

THE PLAYS OF JAMES A. HERNE: FORM AND FORMULA

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THOMAS J. HEMMENS  
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THESIS



This is to certify that the

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FORM AND FORMULA

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has been accepted towards fulfillment  
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Ph.D. degree in English

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Major professor

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ABSTRACT

THE PLAYS OF JAMES A. HERNE: FORM AND FORMULA

by Thomas J. Hemmens

The plays of James A. Herne are important in the history of the American theatre primarily because they were ahead of their time in presenting realistic, local color characters and settings and introducing the discussion of social problems on the stage. To the student of dramatic literature, however, these plays are more interesting as a study in dramatic form, a study which has been generally overlooked by the historians of the theatre. Herne's best plays reveal his awareness of basic dramatic form, especially when they are viewed in the context of recent critical discussions such as those by Susanne Langer and Northrop Frye.

The reviewers and critics of Herne's theatre sensed something different about his plays, particularly in the way in which they created deep emotional response from the audience. In his best and most famous play, Shore Acres, for instance, he carried his audience through a comic form which became complete in a lengthy, one character pantomime, a dramatic ending which recalls the celebrated curtain of The Cherry Orchard, even though Chekov's play came twelve years later. The form of Herne's plays is

easily lost beneath the surface formulas of his contemporary theatre: realism, melodrama, the problem play, the rustic play, the historical drama. To discover that essential dramatic form beneath the formulas is the scheme of this study.

When one considers the theatrical milieu in which Herne produced his plays, the productions are all the more remarkable. The theatre audience in America in the 1890's expected little more than the traditional conventions of the stage. If anything unexpected occurred on the stage, the event was to be a sensational surprise, the sort of thing Belasco amused audiences with during a long and successful career. Herne worked toward a surprise of a different nature. He gave the audience enough of the surface formula they delighted in--even to the spectacle of a real turkey roasted in a real oven and eaten by real Down East people--but he also stirred, perhaps disturbed, the stock responses by creating vital plays that lasted in experience beyond the few hours the audience sat in the theatre.

To establish Herne's awareness of and attainment in essential dramatic form, this study examines first those plays in which the form is most successful, notably Shore Acres and Margaret Fleming, the two Herne plays most frequently anthologized. In Shore Acres, Herne created a successful comic form, transforming traditional



complications worked out in a realistic local humor milieu into an emotionally satisfying comic ending. In Margaret Fleming, Herne came very close to creating a modern tragedy. The tragic experience is dulled somewhat by the social message of the play, but the tragic vision generates more lasting response to the play than the ephemeral social problem of the double standard of sexual morality. For the student of dramatic literature an appreciation of both plays demands an approach that liberates the essential form from the formulas of the period.

Among the other plays, the fragmentary script of Griffith Davenport remains the most interesting for its essential tragic form beneath the exterior of an epic Civil War play. The more conventional and melodramatic plays of Herne--Sag Harbor, Drifting Apart, The Minutemen, Within an Inch of His Life, and Hearts of Oak--reveal, with varying success, form caught in the formulas of the time. When one separates the surface formulas which Herne knew so well from the essential dramatic form which struggles for expression even in these weaker plays, the plays can be seen as tentative, if only partly successful, exercises in essential dramatic form.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION . . . . .

Chapter THE PLAYS OF JAMES A. HERNE: FORM AND FORMULA

I. THE DRAMATIST

By

II. POEM AND PERSONA

III. SHORT ACTS Thomas J.<sup>hon</sup> Hemmens

IV. MARGARET FLEMING

V. GILFERTH DAVENPORT

VI. EARLY MELODRAMA

BIBLIOGRAPHY . . . . .

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION . . . . .	1
Chapter	
I. THE DRAMATIST IN THE 1890's THEATRE . .	13
II. FORM AND FORMULA . . . . .	54
III. <u>SHORE ACRES</u> AND <u>SAG HARBOR</u> . . . . .	204
IV. <u>MARGARET FLEMING</u> AND <u>DRIFTING APART</u> . .	283
V. <u>GRIFFITH DAVENPORT</u> . . . . .	343
VI. EARLY MELODRAMA . . . . .	363
BIBLIOGRAPHY . . . . .	386



## INTRODUCTION

The literature of the 1890's can be read as the juvenilia of a modern sensibility. Critics have explained the mastery of the young Stephen Crane, marvelling at his early use of symbolism. They have been puzzled but intrigued by the abandon of the undisciplined Frank Norris. They have recovered the work of the young Harold Frederic buried for years in corners of the library. They have given new critical life to Kate Chopin, hitherto unheard of by most of us but now seen as a modern girl writing stories more in the spirit of the new century than the old.

But critical interest in the literature of the 1890's has not extended to a detailed examination of the drama. Theatre historians have indeed revived interest in the plays, players, and playhouses of the period; but they have rarely considered the plays as works of dramatic art--as something other than museum pieces, Tiffany lamps oddly displayed in a modern living room. Professor Richard Moody's treatment is typical; in the introduction to his 1966 anthology Dramas of the American Theatre, 1762-1909, he writes,

To study only the literary pretenders among nineteenth-century American dramas is to miss the vital, exciting, and real story of the American

theatre. . . . Literary merit may be almost totally absent from many of the selections, but they all have significance in our social and theatrical history. . . . The introductory essays tell the story about the play, leaving the story and the meaning of the play to unfold undulled and unprejudiced. . . . Americans have loved the theatre and found in it a wide range of pleasure and stimulation. The following pieces demonstrate this range of theatrical experience, the colorful story of the American theatre.<sup>1</sup>

