spring chicken. The clock goes and Bessie goes.<sup>14</sup>

There is sympathy for her because what she is doing is really a great sacrifice to achieve a better life in the future, but in doing this she deeply hurts the other members of the family by stifling their dreams and effacing their personalities. The play is not a tragedy. Not one of the characters has the true dignity of human spirit

---

<sup>14</sup> Awake and Sing, III, 1.



necessary for a tragic figure. Not even Jacob, Bessie's father, can measure up to tragic qualifications because he is an idealist with no power for action. In fact, there is a confusion of impressions. In his laudatory introduction to the play, Harold Clurman said:

The play is about real people struggling humbly with their everyday problems; it is tragic in the sense that we are led to see that these problems are almost life-or-death matters; it is comic in the sense that the manner in which these problems present themselves for the characters in the play (and for most of us in the audience) is so amazingly casual and haphazard in relation to their fundamental significance.<sup>15</sup>

As noted earlier, there cannot be this confusion of aims in a tragedy. But since it is the characters in the plays considered that are of importance to this paper, perhaps the failing of all the dramatis personae as tragic figures keeps this play on a level beneath tragedy. Quinn's judgement that the characters "are not of the slightest importance spiritually or intellectually, and they neither awake nor sing,"<sup>16</sup> points out the failure of the play as tragedy, no matter how interesting it is as a study of lower-middle-class domestic life.

The Little Foxes (1939) by Lillian Hellman is a challenging domestic drama to consider because it defies

---

<sup>15</sup> Harold Clurman, Introduction to Awake and Sing, in Three Plays by Clifford Odets (New York, 1935), page xi.

<sup>16</sup> Quinn, page 300.

definition. It is not actually a problem play, unless one interprets the thesis as being the destruction or rather, the decadence of a family because of their burning avarice. The decent people in the play are totally ineffectual, and the rest are so despicable that nothing admirable can be found in them. The play is not a comedy by any definition of the word; it is not a tragedy, except in the sense that it is tragic that such people exist in the world. However, an examination of these people may afford yet another variation of what can be done with domestic drama.

The scene is the deep South in 1900. Regina Giddens and her brothers Oscar and Ben Hubbard belong to the controlling family of a small town. They have successfully dickered with a northern manufacturer, William Marshall, to have a cotton mill built in the town. All they now need is the necessary capital. Regina's husband, Horace, has the money; but he does not wish to support the idea, for he knows that the people of the town will be exploited by the mill. He is ill in a Baltimore hospital, and he refuses to discuss the affair. Regina contrives to bring him home to talk to him about it, but still he refuses to give in. Meanwhile, Oscar's son Leo, who works for Horace in the bank, has discovered

a cash box of Horace's which contains \$88,000 worth of bonds. Since Horace does not often look in the box, the brothers decide to have Leo "borrow" the bonds for a little while. He does, and Oscar leaves for Chicago to settle the deal. Since they intend to return the money later, they think that no one will be the wiser, and they will control the family share without including Regina.

Horace, however, calls for the cash box and discovers the theft. Rather than make this public, he tells Regina that he is making a new will. Regina's inheritance will be the missing money which will be considered as a loan to her brothers. Thus Horace intends to get back at Regina for all the cruelties which he has suffered from her. Before this can be realized, he has a heart attack, and Regina declines to get him his medicine. He dies attempting to climb the stairs to get it for himself. Regina forces her brothers to give her a seventy-five percent interest in the mill by threatening to expose them for theft. Thus Regina, who cares not what happens to other people, gets what she has desired all her life--enough money to leave the provincial homestead.

It is a nasty family, and their future promises

to be equally nasty. This examination of a family provides a study of the grasping people, perhaps precisely the type of people who built the industrial empires of our country, for Ben can still observe optimistically:

Then, too, one loses today and wins tomorrow. I say to myself, years of planning and I get what I want. Then I don't get it. But I'm not discouraged. The country's turning, the world is open. Open for people like you and me. Ready for us, waiting for us. After all this is just the beginning. There are hundreds of Hubbards sitting in rooms like this throughout the country. All their names aren't Hubbard, but they are all Hubbards and they will own this country some day. We'll get along.<sup>17</sup>

He will wait, for some day he may prove that Regina was the cause of Horace's death; then all will be his.

