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THE MODERN IRISH DRAMA.

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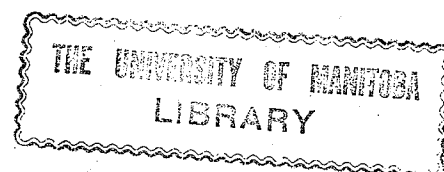
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degree of Master of Arts

S Y L L A B U S.

Carberry, Ethna -

" Four Winds of Erin. "

Gregory, Augusta -

(1). The Tragedies, (Grania
(Kincora
(Dervorgilla

(2). The Comedies, (The Canavans
(The White Cockade
(The Deliverer

(3). Seven Short Plays

(The Rising of the Moon
(Hyacinth Halvey
(The Jackdaw
(The Travelling man
(The Goal Gate
(The Workhouse Ward
(Spreading the News.

(4). The Image.

Hyde - Literary History of Ireland.

Moulton - World Literature.

Murray - Birthright.

Synge -

(1). Travels (1). The Aran Islands.
(2). In Wicklow, West Kerry
and Connemara.

(2). Plays. (1). Playboy of Western World,
(2). Deirdre of the Sorrows,
(3). Shadow of the Glen,
(4). Riders to the Sea,
(5). Well of the Saints.
(6). The Tinker's Wedding.

Yeats -

(1). Land of Heart's Desire,
(2). Countess Cathleen.

(2).

Also Reviews by George Cram Cook, "Ivanhoe," etc., in various papers, and "interviews" with W. B. Yeats and Lady Gregory in the "New York Sun."

Magazine Articles including -

The Bookman.
The Forum.
The Fortnightly Review.
The Craftsman.
The Outlook.
The Athenaeum.
Atlantic Monthly.
Review of Reviews.
The Academy.
Evening Standard.
Daily News.
Pall Mall Gazette.
Daily Mail.
Times Literary Supplement.
Morning Post.
Harper's Weekly.
The Living Age.
Yale Review.
Catholic Quarterly Review, etc..
Morning Leader.
The Star.
The Sphere.
The Nation.
The Irish Times.
Westminster Gazette.
Literary World.
The Daily Telegraph.
Irish Ecclesiastical Review.
Glasgow Herald, etc.

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THE MODERN IRISH DRAMA.

The recent Nationalist Movement in Ireland has constituted itself a noteworthy feature of our present era, and, as the struggle for nationality is ever replete with fascination, has attracted to itself a well-nigh universal interest. Political dissension, however, is but one of the many and varied factors which have made this struggle apparent, and imparted to it enthusiasm and virility. To many minds, indeed, it is a lesser consideration, while the infinitely happier expression of nationality lies in the fact that a modern literature is arising, joining men and women in a new and intellectual fellowship, and creating almost unconsciously, a national ideal.

Almost until the present hour Ireland has lived in her past and in her future. Now, however, the dreamy Celtic genius has quickened into a new life, and upon the deep-based foundation of literature the ardent national feeling, fruit of passion and patriotism, is becoming sane and concrete. This literature, more particularly as it is exemplified in the drama, has reflected with a marvellous fineness and accuracy the varying light and shade of national characteristics, and, under the leadership of those whose efforts have brought about this Celtic Renaissance, dramatists and players alike have sought to give free expression to an

intimate and powerful portrayal of Irish emotion and Irish life.

It will be our purpose, therefore, to discuss, briefly, the rise of the Irish National Theatre, its players and histrionic methods, and, in greater detail, some of the dramas which it has presented, including the work of Lady Augusta Gregory, John Synge, William Butler Yeats and others. Finally, an endeavour to determine the ultimate place of these dramas in the ranks of universal literature may not be inappropriate. Nor can one approach this study without feeling that by such an outburst of light an old prophecy has been fulfilled in Ireland, and that these Writers are among those " who shall build up the old, waste places, " and, who shall be " the restorers of paths to dwell in. "

Historical fact will now assert that six centuries ago, under the statute of Kilkenny, all evidences of Irish nationality were relentlessly suppressed, and the ancient Gaelic language and wealth of tradition were alike driven into hiding.

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Isaiah 58:12.

Yet it may be truly said that only within the great heart of the peasant-folk could they find the hiding-place they desired, sufficiently deep and secure. Thus, these peasant-folk clung passionately, though in secret, to the old belief in nature, and at last a new language came to them, strangely interwoven of the

ancient Gaelic thought and tradition, and the enforced English speech, into the Anglo-Irish idiom, the vivid and beautiful language of the Modern Irish drama.