Professor Moody includes James A. Herne's Shore Acres, a popular success of the nineties, as an event in this colorful story. But limiting the work of Herne--as well as that of some others in the anthology--to theatrical and social history is unfair. Herne's plays are theatrical history: he pioneered in realism of stage technique and insisted on naturalistic Stanislavsky acting. His plays are social history: he wrote what is accepted as the first American drama of ideas and explored social problems. But his plays have another dimension, that of dramatic form. Early he wrote conventional theatrical melodramas, later moved to what is usually called the well-made play, and finally discovered a dramatic form, episodic, not unlike Chekhov's, that gives the play an organic life of its own. It is this freer form, struggling within the strictures of formula in the early plays but almost realized in the later plays, that interests the student of literature,

<sup>1</sup>Richard Moody, Dramas of the American Theatre 1762-1909 (New York, 1966), pp. xi-xiii.

especially in light of twentieth century studies of dramatic form, in particular those by Susanne Langer, Northrop Frye, Francis Fergusson, and Eric Bentley. Viewed in terms of dramatic form, these plays, old-fashioned as they may be in surface detail, still have enough life to warrant study, to suggest, if nothing else, that the American drama did not spring up suddenly with Eugene O'Neill at the Provincetown Playhouse in 1915, as many critics suggest.<sup>2</sup>

Herne's most durable play, Shore Acres, is still produced by amateur groups, the two most recent productions at Washington, D. C., in 1954, and at Chestnut Hill, Connecticut, in 1960. One can appreciate the recent comment of Herne's son, John, that "Shore Acres is a masterpiece of stage craft, it is fool proof, any stock actor or school boy can put on a pair of gray whiskers and overalls and 'have 'em weeping in the aisles' just by saying the beautiful lines."<sup>3</sup> But there is something more to Shore Acres than gray whiskers and beautiful lines. The play has a vital inner form.

To discover that "something more" in Shore Acres and Herne's other plays is the purpose of this study. First,

<sup>2</sup>Typical of many critics, Horst Frenz writes, "Modern American drama was born in Provincetown . . . in 1915," American Playwrights on Drama (New York, 1965), p. viii.

<sup>3</sup>Moody, p. 671.

in Chapter I, this study considers Herne and the theatre of his time, to establish the situation in which the dramatist worked. Chapter II, "Form and Formula," investigates the problems raised by dramatic formulas in both practical craftsmanship and critical appraisal, especially where these formulas tend to obscure or warp the essential form of the play. Realism and naturalism and dramatic genres are considered to the extent that they determine--or deter--the development of form. This chapter is necessarily generalized, examining the playwrighting practices of the period, as well as twentieth century thinking on dramatic form.

In Chapter III Shore Acres and Sag Harbor are considered as attempts to rise above formula into significant dramatic form. The objection might be raised that the early work should be considered before these final pieces, an arrangement which implies some sort of evolution in the playwright's work. Evolution there undoubtedly was. In A History of the American Drama, Professor Arthur Hobson Quinn treats Herne's plays as a progression from melodrama to the study of simple people, although he allows that it is difficult to put the plays into categories.<sup>4</sup> The

<sup>4</sup>Arthur Hobson Quinn, A History of the American Drama, V. 2 (New York, 1927), p. 157.



conventional chronological order<sup>5</sup> is reversed here; the critical interest is on the individual plays themselves, on their form and quality. Hence, the plays that most nearly realize this form may most profitably be considered first.

Seeing that Herne did create essential form out of the formulas of Shore Acres, one is led to look at Herne's plays of ideas, Margaret Fleming and Drifting Apart, as something other than social tracts or American "Ibsen" plays. In Chapter IV, these plays are examined in terms of form. Margaret Fleming, in particular--which Quinn anthologized because it "represents the realistic play of American life, dealing with a great moral problem sincerely and fearlessly"<sup>6</sup>--becomes more interesting as attempted form than as fulfillment of formula. In Chapter V, the form of the lost Griffith Davenport, a realistic history play, is analyzed as far as is possible from summaries of the play and the extant Acts III and IV. Finally, the melodramas The Minute Men of 1774-1775, Within an Inch of His Life, and Hearts of Oak are considered in Chapter VI, not as antiquarian studies in the American theatre but as

<sup>5</sup>Within an Inch of His Life (1879), Hearts of Oak (1879), The Minute Men of 1774-1775 (1886), Drifting Apart (1888), Margaret Fleming (1890), Shore Acres (1892), Griffith Davenport (1899), Sag Harbor (1899).

<sup>6</sup>Arthur Hobson Quinn, Representative American Plays, 5th ed. (New York, 1938), p. 515.

form trapped by the formulas of the time. While these melodramas reveal little in essential form, they suggest, as a final comment, the surprising accomplishment of Herne, who began his career as a successful actor and director and playwright in the popular melodrama of the times, and who came to write plays which remain interesting as dramatic art.

Since the plays and the incidents of Herne's life will not be handled chronologically in the study, a brief biographical sketch is in order here.<sup>7</sup> James A. Herne was born James Aherne, February 1, 1839, at Cohoes, New York. Even though his strict father held the theatre to be a diversion more suitable to the Devil than to God-fearing children, fourteen-year-old Aherne sneaked off to a performance in Albany. The play was The Gladiator; the star, Edwin Forrest. The young man, who could have seen no more famous combination of actor and vehicle, recalled years

<sup>7</sup>The sketch is based, for the most part, on James A. Herne: Rise of Realism in American Drama (University of Maine, 1964), by Julie A. Herne, the playwright's daughter, who began to gather material for her work about the time she appeared in Shore Acres with her father, and by Professor Herbert Edwards, who completed the work after Miss Herne's death in 1955, adding valuable source materials and occasional critical comments. For material on Herne's early career, the best primary sources are his own recollections, "Old Stock Days in the Theatre," Arena (September, 1892), and "Forty Years Behind the Footlights," The Coming Age (August, 1899). Also contributing to the sketch are the comments of Herne's son-in-law, Montrose J. Moses, in The American Dramatist (Boston, 1925).

later, "No boy who has ever been in the gallery of a theatre will forget the first time he sat there. No play will ever be the same to him as his first play." He left the theatre that night determined on a theatrical career.