In addition to the mentioned degree of meanness, there is also an interfamily relationship wherein the weaker members are forced into submission. Oscar married Birdie, who was of the old Southern aristocracy, only for her land; he has treated her as dirt ever since. She was pretty and genteel--quite unprepared to cope with someone like him. He has browbeaten her until she has become an ineffectual alcoholic. He appears quite proud of his accomplishment in breaking one of the

---

<sup>17</sup> The Little Foxes, III.

aristocracy of which neither he nor his family was ever a part. But he is also a cowardly man completely dominated by his brother, and he derives his pleasures from wanton killing of the game in the surrounding lands and then denying the spoils to the starving Negroes. Regina has been spiteful toward her husband and is trying to dominate her daughter, but the girl is made of a stronger stuff than her father, and Regina will probably not succeed. Ben is a real power with a single-minded desire for money. He claims that he does everything for the good of the family, but this is doubtful because it seems more likely that he wants it all for himself.

All the struggles are on a primitive level with no holds barred. This is not fit for tragedy because not one of the combatants rises above this level. Even Horace, who tries to hold the family in check, does not try very hard. Although he is one of the few in the play that has even a spark of decency and humanity, he is too weak to be considered as a tragic figure.

Now, the play is not to be thought of as a melodrama. It is quite skillfully constructed, and the characters are so realistic that they make one feel unclean just watching them. Perhaps it was Miss Hellman's intent to show the breakdown of the old order in the South by

presenting the disintegration of an individual family. The central idea may then be as Ben said, "the southern aristocrat can adapt himself to nothing. Too high-toned to try."<sup>18</sup> If the aristocrats of the play are to be considered as the protagonists, then it is not a tragedy because they do not really fight; they simply fall to the insurgent, grasping new order.

William Inge presents a penetrating analysis of life in a middle-class, midwestern home in his Come Back, Little Sheba (1949). The play begins rather slowly, almost to the point of dullness, as Inge leisurely develops Doc, the husband who is a chiropractor and a former dipsomaniac; Lola, his wife, who is fat, bored, and disillusioned; and Marie, a boarder who is a college student. Doc sees in Marie all the beauty and hope of youth--clean and unsullied by the harsh realities and misfortunes of life. Lola also derives pleasure from observing Marie's love affairs, and she pries into Marie's life in an attempt to regain some of the joy and excitement that has passed her by. It is all quite mundane as we are shown Doc's conforming to the principles of Alcoholics Anonymous and Lola's running her

---

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., I.

house in a slovenly, bored fashion. However, Lola steams open a telegram from Marie's fiance, Bruce, and learns that he is coming. She cleans the house in expectation of a little innocent matchmaking. Marie, who has been dating Turk, an earthy college athlete, decides to have one last fling with him before meeting Bruce. Doc discovers the affair the next morning, and his disillusionment is so strong that he begins drinking again. Bruce arrives, and the next day Marie announces that they are leaving to be married. Doc is taken off to have a cure, and when he returns, there is a reconciliation between him and Lola.

Within this frame Inge presents passions as strong as those found in the dramas of Ibsen and Strindberg. Doc and Lola have both been hurt by life. Doc's desire to be a medical doctor was thwarted, and he had to be satisfied to become a chiropractor. He and Lola had an affair before marriage, and when she foolishly went to an abortionist, the child died. Life has been empty for them--a dull round during which Doc was drunk for a long time. He has quit drinking, but the fires of a lost youth and a wasted life still burn deeply inside him. Lola too burns inside to know and experience all the things in life which she feels have been denied her.

In a sense they both live in the past, and Lola's plaintive cries of "Come Back, Little Sheba" are cries for a return of their lost youth and happiness. The play does close with a feeling of hope, but this is a rather negative hope. When Doc returns from the hospital, Lola tells him of a dream she had in which though Little Sheba was dead, she could not stop to do anything about it. In the following exchange Doc asks her why she could not stop to help.

Lola. I wanted to, but you wouldn't let me. You kept saying, "We can't stay here, honey; we gotta go on. We gotta go on." Now isn't that strange?

Doc. Dreams are funny.

Lola. I don't think Little Sheba's ever coming back, Doc. I'm not going to call her anymore.

Doc. Not much point in it, Baby. I guess she's gone for good.<sup>19</sup>

It is a poignant resignation on the part of them both. Perhaps it could even be interpreted as a happy ending; but actually, it is immeasurably sad. One feels a great amount of pity for such people who are denied happiness because of both their mistakes and their own human limitations. However, this is certainly not tragedy.