This language and this tradition, brimmed with the elemental passion of the Celt, made a striking appeal to such ardent Nationalists as Yeats, Edward Martyn, Dr. Hyde and others, and in 1894 they gave the impetus to that movement which was to restore and preserve the old, Gaelic tongue, and to create a literature that should set forth the inner life of the Irish people. This movement became formally known under the name of the Gaelic League, and from it developed the Irish National Theatre, an outgrowth which has served to broaden the somewhat narrow, purely nationalistic ideals of the League itself, and imparted to it a fresh enthusiasm. Perhaps Lady Gregory has most fittingly defined this national theatre society - " an organization of folk who love Ireland, and believe that Irish poetry and Irish thought need a permanent channel for expression. " But even this definition would be incomplete without a statement of the aim of the society, as expressed by Yeats - " to bring to Ireland the culture of other lands, and to make her conscious of her own mind. "

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Review in the " New York Sun. "

Such an art movement awakens the self-respect of a people.

In obedience to this lofty desire, therefore, a vital

art-movement was established in Dublin, and sketches of Irish life, either traditional, or borrowed from the happenings of every day, began to be presented at the Abbey Theatre. The players were gathered from the working-men and girls of the City, who gave their services gratis until circumstances permitted that the leading actors among them should be paid.

Their recent appearance on this continent has given rise to much criticism concerning their histrionic method, or, more correctly, they have been criticised for their lack of method. Yet, in this seeming deficiency lies the compelling charm of their

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Review in the " New York Sun. "

art, and the truth is gradually finding its way home, that he who would come into a full appreciation of this natural and perfect art must have a strong love for the elemental and the magical, for clear-cut sincerity and for the passions that flame and consume. Nay more, he must be sometimes prepared to look out upon the world as do those peasants of the lonely Aran Islands, " with a sense of prehistoric disillusion, as if summing up in the expression of their eyes the whole external despondency of clouds and sea. "

The Irish players are true children of Nature, red-blooded, impulsive and highly sensitive. They speak with rare, exotic intonations, while their gestures are absolutely free and unrestrained.

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See " The Aran Islands, " p. 121.

Unhampered by any knowledge of artistic laws one may say that they seem to have been destined by the Great Mother herself to enact these wonderfully thrilling little dramas of a passionate and romantic people.

In order to intensify the production of a verse drama the Irish players make use of real rather than painted perspective. "Thus," says Yeats, "an unreal effect is obtained by the use of the real." Yeats further suggests the use of real rather than artificial light, and would banish realistic effects from the stage in so far as they detract from "the intensity of personal life," and adhere rather to pattern and suggestion.

In their lack of histrionic method as it is recognized by the canons of art, and in their striking appeal to what is natural, the dramatic presentation of these players has achieved its end, and their plays have strongly portrayed the inmost truth and feeling of life, over which is cast, to soften and illumine, "the delicate, fairy tracery of the Irish imagination."

Lady Augusta Gregory, John Synge and William Butler Yeats may justly claim our attention as the three leading dramatists of the Abbey Theatre, though one would not omit to mention William Boyle, T. C. Murray, or George Moore.

It has been asserted that to Lady Gregory, however, belongs the right of leadership in this art-movement, because, although an aristocrat, she has achieved the highest expression of democracy. Her work is almost entirely comedy, and perhaps

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the best comments upon it are to be found in her own quaintly written and whimsical notes. Her stories are gathered from her neighbours, " from the wise, old neighbours who sit in wide chimney nooks by turf fires," " from sea-weed gatherers on the Buren coast, " and from " turf-cutters on Slieve Echtge." Lady Gregory warmly sympathizes with the beggar, the piper and the King, but if she does not disdain she at least ignores the middle classes.

The volume, " Seven Short Plays, " contains a felicitous expression of " her infinite variety." The plots of these sketches are of gossamer-like fragility, but life is a little sweeter or a little merrier because of them. There is the delightful humor of " Hyacinth Halvey, " and " Spreading the News,"

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Notes on " The Tragedies. "

Shakespeare's " Antony and Cleopatra. "

" The Work-house Ward " - a pleasant example of the old Irish adage " that it is better to be quarreling than to be lonesome," and the ingratiating sentiment of " The Rising of the Moon, " and " The Jack Daw," touching even a rarer height in the little miracle play of the " Travelling Man, " and ascending, in the play entitled " The Goal-Gate " into a fine delineation of gnawing grief.