His first job was as a supporting actor in the company of a "dog show," an amateur entertainment starring dogs who leaped, on cue, to rescue a hero or heroine in distress. His first professional performance followed in 1859 at the Adelphi Theatre in Troy, as George Shelby in Uncle Tom's Cabin. For the next fifteen years, the young actor--with the more impressive marquee name of James A. Herne--moved from one theatre to another, playing the standard repertory: Shakespeare, Sheridan, Dickens, and leading roles in popular melodramas like Camille, East Lynne, and The Corsican Brothers. He was on stage with most of the famous actors of the day. During this period his work as a manager (the director in today's theatre) began, including one season with a salary of \$10,000 at the Grand Opera House in New York.

With this varied experience behind him, Herne settled in San Francisco in 1874, as manager of Tom McGuire's New Theatre, where he began his career as a dramatist adapting popular fiction for the stage, including Charles Lever's Charles O'Malley, Dickens' Oliver Twist, and Irving's Rip Van Winkle. With his young assistant, David Belasco, Herne adapted Emile Gaboriau's La Corde au Cou and Watt's



Phillips' Camilla's Husband as Within an Inch of His Life and Marriage by Moonlight. The most successful collaboration with Belasco, however, was Hearts of Oak (first produced in 1879 under the title Chums).

Herne's leading lady in Hearts of Oak was his wife, Katherine Corcoran, who began her career in San Francisco at seventeen under Herne's direction. Throughout a long stage life, Mrs. Herne was in many ways her husband's collaborator. He created the leading roles in his plays for his wife and himself. During the composition, he read the plays to her, scene by scene, working her suggestions into the script.

After Hearts of Oak, Herne began writing the plays which pioneered new directions in American drama. The Minute Men of 1774-1775, a war spectacle, opened in Philadelphia on April 6, 1886. The Hernes took the play on the road, even though it constantly lost money. In New York, on May 7, 1888, the Hernes starred in his next play, Drifting Apart, a moderately successful temperance drama, with two acts as a dream sequence. It was this play that Hamlin Garland saw at a second-rate house in Boston, prompting him to seek an introduction to the Hernes. During the next years, he became a constant visitor at their Ashmont home in the suburbs of Boston and introduced them to Boston literary circles. With Garland, the Hernes read Darwin and Spencer, were converted to Henry George's

Single Tax, and discovered Ibsen and Tolstoy.

Herne's next play, Margaret Fleming, reflects these new-found interests. It is a piece of stark realism, using the double standard of sexual morality as a major theme. The date of the opening, July 4, 1890, in Lynn, Massachusetts, is generally accepted as the beginning of a drama of ideas in America. The audiences, however, rejected the play. At Howells' suggestion, the Hernes rented the small Chickering Hall in Boston and produced the play there on May 4, 1891. The Boston intelligentsia showed up for a brilliant opening night: Howells, Mary Wilkins, Thomas Bailey Aldrich, B. O. Flower, J. J. Enneking, among them. Despite the enthusiastic applause of this group, the regular audience failed to come, and the play managed to run only a few weeks.

To recoup his losses, Herne turned to theatrical pot-boiling. He wrote a conventional Irish comedy in the Boucicault manner for Tony Farrell. The piece, My Colleen, served the Farrells as a vehicle for several years. Herne also wrote Coon Hollow, a comedy with music, on commission for Klaw and Erlanger, although it was never produced. Going against the tradition that an actor of stature does not take bit parts, Herne accepted a fifteen-minute part as a malcontent negro in Clay M. Greene's The New South. At a professional matinee--a matinee at which actors made up the majority of the audience--the crowd stamped and ran.

cheered until Herne returned again and again for curtain calls after his scene, much to the discomfort of the stars of the show.

During this time, Herne suggested to Howells that he might play an adaptation of The Rise of Silas Lapham. When Howells, with a collaborator, finished the script and sent it to Herne for suggestions, Herne saw that the script would not play in the theatre: it was still more novel than play. He wrote to Howells, saying that the only really dramatic scene was the dinner at the Coreys, the best scene in the original novel, and suggesting that a novel must be adapted freely for the stage. Displeased with Herne's suggestions, Howells shelved the play and remained cool to Herne in the future.

Next came Shore Acres, the play that made Herne's fortune, first produced in Chicago, May 23, 1892, revised and produced in Boston, February 23, 1893. A local color piece of New England life, the play was an immediate popular and critical success. In the next years he played throughout the country in the role of Uncle Nat, the role for which he is most fondly remembered in theatre chronicles.

Not willing to rest with this success, Herne poured his financial and artistic resources into an adaptation of Helen Gardener's novel, An Unofficial Patriot, the story of a circuit rider turned Union scout during the Civil War.

The play, called Griffith Davenport, opened in Washington, January 16, 1899, and in New York, January 31, 1899, to praise from many of the critics. But it failed to attract audiences. A detailed character study with few climactic scenes, the play was apparently too unconventional for the usual theatre-goer. But Herne believed he had a good play and took it on the road, with little success.

In his last play, Sag Harbor, Herne returned to a regional study of simple folks. The play began as a re-working of Hearts of Oak but emerged an entirely different matter--an atmospheric, almost poetic, evocation of a life of quiet and order. When the play opened in Boston, October 24, 1899, it was an immediate success, but for Herne the success did not last. Exhausted by a series of campaign speeches for Bryan and a variety of theatre activities, including the direction of Israel Zangwill's Children of the Ghetto, he became ill. He continued to play Captain Dan'l in Sag Harbor whenever his health permitted, but, finally, on the road in Chicago, he became so ill he could barely move on stage, and he spoke in an inaudible whisper.

Herne died on June 2, 1901. At the funeral the American playwright Augustus Thomas spoke the eulogy, saying in part,

James A. Herne by an undefiled right believed in himself. For useless convention of any kind he had that disregard which is the mark of genius.



