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THE MODERN IRISH DRAMA.

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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 Ire-
land, 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.