---

<sup>19</sup> Come Back, Little Sheba, II, iv.



Doc, when he meets with a crisis, gets drunk. He does not fight, but he attempts to escape. Lola is lost, irrevocably lost. There is no real hope for her, and she is of insufficient stature to elicit more than sympathy--even that is transitory. Once again, though passions rage in the breasts of these commonplace people, it is all banal, not the sort of stuff worthy of transporting the observer beyond the immediate scene. This, of course, is the failing of many serious domestic plays. It is good drama--entertaining, and perhaps thought-provoking; but the action remains on the one level. The characters never move far beyond their immediate situation. There is no reconciliation with anything except the present problem, and they do not even struggle nobly with that problem. But then, Inge never chose characters of any greater proportions than those demanded by the particular situation. The dramatist must know what he is creating, and if a competent playwright like Inge chooses to use characters unsuitable as tragic figures, it is not to his damnation. A successful play does not have to be a tragedy. However, this play has been included to afford examples of real characters in a domestic situation who, by their very endowments as human beings, preclude the possibility of the play being called a tragedy.

One of the most powerful playwrights on the present American scene is Tennessee Williams. The lilted, unreal quality of such a play as The Glass Menagerie is indicative of his ability to enchant an audience. Although that drama could be considered as a domestic drama, A Streetcar Named Desire (1947) is much more apropos. The setting is the French Quarter of New Orleans, and Stanley and Stella Kowalski are quite happy with their bohemian existence. The domestic scene is upset with the arrival of Blanche, Stella's sister. She at first gives the impression of utter gentility, aristocracy, and refinement--all out of place in her new surroundings. She criticises the uncouthness of Stanley and brags about her own rich, gentleman admirers. However, Stanley soon exposes her. She is a nymphomaniac, a drunk, and a spendthrift who has squandered the family estate. Unstable when she arrives, she is driven completely insane when Mitch, one of Stanley's friends, deserts her; and to add the final blow, Stanley shatters her last defense--her world of fantasy. At the end of the play she is removed to an institution, and life is presumed to go on as before; strangely enough, it probably will.

Williams creates a very intense situation; yet he does it more with his characters than anything else.

Stanley is an animal; but he is also a proud sort, driven perhaps by primal emotions, but not stupid. He gets what he wants as directly as possible; and although he is crude, his crudeness can be excused because it is the only way he knows how to act. He is happy with Stella-- on an earthy plane; but it is an honest, fundamental love between them. Stella also loves him. Her background is entirely different from his, but she has adjusted to Stanley's ways, and loves him so intensely that she overlooks his more obvious crudities.

Blanche must be considered as the protagonist. However, is she a tragic figure? One must proceed rather cautiously before judging her as such, because it is wholly possible that she is insane during the entire play. Insane people are difficult to consider as tragic figures because their lives are ones of delusion; therefore, these people must be seen first as sane to provide the proper perspective. But in the case of Blanche, if it can be believed that she was a sheltered, sensitive girl, in love with a degenerate young man and that she had a great emotional shock when her lover killed himself, perhaps she can be viewed in a different light. That is, she can be viewed as a person seeking happiness in a life of disappointments. But then, other facts of her existence.

cannot be ignored. She is proven to have been notoriously promiscuous in her home town; furthermore, after being expelled from that town, she continues to delude herself when she comes to New Orleans. Is this an attempt at happiness? Or, is this the machination of a madwoman? It is a fine point upon which any analysis must balance. Granted that she is only momentarily insane and that she is attempting to achieve happiness rationally, she still emerges as too false. She does not struggle with her problems; instead, she sidetracks and goes off into a limbo of fantasy wherein she conceives of herself as being someone who she really is not. This is not the material for a tragic hero. When she is exposed, it is apparent that she has never really done anything good or noble. It is unfortunate that her demise comes at the hands of a brute like Kowalski, but he is not expected to be understanding; and besides, he provides an excellent contrast. He takes things as they appear to him; facts, not analyses, are of prime importance in his mind. Thus she is exposed, and finally, she is destroyed. However, though pity is aroused, and one must sympathize with her plight, nothing more exists. If Williams aimed at tragedy, a character like Blanche forbids success.