Whenever a so-called maxim of his art was an unpleasant bond he turned from it and appealed successfully to the heart of his public.<sup>8</sup>

It is this art, an emotional form, I wish to distinguish beneath the prevalent theatrical formulas--the so-called maxims of his art--in the plays of James A.

Herne.

<sup>8</sup>Augustus Thomas, "Address at the Funeral Service of James A. Herne," The Single Tax Review (July 15, 1901), p. 18.

It was in some ways a lost generation in literature, or, as Stanley Kaufman has called it, "The badly lost generation," as against "the celebrated loss generation of the 1920's who were in fact quickly and wholely recovered." The former, a popular entertainer, rarely acknowledged as

Harner Ziff, The American (New York, 1966), p. 343.

Stanley Kaufman, "The Badly Lost Generation," The New Yorker, December 1, 1966, p. 42.

## CHAPTER I

### THE DRAMATIST IN THE 1890's THEATRE

Vital and vigorous as the literature of the American 1890's now seems to us, it went unheralded and unread, except by the critical few, in the new century. The major writers of the period often spoke in an unsettling voice to a time not ready to hear what they had to say. In the most recent study of the nineties, Larzer Ziff writes, "When the transforming events of the nineties subsided into the tranquility of the following ten years, these writers appeared to be part of the temporary disorders which had been thrown off in the now ended spasms of the decade. But these spasms proved in fact to be not the convulsions of rejection but the first strong and sure labor pains of modern American literature."<sup>1</sup>

It was in some ways a lost generation in literature, or, as Stanley Kaufmann has called it, "The Really Lost Generation," as against "the celebrated lost generation of the 1920's who were in fact quickly and widely received."<sup>2</sup> The drama, a popular entertainment barely acknowledged as

<sup>1</sup>Larzer Ziff, The American 1890s (New York, 1966), p. 348.

<sup>2</sup>Stanley Kaufmann, "The Really Lost Generation," The New Republic, December 3, 1966, p. 22.

literature throughout the nineteenth century, was particularly hostile to uninvited voices speaking of unspeakable matters. At the beginning of the new century, a placid commercial theatre seemed unaware, at least on the surface, that a modern American drama had already felt its labor pains. It is singularly remarkable that the audience did give a hearing, however capriciously, to the voice of one forward-looking dramatist: James A. Herne.

Since Herne was by this time, as we have seen, a respected actor-director-playwright in his fifties, he may seem something of a veteran in the rebellious company of the young writers of the period--Crane, Garland, Norris, Frederic. But those writers who knew him regarded him as a lively contemporary. Hamlin Garland, for an example, wrote, "His resiliency at sixty years of age was a constant marvel to me. He was intellectually young. He seemed my own age rather than a generation ahead of me. He was also intellectually hospitable to new ideas and capable of boyish enthusiasm."<sup>3</sup> From his editor's study, William Dean Howells praised Herne's revolutionary work in Margaret Fleming, and suggested the Chickering Hall performance of that work in Boston, a performance generally considered the first important independent theatre

<sup>3</sup>Hamlin Garland, "James A. Herne: Actor, Dramatist, and Man," Arena, XXVI (1901), p. 283.



Production in America. In 1899, B. O. Flower, the editor of the radical Arena, considered Herne the pioneer of the new drama:

The vision of the philosopher is shadowed forth in his work. He has striven to be real or true to life, but his breadth of thought and appreciation of what lies before the race, when justice and freedom prevail, have invested his work with a noble idealism which, though transcending the real, is in perfect alignment with it, and therefore free from the taint of artificiality or untruth. It is true that he has in a measure shared the fate of all innovators, but, thanks to the rapid growth of intelligence and serious thinking, he has suffered far less than most of those who preceded him.<sup>4</sup>

At Herne's death in 1901, The Theatre, the journal of the trade, praised Herne as "one of the pillars of the nascent American drama, possessing as he undoubtedly did high intellectual qualities."<sup>5</sup>

After his death, Herne's reputation as the leading pioneer of a new drama in the nineties was kept alive by a few critics. In 1905, The Theatre called him "the greatest dramatist the American stage ever had."<sup>6</sup> In a critical survey of the American drama in 1913, Richard Burton saw Herne as "the most remarkable man of his

<sup>4</sup>B. O. Flower, "Mr. Herne's Contribution to American Dramatic Literature," The Coming Age, II (1899), p. 395.

<sup>5</sup>"Current Plays," The Theatre, July, 1901, p. 6.

<sup>6</sup>"Current Plays," The Theatre, April, 1905, p. 80.

times . . . a creative force in the theatre."<sup>7</sup> Arthur Hobson Quinn, the historian of the American drama, devoted a laudatory chapter to Herne in the first (1927) edition of his History of the American Drama. In 1940, a critic wrote, "Herne's artistic approach and much of his material looks strangely like what we see around us."<sup>8</sup> In a very selective anthology of American drama in 1960, Alan Downer includes only one play from the nineties, Herne's Shore Acres. And he opens his 1965 collection, American Drama and Its Critics, with Herne's essay, "Art for Truth's Sake."

Herne was clearly the most original dramatist of his day, "obviously ahead of his time," as Sculley Bradley observes in The Literary History of the United States.<sup>9</sup> One of his daughters, Chrystal, a successful actress in the American productions of Shaw, learned her profession under her father's training. In 1928, she recalled, "If he were in the theatre today he would not need to change. He was ahead of his time. When I played 'Craig's Wife' in 1925, I had a long silent scene at the end; it summed up

<sup>7</sup>Richard Burton, The New American Drama (New York, 1913), p. 62.

<sup>8</sup>Frederick Morton, "James A. Herne Centenary," Theatre Arts Monthly, XXIV (1940), p. 900.