In the latter, the keening of Mary Cushin for her dead husband is almost Oriental in its wealth of imagery and overwhelm-

ing passion -

" What way will I be the Sunday and I going up the hill to the Mass? Every woman with her own comrade and Mary Cushin to be walking her lone!

What way will I be the Monday and the neighbours turning their heads from the house? The turf Denis cut lying on the bog, and no well-wisher to bring it to the hearth!

What way will I be in the night-time, and none but the dog calling after you? Two women to be mixing a cake, and not a man in the house to break it!

What way will I sow the field, and no man to drive the furrow? The sheaf to be scattered before Spring-time that was brought together at the harvest!

An even more powerful expression of genius is to be found in " The Tragedies, " belonging to the most ancient times. Grania, indeed, is said to have been one of the small dark race, "and an old basket-maker told me that some say she slept under the huts with big stones, called cromlechs." She is represented as a woman of great will power and of a bitter spirit, and

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" The Goal-Gate " - " Seven Short Plays " - p. 190.

Notes on " Grania. "

the theme of the play is Love - Love, as defined by Grania, herself - "three sharp blasts of the wind, a white blast of delight, and a grey blast of discontent, and a third blast of jealousy that is red."

A vein of poetry and brooding superstition runs throughout, a gladness of the furze blossoming on the hills, and a melancholy of the cranes crying among the willows.

Nevertheless, despite this richness of style, which is also apparent in "Kincora," and "Dervorgilla," one feels that Lady Gregory is peculiarly at home in the realm of comedy. "The Canavans" is a delicious little play of the Elizabethan age, whose hero has but one object in life - to be on the strong and safe side. In the same

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"Grania," p. 7.

volume "The White Cockade," cleverly sets forth the attitude of the Irish to the Stuarts, and, incidentally, the character of King James the Second does not gain notably by the portrayal. Another comedy, "The Deliverer," is a brilliant satire upon those very people Lady Gregory loves so well - the Irish. The scene is laid in Egypt, in the time of the Pharaohs, but its characters are distinctively of Ireland, and it is their defects which are exhibited rather than their good qualities.

To J. M. Synge belongs the relentlessly true portrayal of the folk-imagination, expressed in a strange, musical and haunting

form of English prose. For many years an unsuccessful journalist, he at last attracted the attention of Yeats, who urged him to cease his hitherto indifferent work and to write of the life that he knew so well, of the vagrants of Wicklow, the fishers of Aran, and the peasants of Donegal. At once the genius of Synge burst into flower.

The key to the development of his dramas may be found in his charming travel sketches. " In these two volumes, as in the plays, suggestion takes the place of description, and a few common words convey the keenest and most complex emotions. One sees how he gained that sympathy with the sights and sounds and incidents of common life, which gives his plays their peculiar imaginative quality; how his life among this tender, fierce and primitive people raised him, in an age devoted to social ethics, above society and above morality."

They contain, moreover, his theory of literary art.

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See " The Times Literary Supplement. "

"In all the healthy movements of art," he writes, " variations from the ordinary types of manhood are made interesting for the ordinary man, and in this way only the higher arts are universal." In contrast, he strongly condemns that literature, which is so frequently confounded with real art, but which in reality is founded on the freak of nature, the emanation of a diseased mind. Therefore, we may expect to find in Synge a brutal realism, but a free

and untrammelled realism, void of all that is morbid, clean-swept with the sea wind, flashing with terrible gleams of humor, tempered by the richest sun-steeped poetry of love, or, more frequently, expressing the desolation of nature and the still more awful desolation of the human heart.

One finds the origin of nearly all of his six plays in these strong, simple sketches of homely life. He is especially

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" In Wicklow, " p. 12.

impressed by the intense nervousness apparent among the women of Wicklow, due to the white, foggy atmosphere, the boglands shining weirdly in the moonlight, the silvery gleam of the rain on the bracken, and the lakes, " where grey fingers come up and down like a hand that is clasping and opening again. " Then, an old man in Inishmaan tells him a crude narrative of an unfaithful wife, and the tale is finally set forth in the " Shadow of the Glen," whose pitiless realism is only relieved by Nora's justification of herself, a justification that is founded on this very greyness of sky and weather, and upon the loneliness of a young woman married to an elderly husband - " for what good is a bit of a Farm with

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" In Wicklow, " p. 59.

cows on it, and sheep on the back hills, when you do be sitting looking out from a door the like of that door, and seeing nothing but the mists rolling down the bog; and the mists again, and they rolling up the bog, and hearing nothing but the wind crying out in the bits of broken trees were left from the great storm, and the streams roaring with the rain."