Actually, Williams could have instilled even greater

pathos into this play if he had chosen to allow Stella to believe that Stanley seduced Blanche on the night that Stella gave birth to their child. But Stella has great faith in Stanley, and in the following exchange between Stella and Eunice, a neighbor, when Blanche is to be committed to an asylum, it is clear that life will continue as before. Stella's faith in Stanley will not be shaken.

Stella. I don't know if I did the right thing.

Eunice. What else could you do?

Stella. I couldn't believe her story and go on living with Stanley.

Eunice. Don't ever believe it. Life has got to go on. No matter what happens, you've got to keep on going.<sup>20</sup>

Life does have to keep going on. Blanche was a dangerous interruption in the domestic round. Her feelings are of minor importance except to her. It becomes simply a matter of development of a character, one who is never really strong enough, although quite real and believable, on a level beneath that demanded of tragedy. All the rest merely makes for a good play.

Another popular and competent dramatist, Arthur Miller, has been very successful with his typically

---

<sup>20</sup> A Streetcar Named Desire, I, xi.

American domestic dramas, All My Sons (1947) and Death of a Salesman (1949). Miller discusses his plays at length in an introduction to his Collected Plays. Concerning Death of a Salesman he says, "I set out not to write a tragedy in this play, but to show the truth as I saw it."<sup>21</sup> He continues with an interesting discussion of tragedy and the tragic hero which gives the impression that he feels that this play ends as a tragedy. Moreover, Miller feels that Willy Loman is a very brave spirit who receives the final knowledge "which is that he is loved by his son and has been embraced by him and forgiven."<sup>22</sup> An author's own comments on a play are very helpful, but not everyone is aware of these comments when reading or seeing a play; further, one is never as closely associated with the characters in a play as is the author. A play must exist on its own merits and require no introductory comments about what has or has not been intended.

Death of a Salesman is a skillfully constructed play, and there is employed a method of scene transition which avoids the abrupt change brought on by the use of

---

<sup>21</sup> Arthur Miller, Collected Plays (New York, 1952), page 31.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., page 34.

a curtain. This is very effective because much of the action takes place in Willy Loman's mind. The continuity is preserved by lighting effects and special staging rather than the traditional scene changes. Willy has been a salesman all his life, and his product is himself. But he has never been a good salesman. There have been other opportunities, but he has scorned them in preference to his chosen work. His life is supposedly dedicated to his two sons, who at the time of the play, have not turned out very well. Maybe Willy's great disappointment is that they have not succeeded where he failed, but he does not realize that it is his fault. Although he is a practical man when working with his hands, he is also an impractical dreamer. He has deluded himself into believing; he has accomplished great things and made many friends.

Willy's dream was to be exactly like a salesman named Dave Singleman who was on the road until the age of eighty-four. Willy, in telling his boss about this man, is actually talking to himself when he says:

And old Dave, he'd go up to his room,  
y'understand, put on his green velvet  
slippers--I'll never forget--and pick up his  
phone and call the buyers, and without ever  
leaving his room, at the age of eighty-four,  
he made his living. And when I saw that, I  
realized that selling was the greatest career

a man could want. 'Cause what could be more satisfying than to be able to go, at the age of eighty-four, into twenty or thirty different cities, and pick up the phone, and be remembered and loved and helped by so many different people? Do you know? when he died--and by the way he died the death of a salesman, in his green velvet slippers in the smoker of the New York, New Haven and Hartford, going into Boston--when he died, hundreds of salesmen and buyers were at his funeral.<sup>23</sup>

But no one knows Willy any more; perhaps they never did know him.

Willy is contemplating suicide at the opening of the play. His contact with reality, however, is constantly pushed into the back of his mind with his dreams. The one thing that he cannot ignore is that he is not loved either by his friends or his sons. When he is released from his job, he no longer has the means of even pretending that he is going off to meet his friends in his old territory. It is much too apparent that his sons are incompetents, and he finally realizes that it is his own fault. Willy becomes a very sympathetic figure when he comes face to face with himself, but he is not a tragic figure. A man who can happily consider killing himself because he is exalted to learn that his son really does love him is quite pitiable, but it is an

---

<sup>23</sup> Death of a Salesman, II.



action of a petty man and not the action of the protagonist of a tragedy.