<sup>9</sup>Literary History of the United States, ed. Robert E. Spiller, 3rd ed. rev. (New York, 1963), p. 1004.

the whole story. The author, George Kelly, had planned it to do that very thing. It was considered so new. But I often thought of Father's last scene of 'Shore Acres' so many years before."<sup>10</sup> The last scene of Shore Acres is a seven minute pantomime, in which Herne, as Uncle Nat, closes the quiet farm house for the night.

Encouraged by a few critics, notably Howells and Flower, Herne still had to make his way in an unreceptive mass entertainment industry where such critics could do little to influence managers and audiences. Garland wrote, "The remarkable thing about it all was that Mr. Herne did this work with little or no help or encouragement from the literary critics of the day."<sup>11</sup>

In fact, the theatre establishment was often hostile to Herne's innovations. William Winter, the venomous leader of the New York drama critics--and a thorough romantic--attacked every Herne play. In a collection of critical pieces which John Mason Brown has happily called "his more or less empty Wallet of Time,"<sup>12</sup> Winter's repugnance to any new stirrings in the drama is evident,

<sup>10</sup>Helen Ormsbee, Backstage With Actors (New York, 1938), p. 172.

<sup>11</sup>Hamlin Garland, "Truth in Drama," Literary World, September 14, 1889, p. 308.

<sup>12</sup>John Mason Brown, Dramatis Personae (New York, 1963), p. 238.

especially in these comments on Ibsen's Ghosts: "Moral obliquity and mental failure, sequent on inherited physical disease, resulting from sexual vice, is the subject of that play, and platitudinous gabble is the form."<sup>13</sup> Winter sensed a menace in this "indefensible and shameful vagary of a diseased mind."<sup>14</sup> He was equally appalled by Herne's notorious social drama, Margaret Fleming:

"Margaret Fleming" . . . is one of those crude and completely ineffectual pieces of hysterical didacticism which are from time to time produced on the stage with a view to the dismay of libertines by an exhibition of some of the evil consequences of licentious conduct. In that play a righteously offended wife bares her bosom to the public gaze in order to suckle a famished infant, of which her dissolute husband is the father by a young woman he has seduced, betrayed, and abandoned to want and misery: libertines, of course, are always reformed by spectacles of that kind!<sup>15</sup>

Winter and the mass audience preferred to idolize theatre men like Herne's early collaborator, David Belasco,

<sup>13</sup>William Winter, The Wallet of Time (New York, 1913), p. 568.

<sup>14</sup>Winter, Wallet, p. 567.

<sup>15</sup>William Winter, Life of David Belasco (New York, 1918), p. 199. What curious fancy raced in Winter's mind as he conjured up that scene! In no performance of the play did Mrs. Herne, as Margaret, do more than prepare to nurse the child, as the lights dimmed and the curtain fell. In fact, Mrs. Herne suggested the scene to make an important dramatic point at the climax of the play. See Arthur H. Quinn, "Ibsen and Herne," American Literature, XIX (May, 1947), p. 174.



whose romantic plays--including such box office favorites as Madame Butterfly and The Darling of the Gods--were among the most popular of the day. Herne is slighted in favor of Belasco by other critics. For example, in the America's Lost Plays series Glenn Hughes writes, "No one of the writers who was allied with Belasco as a collaborator ever achieved fame or success from an individual effort."<sup>16</sup> He overlooked Herne who, of course, did win both fame and success with at least one play, Shore Acres. An unpublished dissertation studying Belasco includes a consideration of the early collaboration with Herne, but leaves the distinct impression that Herne more or less dropped from sight after those early days in San Francisco.<sup>17</sup> A historian of the San Francisco stage discusses Belasco at length, but relegates Herne to the position of an unimportant hack.<sup>18</sup>

In a theatre where Belasco reigned as a self-styled holy man--"The Bishop of Broadway," wearing a cleric's collar--Herne often felt alone, even though he had the

<sup>16</sup>David Belasco, The Heart of Maryland and Other Plays, ed. with an intro. by Glenn Hughes and George Savage (Princeton, 1941), p. ix.

<sup>17</sup>Gladys Forde, "David Belasco: An Evaluation of the Man and His Contribution to American Theatrical History," unpubl. diss. (Western Reserve University, 1954).

<sup>18</sup>Edmund M. Gagey, The San Francisco Stage (New York, 1950).

respect of many of his fellow actors. "At the annual benefit for the Actor's Fund at the Fifth Avenue Theatre on Thursday afternoon, March 23, 1899, Herne and his wife, appearing in the fourth act of Griffith Davenport, were given an ovation."<sup>19</sup> The critics, too, had praised Griffith Davenport and its carefully controlled production into which Herne had put considerable money and, more importantly, what he thought to be his most mature artistic work in the theatre. But acclaim from the profession and from critics was not enough to bolster the dwindling audiences. After a performance of the play, the drama critic of The Brooklyn Eagle found Herne and his wife backstage, heartbroken. Herne said, "I wouldn't mind if they came to see my play and said it was bad. But they won't come."<sup>20</sup>

Herne was hardly alone in his disappointment with an audience that wanted to be fed only melodrama and romance--"Belascosity," in Stark Young's word. Herne's more famous contemporaries, Henry James and William Dean Howells, both stung by failure in the theatre, put much of the blame on the audience. In a letter, in 1895, James wrote that he had a horror of the audience: he despised "the abysmal

<sup>19</sup>Herbert J. Edwards and Julie A. Herne, James A. Herne: Rise of Realism in American Drama (Orono, Maine: University of Maine, 1964), p. 170, n. 73.

