

Modern English Drama

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In the early part of the nineteenth century, practically all the poets, from Keats to Browning, tried their hands at five-act blank verse plays, but these were foredoomed to failure. One can see new forms of drama in the works of playwrights such as Thomas William and Henry Arthur Jones. But English drama needed other elements than a mere attempt at 'realism'; it needed fantasy and wit. Oscar Wilde gave it wit in his admirable artificial comedy The Importance of Being Earnest.

In fact, the early great dramatic genius of the age came from Norway, Henrik Ibsen, who dealt with the social and domestic problems of his age. His translated works into English affected the English playwrights, especially Shaw, who defended Ibsen against the attacks of the critics, and stated that this was the way the new drama should go, it should concentrate on ideas, it should rely on its own inner life rather than on external 'accidents' like spectacle and comic turns.

Ibsen's first three-act tragedy Catiline appeared in 1850. In 1950, in London, there appeared another verse play, a comedy; T.S. Eliot's The Cocktail Party. The hundred years which passed between those plays were eventful in European drama. New movements appeared during these years. A whole new dramatic movement, the naturalist prose drama, spread and grew to maturity. It gave us the prose plays of Ibsen, the early plays of Strindberg, the plays of Chekov, of Synge or Pirandello, of Hauptmann, of Shaw. The prose play, also, was the basis of another dramatic movement in these years; what is now called expressionism. Verse drama, which had come to an isolated greatness in Ibsen's Peer Gynt, came in the twentieth century, in Ireland and in England, back into the popular theatre. Further, as a necessary part of these developments in the drama itself, the whole art of the theatre was radically reconsidered and revised.

A new era of drama started. Now, there is a new style of acting: less polished, perhaps less virtuosic; but stronger, more direct and individualistic, more related to behavior outside the theatre. New acting schools spread. More types of plays appeared and more new dramatists. Each tried to do new things and to present plays more suitable to the age and its spirit. The new plays have been given all sorts of labels: "Kitchen-sink drama" was one of the first; neo-realist; drama of non-communication; absurd drama; comedy of menace; dark comedy;

The starting point in English drama began toward realism: a revolt against orthodox middle-class drama (which was common in the 18th century) , in its own best terms. The revolt criticized what was seeming real : it is not about real people in real situations , but about conventional characters .

A variety of methods of presentation , approaches and techniques were the remarkable events of modern drama. Every playwright tries to write in a different way from the others. Thus , various plays and movements appeared as a result of the various attempts to present new forms.

Then, it is time to know the reasons behind the change towards new forms and trains in drama. The question which is raised here is what caused the appearance of trends with so many kinds of drama ? The answer can be outlined in the following points:1.The development in technology.2.The thinking of people is changed because of the war(the use of new weapons like canons).As a result of this new ideologies began to appear;3. Development in the field of science, especially in psychology;4.The industrial revolution;5.The appearance of new political movements.6.The influence of other fields of knowledge , such as Freud's theories concerning dreams and other psychological areas.

It is very worthy in this respect to say something about Freud's influence. Freud's ideas have been one of the most important influences on twentieth century literature, and even some of the popular misunderstandings of them have been fruitful .In fact ,there are three distinct aspects of Freud's literary impact. First ,literary schools such as surrealism have been based on the idea of breaking through inhibitions and giving full and uncensored expression to the irrational elements of consciousness of unconsciousness .Second, critics have tended to try to psychoanalyze writers and explain their literary productions in terms of the results. Occasionally illuminating , this process is a rather dubious one in that it concentrate attention on the man rather than the aesthetic object which he produced, and the end of aesthetic criticism is the work of art itself. Third, writers , especially novelists and dramatists , have tended to conceive and understand their characters in Freudian terms and to present them accordingly. This is especially true in the stream of consciousness novel , but it is by no means confined to this type. The result is that some elementary knowledge of Freudian psychology has become part of the necessary equipment of the modern reader.