In lighter vein he has given us the charming comedy of the "Tinker's Wedding," It first came to him as an old story told at a Fair, where he was also told that the Tinkers mate in the Spring-time. As a result, we have the delightful adventure of Sara Casey, Michael Bryne and the incorrigible Mary. They are crafty and shiftless and unmoral, but their view of life is rich and genial and humorous. Truly, as Mary Bryne herself would say, "it makes a fine story for a fine night," in the boreen,

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"The Shadow of the Glen," p. 19.

maybe, "and the Spring coming in the trees."

"A woman of Sligo had a son who was born blind, and one night she dreamed that she saw an Island with a blessed well in it that could cure her son. She told her son in the morning and an old man said it was of Aran she was after dreaming.

She brought her son down by the coast of Galway, and came out in a curagh and there was

the well that she was dreaming of, and she walked up to it, and kneeled down and began saying her prayers. Then she put out her hand for the water and put it on his eyes, and the moment it touched him he called out, " O, Mother, look at the pretty flowers! "

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" The Tinker's Wedding, " p. 153.

" The Aran Islands, " p. 14.

Over this quaint bit of folk-lore Synge cast the irised wings of fancy, and gave us " The Well of the Saints, " abounding in passages of exquisite beauty. Perhaps the finest, however, is the lament of the old man who has been cured of his blindness. "Grand day, is it? Or a bad, black day when I was roused up and found I was the like of the little children do be listening to the stories of an old woman, and do be dreaming after in the dark night that its in grand houses of gold they are, with speckled horses to ride, and do be waking again, in a short while, and they destroyed with the cold, and the thatch dripping maybe, and the starved ass braying in the yard? "

In the " Playboy of the Western World " he flashed forth into criticism. It is the delineation of an airy, idealistic character, who rebels suddenly against his tyrannical Father,

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" The Well of the Saints, " p. 96.

and, injuring him, leaves him dying. The youth at once becomes a hero in the eyes of the peasant-folk, and, possessed of an essentially romantic temperament, he gives his spirit and imagination free rein. His glory is unexpectedly shattered, but he has tasted of power, and life will never be dull or trivial to him again.

The language is fresh and vigorous, while the love scene between Christy and Pegeen is hardly surpassed for exalted tenderness of expression - " And in four months or five its then yourself and me should be pacing Neifin in the dews of night, the times sweet smells do be rising, and you'd see a little, shiny new moon, maybe, sinking on the hills. "

(Pegeen, looking at him playfully) " And its that kind of a poacher's love you'd make, Christy Mahon, on the sides of Neifin, when the night is down? "

Christy. Its little you'll think if my love's a poacher's or an Earl's, when you'll feel my two hands stretched around you, till I'd feel a kind of pity for the Lord God is all ages sitting lonesome in his golden chair. "

The tragedy of " Deirdre, " takes us back into the mist of ages, and displays the most elaborate workmanship. " It has the beauty of the sun throwing light across the branches at the dawn of day, " and the musical cadence of the waves breaking on the sand. " I see the flames of Emain starting upward in the dark night, " says Deirdre, and because of me there will be weasels and

wild cats crying on a lonely wall where there were Queens and
Armies and red gold, the way there will be a story told of a

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" The Playboy of the Western World, " p. 90.

" Deirdre, " p. 153.

ruined City and a raving King and a woman will be young forever. "

Yet it is in the " Riders to the Sea, " that Synge
achieves the highest expression of his genius. It is the story
of an old woman who has seen the sea carry away her husband and
her strong sons. Finally, when the last one has been brought
home to her, " They're all gone now, and there isn't anything
more the sea can do to me, " she says, speaking with the calmness
of utter despair, " I'll have no call now to be up crying and
praying when the wind breaks from the South, and you can hear the
surf is in the East, and the surf is in the West, making a great
stir with the two noises, and they hitting me on the other . . .