<sup>20</sup>Ormsbee, p. 174.

vulgarity of the theatre and its regular public."<sup>21</sup> Howells, in an introduction to Leonard Merrick's novel The Actor-Manager, wrote of the depressing prospects for an "ambition which seeks fruition in the successes of the theatre."<sup>22</sup> Howells knew, of course, that he had to please that audience to be successful, no matter how backward it might be. Like Dion Boucicault, one of the successful playwrights of the time, Howells knew that "the jury is composed . . . here of the people."<sup>23</sup>

An awareness of the power of the audience also conditions Howells' fictional playwright Brice Maxwell who experiences frustrations in the theatre much like those of Howells. Maxwell argues with his wife, Louise, a Boston Brahmin:

"It won't do to despise any public, even the theatre going public." Maxwell added the last words with a faint sigh.

"It's always second-rate," said his wife passionately. "Third-rate, fourth-rate! I wish you were writing a novel, Brice, instead of a play. Then you would be really addressing refined people."

"It kills me to have you say that, Louise."

<sup>21</sup>Brander Matthews, "Henry James and the Theatre," Bookman, LI (1920), p. 394.

<sup>22</sup>William Dean Howells, "Introduction" to Leonard Merrick, The Actor-Manager (New York, 1919), p. x.

<sup>23</sup>Dion Boucicault, "The Future of American Drama," Arena, II (1890), p. 647.



"Well, I won't. But don't you see, then, that you must stand up for art all the more unflinchingly if you intend to write plays that will refine the theatre going public or create a new one."<sup>24</sup>

Even though this public might not be refined enough for the kind of play Howells wanted to write, he would accept their verdict. Working on a dramatization of The Rise of Silas Lapham in 1895, Howells wrote to his collaborator,

I send you the last leaf of the play, which I'm so grateful to have you praise. I leave it quite with you to let Mr. Thorpe [the producer] see it or not. But in no case would I be willing to be made the victim of a trial-matinee. That has happened to me often enough. If you approve of his doing the play at all, and he will do it in the usual way, . . . to see whether the common cry will stand it, all right. But not in a matinee, here, for every bravo to stab it before it could get on its legs, and while it was still kneeling for favor. If it will not please the general, let us know it from the general.<sup>25</sup>

Try-outs at matinees, often attended by critics and other theatre people off for the afternoon, was a common practice in New York in the nineties. Herne had produced Howells' Bride Roses, without success, at a professional matinee. Howells preferred even the despised general public to such an audience.

<sup>24</sup>William Dean Howells, The Story of a Play (New York, 1898), pp. 31-32.

<sup>25</sup>William Dean Howells, Life in Letters of William Dean Howells, ed. Mildred Howells, 2 vols. (Garden City, N.Y., 1928), pp. 63-64.

But the general public was not likely to be kinder to a new play of merit than the more experienced matinee audience. For one thing, the theatre was a major entertainment for all classes, a social event, quite a different matter from the theatre today, when, as J. Donald Adams has observed, the theatre "hardly qualifies as a means of mass communication," on the simplest criterion of audience size.<sup>26</sup> For another thing, women made up the most powerful part of the theatre-going public, often deciding which plays their men would escort them to see. One critic has commented, "The spirit of woman suffrage prevails at the better class theatres. Women's votes for or against a play count more than men's. If a piece pleases them it is bound to prosper."<sup>27</sup>

On the whole, these women and the men they brought with them did not want to think when they came to the theatre, preferring mindless Belascosity. Surveying the possibilities for the successful production of good drama under such circumstances, a critic in the North American Review wrote,

During the last two or three seasons so few good plays have been brought out in this country that the theatre has been generally unattended by the

<sup>26</sup>Eric Bentley, What is Theatre? (Boston, 1956), p. 257.

<sup>27</sup>Franklin Fyles, The Theatre and Its People (New York, 1900), p. 124.

more intelligent portion of the drama-loving public. As a natural consequence, we hear the cry started by managers, who do not or will not understand the situation, that people who go to the theatre do not want to think, but only to be startled by sensational effects or tickled by grotesque antics.<sup>28</sup>

Audiences did not improve much after the turn of the century. Observed Clayton Hamilton, one of our first serious critics in the twentieth century, "The public of America, considered as a whole, is not at all interested in the drama. It is enormously interested in the theatre; but that is another matter altogether."<sup>29</sup> For Hamilton, as for other pre-World War I critics, "theatre" often meant trickery and the thrill-a-minute play, not a drama that develops its own life and is likely to outlive a few instantaneous wonders that fade on the way up the aisle. "The American public, with its avidity for clever invention, prefers the ingenuity of new authors to the matured imagination of writers who have risen above the initial exercise of cleverness."<sup>30</sup>

By the nineties Herne had certainly risen above the clever ingenuity of his early plays with Belasco, plays like Hearts of Oak with a baby who became animated at just

<sup>28</sup>Julian Magnus, "The Condition of the American Stage," North American Review, CXLIV (1887), p. 169.

<sup>29</sup>Clayton Hamilton, Problems of the Playwright (New York, 1917), p. 316.

<sup>30</sup>Hamilton, Problems, p. 313.

the right time and a cat that was made to walk across the stage and stretch itself at a certain point in the action of each performance. In the later plays, Herne had learned to make such extrinsic wonders an intrinsic part of the drama. For example, the spectacle of stage dinners was very popular. In The Story of a Play, Maxwell plans "to have the dinner served through all the courses and the waiters coming and going; the events will have to be hurried, and the eating merely sketched, at times; but I should keep the thing in pretty perfect form."<sup>31</sup> When he plans to repeat the meal in a later act, his leading actor agrees: "It might be the very thing. The audience likes a recurrence of a distinctive feature. It's like going back to an effective strain in music."<sup>32</sup>

Herne was among the first to put a real dinner on the stage, in Hearts of Oak. The meal, however, has no dramatic substance; it functions only as a realistic background for the action. By contrast, in the later Shore Acres the dinner--a full-course country feast with a real turkey--is more than setting: it is the atmospheric element that motivates the action of the scene.

But one wonders how many people admired the turkey more than the play. Reviewing the production at the

<sup>31</sup>Howells, Story of a Play, p. 5.