The play is not a tragedy although it first appears to be. When one realizes what Willy really is, there is no longer any tragic identification despite the intense pathos arising from the displayed emotions. There is a horrible fascination in watching such an unhealthy delusion brought to a dramatic close, but it is not the horror that evokes katharsis. One is neither purged nor uplifted by the action. Willy simply does not have the nobility of human dignity necessary for anyone to feel that there has been any great loss. The impact of the play is undeniable. Miller has created a group of living characters and analyzed them to their cores. Further, it is difficult to categorize this play. If it is not a tragedy, what then? It is not really a problem play, for neither problem nor solution is presented. Perhaps it can be called an intense probing into the mind of a man who may be more typically American than many would like to admit. Moreover, since this probing is conducted within a frame of reference of a family, the play must be considered a domestic drama. Therefore, if an author is going to submit his creations to such sharp scrutiny, he must first be sure he has the necessary stuff to work with before he aims at tragedy.

Since the endeavors of the leading American dramatists of today have been judged as not succeeding as tragedy, and since they have failed because of the stature of the protagonist, Joseph Wood Krutch's comparison of Death of a Salesman and A Streetcar Named Desire affords significant support to this judgement. The failure of these plays lies in the fact that

Both end with what looks less like a tragic affirmation than like a simple confession of defeat. Neither Willy Loman nor Blanche Dubois is likely to strike the spectator as a very dignified or very noble character, and both are completely destroyed--as, say, Hamlet and Othello are not completely destroyed--when the story ends. Loman is a suicide and Blanche is being led away to a madhouse.<sup>24</sup>

American drama is very active today. There are enough competent playwrights capable of producing tragedy. Moreover they are capable of producing tragedy in a domestic setting. But first, they will have to endeavor to create a protagonist who, though he appears humble and his surroundings are ordinary, must have an inherent greatness and human dignity. He must pit this protagonist against overwhelming odds, and this protagonist must struggle honestly before he falls. But when he does fall, or when his destruction is inevitable, this protagonist

---

<sup>24</sup> Joseph Wood Krutch, "Modernism" in Modern Drama (Ithaca, 1953), pages 123-124.

must achieve a peace that goes beyond the immediate surroundings; he must be capable of exulting with the realization that his reward is something greater than death. If this is achieved, the result must be pure tragedy.

## CONCLUSION

Domestic drama is the most popular genre employed by the modern dramatist. The question may arise as to whether or not tragedy is any longer desired by the playgoer. In these representative plays, taken from many countries and written on a variety of themes all centered around domestic life, as judged by the criteria established in the first chapter, few of these dramas succeed as tragedies. This is not to be interpreted to mean that the so-called "tragic impulse" is dead. Those plays which are classed as tragedy are pure tragedy--dramas at the peak of intensity demanded by the best of dramatic art.

Naturally, when performed, a play must have skilled actors, directors, and producers. But if the playwright has utilized all his skill, if he has created characters that come to life with each performance because they are endowed with the necessary attributes of a real person--behaving in accordance with the natures with which they, as persons, must logically possess--then it does not matter what the stake is; the station of the protagonist does not matter; nor does the time or place matter.

If these real characters, by their behavior in the time that is allotted to them on the stage, elicit awe and horror on the part of the audience because they are of such magnitude as human beings; if the odds have been established in such proportions that the protagonist cannot win; and if there is the realization on the part of the protagonist that he has conquered, though conquered; then the tragic impulse has been recaptured.

But a tragedy requires much more than merely a strong protagonist. The surroundings must be of sufficient scale; that is, his antagonist must be invincible for the ensuing struggle to be of proper proportions. Daily life is composed of innumerable struggles. These are seldom tragic; instead, they are a step or two lower, though quite serious at the moment. The immediate must be transcended, for the tragic situation continues to revolve in the mind of the audience long after the revelation of the facts. People like to share the troubles of others, and by doing so they tend to forget their own troubles. However, in a tragedy the situation is much more intense than in everyday life, and it is doubtful that a steady diet of tragedy, with its exhausting demands, is desirable. Human beings simply do not have the capabilities; unalleviated tragedy quickly becomes satiating. Therefore, tragedy must remain a

special thing, a quality, or experience, that must be taken in small doses and savored.

When one witnesses a true tragedy, there is indeed a purgation of emotions. This is as true today as it was in the time of Aristotle. One is drained by watching the fate of a tragic figure because one is removed from the banalities of everyday existence; life is placed on a higher plane; events have greater significance. This is not a flash impression or experience. Rather, it is a continuing emotional state which permits one to go beyond and to search within one's own soul to see if there is the personal capability of experiencing the same. Thus everyday troubles are forgotten; the end result is a cleansing of one's own emotions. This is something which extends beyond a contemplation of death. Although death is a very serious thing to most people, the death of the protagonist does not automatically qualify a play as tragedy. Death occurs every day, and although often with accumulated suffering for the living, it is really such a commonplace curtain to existence that one does not long ponder on the event, except when it is the death of one very dear.