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" Deirdre, " p. 194.

May the Almighty God have mercy on Bartley's soul, and on Michael's
soul, and on the souls of Sheamus and Patch, and Stephen and Shawn;

and may he have mercy on my soul, Nora, and on the soul of everyone is left living in the world. "

The play is pervaded by a strong and terrible simplicity, a chaste Greek austerity of plot and dramaturgy, and throughout it all there is the deep, poignant accent of the Celtic sorrow, the beating of the surf and the keening of the women. One is reminded of Synge's words in the description of a funeral on the Aran Islands.

" The grief of the keen is no personal complaint, but seems to contain the whole passionate rage that lurks everywhere. In this cry of pain the inner consciousness of the people seems

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" Riders to the Sea, " p. 49 & 51.

to lay itself bare for an instant, and to reveal the mood of beings who feel their isolation in the face of a universe that wars on them with winds and seas. "

Such is the power of Synge to render articulate the consciousness of a race, to sweep away meretricious glamour, to lay bare the vital, quivering emotions of life. He is speaking to us of a people " to whom the outrage to the hearth is the supreme catastrophe, " of a people who dwell near to laughter and even nearer to tears. If he is always in touch with earth he touches it with wings, and surely the earth beneath him is a mountain top. "

The strange fantasies of the countryside have been perhaps most adequately represented in the verse plays of William Butler Yeats. He leads us into the world of Faery,

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" The Aran Islands, " p. 52.

" The Aran Islands, " p. 78.

" The Athenaeum. "

not into that merry, sparkling realm of Shakespeare, where elves play hide-and-seek in the mottled bells of cowslips, but into the vague, mysterious spirit world of the Irish, " where there is a light among the stems of the trees that makes me shiver. "

It is difficult, indeed, to visualize the exquisite, fleeting beauty of these plays, wherein is heard the sound of many waters, and where one is wafted, imperceptibly, ever nearer to the land of heart's desire,

" Where beauty has no ebb, decay, no flood,

But joy is wisdom, time an endless song. "

A certain Pantheism is visible in his dramas, a lingering trace of that old Druidism which was never wholly absorbed by Christianity. " Listening to voices within and without "

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" The Land of Heart's Desire, " p. 21.

" The Land of Heart's Desire, " p. 38. .

the subconscious life takes firm hold upon his imagination, and every aspect of nature becomes invested with a personality of its own. To the Celtic mind the rainbow is not merely an object of beauty, but, " the mystic highway of man's speechless longings."

In his desire to get away from externality he is sometimes vague, and has elsewhere censured Kipling as having expressed himself in terms of the commercial and trivial. The criticism is characteristic of one who can scarcely understand that true drama must touch the real circumstance of life. Lacking the broad and gracious sweep which gave power to the Elizabethan, his plays of the countryside have tended towards the pallid and remote; though a warmer humanity is apparent in " Kathaleen ni'Houlihan, " in

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See " The Fortnightly Review."

From Martyn's " Meave. "

which the old crone mourns for her beautiful green fields, for that Ireland which alone can bring peace to the Gael.

The " Countess Cathleen " takes us far into the remote past, when two merchants in the guise of demons come into a famine-stricken land to buy human souls in return for bread. The young Countess gives herself into their power to save her people, she "who was the great white lily of the world - more beautiful than the pale stars. "

At last, the darkness is broken by a visionary light, and armed angels stand upon a mountain-side while the affrighted peasants cast themselves on the ground below. Then an angel speaks and tells them that the Countess has been redeemed -

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The " Countess Cathleen, " p. 109.

"The light beats down; the gates of pearl are wide,
And she is passing to the floor of peace,
And Mary of the seven times wounded heart
Has kissed her lips,
And the long, blessed hair has fallen on her face,"
And the supreme conclusion -

"The Light of Lights looks always on the motive,
Not the deed,
The Shadow of Shadows on the deed alone."

The secret of the perfect art, to Yeats, " is to speak of one's emotions without fear or moral ambition, to come out from the shadow of other men's minds, to forget their needs, to be utterly oneself - that is all the Muses care for. All art is the disengaging of a soul from place and history, its suspension in a terrible or beautiful light, to await the judgment, and yet, because

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The " Countess Cathleen, " p. 113.

all the days were a last day, judged already."