<sup>32</sup>Howells, Story of a Play, p. 10.



Baldwin Theatre in San Francisco, a critic wrote, "And the turkey! well the turkey perfumed the Baldwin so invitingly that it made everybody hungry. The cranberry sauce, the bread--such slices--the cake, the celery, everything was real."<sup>33</sup>

Herne's spectacle was not, of course, the only entertainment audiences could savor that night in San Francisco. Published on the same page of the San Francisco Daily Report as the review of Shore Acres are comments on a varied theatrical diet. Fanny Rice, a popular headliner in farcical sketches, was at the Columbia Theatre: "And yet there is much wholesome fun in this version of 'At the French Ball,' and the audience . . . last night seemed to enjoy it very much. It was a large audience, too, and it laughed heartily over the antics of the star, and applauded Miss Kate Michelena and George Broderick for their fine singing. Becky Haight and Ralph Bucknell showed themselves to be a team of graceful and clever dancers and came in for a large share of the applause. John Conley made a hit as the colored servant." At the Morosco Grand the audience was devouring Ten Thousand Miles Away by the English melodramatist Oliver Byron: "The play is full of thrilling adventures, and startling situations, and there is interwoven with the plot a thread of humor that softens

<sup>33</sup>"A Fine Play," San Francisco Daily Report, February 23, 1897.

the serious and sentimental features and keeps the audience in good humor." At the Alcazar was the "somewhat familiar" Saints and Sinners, a melodrama popular in revival into the twentieth century. At the Tivoli, there was a double bill of operetta, Von Suppe's The Lovely Galatea and Gilbert and Sullivan's Patience: "Both operas were handsomely mounted and costumed." Across the Bay in Oakland, and due to open in San Francisco that week, was Sousa's band, "which pleases all sorts and conditions of musical taste." Varied fare certainly, ingeniously served to suit every taste for spectacle, but hardly nourishing.

This diet was duplicated in theatres across the country. Edmund Gagey writes, "Whatever performance was finally chosen, the Broadway seeker after amusement knew there was little chance of his being disturbed unduly by contemporary problems or driven to painful thought. He would count on being moved to laughter or tears, with the strongest possible emotional stimulation. . . . It was, on the whole, a pleasant world of make-believe that was presented on the stage."<sup>34</sup>

If this world of escape was what the audience wanted, the theatre manager was ready to provide it, even though he was aware of the lack of quality. Howells gives the

<sup>34</sup>Edmund M. Gagey, Revolution in American Drama (New York, 1947), p. 2.

manager that much credit: "He knows perfectly well that it is abject trash he gives: for whatever else the manager is he is very commonly not a fool. He is often a man of taste and of sufficient reading; he knows quite well what is good literature. He merely believes that it is not adapted to the stage . . . ." <sup>35</sup> In The Story of a Play, the manager who reads Maxwell's script expresses the same attitude: Maxwell's play is good, but it will not win an audience. A manager, Howells concedes, is a businessman first: "The manager cannot afford to experiment with literary quality; for it costs so much to 'stage' a play in these days of material theatre but no drama, that he can only risk giving the old rubbish in some novel disguise. . . . So much money has to be put into the frame of the picture that only the well-known chromo-effects in sentiment, character, and situation can be afforded in the picture." <sup>36</sup>

In a costly, competitive business, it was perhaps inevitable in the monopoly-minded nineties that a few owners, like the Klaw-Erlanger Syndicate, should gain control of the theatres, not only in New York but in every major road city. The Klaw-Erlanger letterhead, "Representing the

<sup>35</sup>William Dean Howells, "Editor's Study," Harper's Magazine, LXXIII (July, 1886), p. 315.

<sup>36</sup>Howells, "Editor's Study," Harper's Magazine, LXXIII (July, 1886), p. 315.

Principal Theatres and Attractions of America," was an accurate description of the extent of their empire. These entrepreneurs ran a shrewd enterprize: operating out of New York, they controlled local productions and created road companies of the plays and the stars they thought would be a commercial success. They were not interested in any product that did not appeal to the easily satisfied public taste for a standardized diet. A Doll's House and Margaret Fleming were not likely to get a hearing in their theatre.

The effect on playwrights was predictable: they were forced to produce what the Syndicate thought would sell. The most readable account of the Syndicate, Allen Churchill's The Great White Way, gives ample evidence that the playwrights had little money and certainly no spiritual reward for their work.<sup>37</sup> Re-examining the period to discover why the art of the drama had been neglected in a corner of the nineties, Sheldon Cheney found that "centralized control of all the theatres in the land meant standardization of types of production, so that the dramatist who brought forward anything new found every trying-out ground closed to him. 'Kept' playwrights became the rule. . . . The American playwright for two decades was

<sup>37</sup>Allen Churchill, The Great White Way (New York, 1962), p. 42.



thus left without laboratory or studio."<sup>38</sup>

The Syndicate was opposed by independent actors and playwrights, among them Minnie Maddern Fiske, who was intent on introducing Ibsen to New York audiences, and Herne, who had been his own producer in the past. Said Herne, "It is conceded that I have contributed something to the literature of the stage and to dramatic art, and I therefore refuse to be driven from the stage of my country by the gentlemen who have the lessees and the owners of a number of playhouses by the throat."<sup>39</sup>

Although the Syndicate would not give Herne a hearing for his plays, nor for that matter an acting job because he did not fit the image of the fashionable matinee idol they preferred amid the decor of their stages, they did give him a job as stage manager (director) because he was one of the best in the business, and they knew it. But his employment was short-lived. Trying to get a hearing for Shore Acres, Herne took the play to Erlanger, his boss, who saw possibilities in the script--if he could star Joseph Jefferson, then under contract, as Uncle Nat, the part Herne had written for himself. Herne refused. They argued. Herne was fired. As Herne left, Erlanger shouted,

<sup>38</sup>Sheldon Cheney, The Art Theatre (New York, 1925), pp. 26-27.