However, when one witnesses someone struggling with a power greater than a tangible antagonist--greater

than an antagonist who can cause only momentary suffering before death; when this is a struggle which is mostly mental and is of the sort that permits no compromise; and when this struggle is further complicated by the fact that the odds are hopelessly against the protagonist, and that often he does not know it, then the tragic atmosphere is created. Moreover, when this protagonist fights until fight is no longer necessary, practical, or plausible; when he rises by dint of his own human dignity and nothing more; and finally when he achieves a peace, perhaps the most apt phrase is "the peace that passeth understanding," then the play must be called a tragedy.

People do not experience the emotional stress of tragedy every day. People have neither the capacity nor the inclination for a steady diet of tragedy. This is not to say that thinking people--and tragedy, real tragedy, demands thinking people--cannot enjoy this vicarious transport, thus purging their emotions. In reality, a thinking person must be cleansed emotionally from time to time to be able to cope with the multitude of problems that surround him in everyday life. The daily frustrations must be relieved, and there is no better way than through the homeopathy of fighting the

trouble by sharing another's trouble. When the vicarious experience is greater than one's personal experience, ordinary troubles can be made to appear insignificant and thereby easier to bear.

The tragic situation is hardly morbid, with suffering presented for the sake of suffering. In a tragedy there is exultation and reaffirmation. The audience is uplifted, not depressed. Therefore, the witnessing of tragedy is a healthy thing, although the experience is partially fantasy. However, it is not the fantasy in which people indulge themselves in moments of personal escape. The play must ring true because it is a fantasy for the multitude. The plot cannot be a constructed treatise; such a thing is soon recognized. It all must be natural: atmosphere, character, speeches, and plot must all complement one another realistically. Melodrama is amusing; one laughs at the obvious incongruities--the very seat of humor. There is no place in tragedy for incongruity. If the entanglement becomes too great, the deus ex machina cannot be introduced; neither is there any place for the unexpected telegram, nor the complete reversal of character. All of these things must be avoided because they shatter this created sense of reality. It cannot be denied that a play is heightened



reality--one is shown only so much; but on the other hand, how many significant things are shown to the ordinary person concerning his acquaintances, even the closest of friends?

Tragedy affords one the opportunity to weigh the most important facts about a person, to examine this distillation of all a character is and thinks, and from this construct in one's own mind exactly the desired impressions. These impressions will be quite varied in an audience; none the less, there will be one general impression recognizable by all. The various interpretations only add an extra dividend that is usually lacking in a melodrama. However, once again it must be reiterated that the actions of the protagonist must be real and understandable. In this age of misconstrued psychological insights, the tendency is to forget that all great dramatists were psychologists. Psychology is knowledge of human nature, and the greatest problems revolve around the normal rather than around the obscure and abnormal, which the audience cannot hope nor even care to understand. This is precisely why domestic drama provides such potentiality for being a true medium for tragedy.

If there are not more domestic tragedies, it is

because the dramatists have not aimed at them. Domestic life affords the clearest, most easily understood situation that can be found. It is the situation with which almost everyone is familiar. Further, domestic life contains closer affiliations, more intense feelings, greater conflicts, and hence opportunities for more nearly universal identification than are to be found in almost any other situation.

Many domestic dramas have been omitted. Among these are surely many that could be classed as legitimate domestic tragedies. But the intent was not to include every domestic drama written, nor was the intent to show a definite development of domestic drama. Certain transitional material had to be included when necessary to provide some sense of continuity. The individual plays were selected to demonstrate both the variety of themes and the variety of protagonists that can be employed in domestic drama. It should be apparent that there is a much greater diversity afforded by domestic drama than first appears. Moreover, a complete story with a strong plot is not necessary; in fact, the tranche de vie is often quite sufficient to contain material for tragedy as is the short, one act play.