Among other dramas one might mention " Birthright " by T. C. Murray, a simple, primal story of the struggle between two brothers, resulting in the tragic death of the younger. Then there is the humorous characterization displayed by William Boyle, the stirring, ingenious little plays of Rutherford Mayne, notably "The Troth," " The Drone," and " The Turn of the Road," and that remarkably fine production of George Moore's, " The Apostle," equal, if not superior, to the " Mary Magdalene " of Maeterlink.

In determining the place which these dramas of Modern Ireland shall hold in universal literature one may speak with certainty, even in an age of fluctuating taste and feeling. Nature

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W. B. Yeats in " The Forum, " (Aug. 1911).

and Art are the two great teachers of mankind, the one uttering her message in the roll of the thunder or in the indeterminate murmur; the other speaking to us from within her carefully elucidated limitations. But, ever seeking to achieve perfection of technique, the matter of artistry has repeatedly given way to the manner of its expression, and as one Writer aptly phrases it, " in every progressive revolution of humanity there has been a recurrent yearning to return to Nature. "

Such was the feeling that prompted Wordsworth to protest against the false emotion and gilded conventions of his time, to lead the scholar to seek " the primrose by the river's brim," and to recognize a grandeur in the beatings of the heart. " Unhappily, the language of the English countryside was frequently

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" The Bookman," January, 1912.

Wordsworth's " Peter Bell."

Wordsworth's " Influence of Natural Objects."

far too inadequate for this noble simplicity of thought.

The Irish dramatists, however, sat down on the " jewel-red turfs " with beggars and ballad singers, and tramped the roads with Tinkers, and found a language " whose words have longer memories than ours," and a people who know naught of Cosmopolitan Cities or the conventions of modernity. They only thrill to tales of Kings and Princesses, and to folk-songs of sun and moon and stars.

The Irish Players have led us back to the basic and primordial; they have made a human appeal, and they have had power to arouse innate emotions that are ever the same, not necessarily of a turbulent nature, but wondrously deep and delicate - " too full for sound or foam. "

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" Fortnightly Review " (Sept. 1911.)

" The Bookman " (Jan. 1912.)

" Tennyson's " Crossing the Bar. "

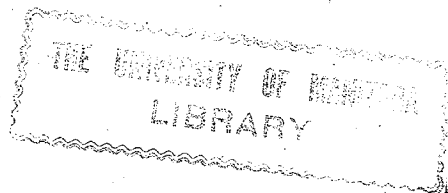
An instinctive purity, also, pervades these plays, and there is a striking absence of depressing problems bred of the social and moral tangle. Let the Writers of this modern drama only beware, lest, in this crystallization of Irish literature the feeling of partizanship enter and strike at the heart of that very nationality they are endeavouring to arouse. If it be true, indeed, that an outburst of literature has long been the symbol of a national enthusiasm and a national ideal, then the safeguard of Ireland lies in her preservation of that ideal, intact from corruption.

In the least of these dramas, as in the greatest, the most vital characteristics of the Celt have been adequately portrayed. There is, first of all, the lofty Pantheism, innate in a people whose sights and sounds are born of the sky, the mists and the flowers, of the loneliness of black bogs with plover wheeling above, or the warmth of those days, "when the twittering yellow birds do be coming in the Spring-time from beyond the Sea."

There is the tender melancholy, too, that same refinement of feeling which enabled a Poet of the Eleventh Century to see infinite pathos in the ruin of a nest, and to impart to the simple tragedy a divinely personal touch.

"My heart, O blackbird burnt within!"

In these later days there is finer evidence of the same exquisite sympathy, deepened and enriched by a lyrical riotousness or a glow of patriotism.



There is a sense of the mystic also, as one must surely find in the lives of those who are in touch with "The little, good people," and in whose eyes Tir - Na'n - Og, that
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"The Well of the Saints," p. 115.

From "Ancient Irish Poetry." p. 30.

land of perpetual youth, glistening with an almost heavenly brightness.

Nor has the Celt's rarest quality been inadequately portrayed - his realization of a Supreme Power, and his responsiveness to that Power. To find the greater in the lesser, to see God in the star, in the stone - is not this to be divinely gifted?

The Irish dramatists went forth on a quest of truth, and they found beauty, and those who sing clearly of Truth and Beauty and Nature will ever find a listening humanity. "When they have closed their eyes on Ireland" some of them, indeed, may be forgotten; but others among them shall surely feast with the Immortals, brow-bound with unwithering laurel.