There are certain landmarks in the development of

domestic drama that cannot be ignored. It is now generally agreed that Ibsen showed the way. Raymond Williams is probably right in saying that Ibsen created "the consciousness of modern European drama."<sup>25</sup>

In England, Pinero demonstrated the potentialities of domestic drama as tragedy, and Massfield fulfilled these potentialities. In America, modern domestic drama begins with O'Neill. However, all of this points to what John Mason Brown speaks of when he says that the theatre now aims at spiritual release rather than detailed information. One becomes transported from the mundane everyday life, to "that special world of meaning and suggestion, of rapture and beauty which lie within the theatre's province to evoke."<sup>26</sup> But then, has that not always been the case with tragedy? The men mentioned above merely showed that such a thing is possible with domestic drama. Since drama is not dead, the art of writing tragedy cannot be considered to be dead. Furthermore, it is probably not wrong to suggest that in the future true tragedies--and great tragedies may be expected--will be written as domestic dramas.

---

<sup>25</sup> Williams, page 97.

<sup>26</sup> John Mason Brown, The Modern Theatre in Revolt (New York, 1929), page 55.

## WORKS CITED

- Archer, William. The Old Drama and the New. Boston: Small, Maynard and Company, 1923.
- Aristotle. Poetics. Criticism: The Major Texts, ed. Walter Jackson Bate. New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1952.
- Baker, Elizabeth. Chains. Contemporary Plays, ed. Thomas Dickinson and Jack R. Crawford. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1925.
- Becque, Henri. Les Corbeaux. Paris: DeLamain et Routelleau, 1928.
- Bellinger, Martha Fletcher. A Short History of the Drama. New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1927.
- Björnson, Björnstjerne. The Bankrupt. Three Dramas by Björnstjerne Björnson, ed. R. Farquharson Sharp. London: J. M. Dent and Sons, Ltd., n.d.
- Brooke, Charles Frederick, ed. The Shakespeare Apocrypha. Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1908.
- Brown, John Mason. The Modern Theatre in Revolt. New York: W. W. Norton and Company, Inc., 1929.
- Chandler, Frank Wadleigh. Aspects of Modern Drama. New York: The Macmillan Company, 1918.
- Chekhov, Anton. Uncle Vanya. Eight Great Comedies, ed. S. Barnet, Morton Berman, and William Burto. New York: Mentor Books, 1958.
- Clark, Barrett H. A Study of the Modern Drama. New York: Appleton and Company, 1925.
- Clark, Barrett H. and George Freedley, ed. A History of Modern Drama. New York: D. Appleton-Century Company, Inc., 1947.

- Cromwell, Otelia. Thomas Heywood, A Study on the Elizabethan Drama of Everyday Life. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1928.
- Cunliffe, John W. Modern English Playwrights. New York: Harper and Brothers, 1927.
- Dickinson, Thomas H. The Contemporary Drama of England. Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1922.
- Dukes, Ashley. Modern Dramatists. London: Frank Palmer, 1911.
- Eliot, Thomas Stearns. The Complete Poems and Plays. New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1950.
- 
- \_\_\_\_\_. Poetry and Drama. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1951.
- Emery, Gilbert, The Hero. Modern American and British Plays, ed. S. Marion Tucker. New York: Harper and Brothers, 1931.
- Ervine, St. John G. John Ferguson. New York: The Macmillan Company, 1928.
- Gassner, John. Masters of the Drama. New York: Random House, 1940.
- Granville-Barker, Harley. Three Plays of Granville-Barker. New York: Mitchell Kennerly, 1904.
- Hauptmann, Gerhart. Before Dawn. The Dramatic Works of Gerhart Hauptmann, II, ed. Ludwig Lewisohn. New York: B. W. Huebsch, 1912.
- Hebbel, Frederic. Three Plays by Frederic Hebbel, ed. L. H. A..en. London: J. M. Dent and Sons, Ltd., 1914
- Heiberg, Gunnar. The Tragedy of Love. Chief Contemporary Dramatists, ed. Thomas H. Dickinson. Boston: The Cambridge Press, 1921.
- Hellman, Lillian. The Little Foxes. Six Modern American Plays, ed. Allan G. Halline. New York: Random House, Inc., 1951.

- Henderson, Archibald. European Dramatists. Cincinnati: Stewart and Kidd Company, 1918.
- Heywood, Thomas. A Woman Killed with Kindness. Types of Domestic Drama, ed. Robert Metcalf Smith. New York: Prentice Hall, Inc., 1925.
- Howard, Sidney. The Silver Cord. Modern American and British Plays, ed. S. Marion Tucker. New York: Harper and Brothers, 1931.
- Huneker, James. Iconoclasts. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1909.
- Ibsen, Henrik. The Works of Henrik Ibsen, 4 vols. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1912.
- Inge, William. Come Back, Little Sheba. New Voices in the American Theatre, ed. Brooks Atkinson. New York: Random House, Inc., 1955.
- Jones, Henry Arthur. Saints and Sinners. New York: The Macmillan Company, 1914.
- Krutch, Joseph Wood. "Modernism" in Modern Drama. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1953.
- Lewisohn, Ludwig. The Modern Drama. New York: B. W. Huebsch, 1915.
- Lillo, John. The London Merchant, or The History of George Barnwell. Types of Domestic Drama, ed. Robert Metcalf Smith. New York: Prentice Hall, Inc., 1925.
- Marriot, J. W. Modern Drama. London: Thomas Nelson and Sons, Ltd., n. d.
- Masefield, John. The Poems and Plays of John Masefield, II. New York: The Macmillan Company, 1918.
- Mayorga, Margaret G. A Short History of the American Drama. New York: Dodd, Mead, and Company, 1922.
- Miller, Arthur. Collected Plays. New York: The Viking Press, 1957.

- Morgan, A. E. Tendencies of Modern English Drama. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1924.
- Nicoll, Allardyce. British Drama. An Historical Survey from the Beginnings to the Present Time. London: George G. Harrap and Company, Ltd., 1946.
- \_\_\_\_\_. The Theory of Drama. New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Company, 1923.
- \_\_\_\_\_. World Drama. New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, n.d.
- O'Casey, Sean. The Plough and the Stars. New York: The Macmillan Company, 1926.
- Odets, Clifford. Three Plays. New York: Random House, 1935.
- O'Neill, Eugene. The Plays of Eugene O'Neill. New York: Boni and Liveright Company, 1925.
- Otway, Thomas. The Orphan. London: T. Fisher Unwin, n.d.
- Pinero, Arthur Wing. The Social Plays of Arthur Wing Pinero, vol. I and IV, ed. Clayton Hamilton. New York: E. P. Dutton and Company, 1917-1922.
- Quinn, Arthur Hobson. A History of the American Drama. New York: F. S. Crofts and Company, 1945.
- Schnitzler, Arthur. Intermezzo. Three Plays by Arthur Schnitzler, ed. Edwin Björkman. New York: Mitchell Kennerley, 1915.
- Shaw, George Bernard. The Quintessence of Ibsenism. New York: Brentano's, 1905.
- Strindberg, August. Eight Famous Plays, ed. Edwin Björkman. London: Gerald Duckworth and Company, Ltd., 1950.
- Sudermann, Hermann. Magda, ed. Charles Edward Amory Winslow. Boston: Lamson, Wolf and Company, 1896.
- Synge, John M. Riders to the Sea. Boston: John W. Luce and Company, 1911.

- Thorndike, Ashley H. Tragedy. Cambridge: The Riverside Press, 1908.
- Tolstoi, Leo. The Power of Darkness. Leo Tolstoi, Plays, ed. Louise and Aylmer Maude. New York: Funk and Wagnalls Company, 1919.
- Tucker, S. Marion, ed. Modern American and British Plays. New York: Harper and Brothers, 1931.
- Williams, Raymond. Drama from Ibsen to Eliot. New York: Oxford University Press, 1953.
- Williams, Tennessee. A Streetcar Named Desire. New Voices in the American Theatre, ed. Brooks Atkinson. New York: Random House, Inc., 1955.
- Zucker, A. E. Ibsen--The Master Builder. New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1929.



## VITA

Charles Turney was born in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, on December 1, 1930. The following year his family moved to Chester, Pennsylvania, where he still resides. He received his primary and secondary education in the Chester Public School System, and he graduated from Chester High School in 1948.

After working at various odd jobs for a year, he entered the University of Richmond in June, 1949. In 1950 he left school and became a merchant seaman. Four years later he was drafted into the army. He was trained as a radio operator at Camp Gordon, Georgia, and then assigned to the Seventeenth Signal Battalion in Pirmasens, Germany. He was released from active duty in May, 1956, and he returned to sea. In February, 1957, he re-entered the University of Richmond and received a B.A. in English in August, 1958. The next month he began work on his M.A. in English.

He is still unmarried. He intends to acquire a Ph.D., and wishes eventually to teach in college.