<sup>39</sup>Norman Hapgood, The Stage in America, 1897-1900 (New York, 1901), p. 22.

"And you're the last damned anarchist that ever steps foot in this office."<sup>40</sup> Almost everyone else eventually became aligned with the Syndicate. Mrs. Fiske and Herne were notable exceptions; they managed to produce and act in their plays wherever they could, often in second-rate houses which lacked the popular luxury the Syndicate supplied for its customers.

Commercial pressure to give the audience what it wanted resulted in another theatre condition that hampered creativity: the star system. The audience liked to see the same stars in the same roles, or in roles so similar they could well have been the same. Both the actor and the playwright were left little room to explore new characters in new situations. Of the many artists affected, most memorably recorded is the experience of the actor James O'Neill, with whom Herne had played in the early San Francisco days. In Long Day's Journey into Night, O'Neill's son recreated the thwarted father, doomed to play the Count of Monte Cristo over and over. The father (Tyrone in the play) tells what the experience did to him as an artist:

That God-damned play I bought for a song and made such a success in--a great money success--it ruined me with its promise of an easy fortune. I didn't want to do anything else, and by the time I woke up to the fact I'd become a slave to the

<sup>40</sup>Herbert J. Edwards, James A. Herne, p. 94.

damned thing and did try other plays, it was too late. They had identified me with that one part, and didn't want me in anything else. They were right, too. I'd lost the great talent I once had through years of easy repetition, never learning a new part, never really working hard. Thirty-five to forty thousand dollars net profit a season like snapping your fingers! It was too great a temptation. Yet before I bought the damned thing I was considered one of the three or four young actors with the greatest artistic promise in America.<sup>41</sup>

Herne, too, could not escape the pressure to create a starring vehicle for himself. Early in his California career, he created and produced his own version of Rip Van Winkle, before Jefferson had secured any claim to the role as his personal property. Belasco, one of the dwarfs in the production, recalled, "I have seen three Rips--that of Jefferson, that of Robert McWade, and finally that of James A. Herne. This last was a wonderful characterization, with all the softness and pathos of the part. . . . But Fate chose to thrust forward Jefferson as the only Rip that ever was or could be. I happen to know better. Jefferson never was the Dutchman; he was the Yankee personating the Dutchman. But James A. Herne's Rip was the real thing."<sup>42</sup> Winter, the biographer of both Jefferson and Belasco, could not accept Belasco's judgment: "Seldom has so much error and injustice been packed into so small

<sup>41</sup>Eugene O'Neill, Long Day's Journey Into Night (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1956), pp. 149-150.

<sup>42</sup>Winter, Life of David Belasco, p. 168.

a place."<sup>43</sup> He did not see Herne's Rip.

Winter assumed that Herne put commercial stardom first: "Herne earnestly wished for a part in which he might win popularity and opulence in some degree commensurate with those obtained by Jefferson in Rip Van Winkle; he eventually found it or something like it in 'Hearts of Oak,' which he acted, far and wide, for many years, and by which he accumulated a fortune of about \$250,000."<sup>44</sup> Herne did play Hearts of Oak for years but lost the fortune on his unpopular productions of The Minute Men, Drifting Apart, and Margaret Fleming. When those productions failed, he could always round up a Hearts of Oak company and take to the road, where audiences evidently never tired of seeing the play. Then, with capital renewed, he would shelve Hearts of Oak and lose his money in a new production. The audiences that would see Hearts of Oak over and over would not come to plays like Margaret Fleming. In fact, after Margaret Fleming, managers feared that he had lost his old melodrama audience altogether, a situation which accounts in part for Herne's difficulties in getting Shore Acres produced.

Herne was respected by many for his refusal to be lulled into commercial security. One critic of the time

<sup>43</sup>Winter, Life of David Belasco, p. 169.

<sup>44</sup>Winter, Life of David Belasco, p. 201.





wrote, "Had James A. Herne the money-making instinct, he would (the opportunity was his) many years ago adopted 'Rip Van Winkle,' in which his reputation was foremost on the American continent and confirmed as the greatest impersonator East and West."<sup>45</sup> The critic commended him for avoiding the fate of Jefferson, and of John E. Owens as Solon Shingle, and of Frank Mayo as Davy Crockett.

Garland, however, took a surprising view of commercial success. Even though he had encouraged Drifting Apart and Margaret Fleming, he could not understand why Herne had to set out in the new direction of Griffith Davenport when he obviously had a life-long income in Shore Acres: "Herne's return to speculative producing seemed foolish to me, for it had plunged him once again into the morass of anxious toil from which 'Shore Acres' had lifted him. Theatrical folk are like that. They are seldom content to let well enough alone: 'This time we are sure to win.'"<sup>46</sup>

Only a few others in the theatre shared Herne's belief that eventually audiences could be made to accept unconventional new work. Minnie Maddern Fiske, for one, continued to fight to get Ibsen produced: "Oh, I have no

<sup>45</sup>"Amusements," Anaconda [Montana] Standard, April 24, 1898.

<sup>46</sup>Hamlin Garland, Roadside Meetings (New York, 1931), p. 406.

patience with those who descend upon a great play, produce it without understanding, and then, because disaster overtakes it, throw up their hands and say there is no public for fine art. How absurd!"<sup>47</sup> Chekhov, facing similar problems in Moscow during this period, was also impatient with those who blamed the public for the wretched state of the theatre: "The public is always and everywhere the same: intelligent and stupid, sympathetic and pitiless, according to mood. It has always been a flock which needs a good shepherd and dogs, and it has always gone in the direction in which the shepherds and dogs drove it."<sup>48</sup> An artist, obviously, cannot give all his attention to the audience; he must have faith, as Eric Bentley has said, "that there will be an audience for good work."<sup>49</sup>

Herne, more than any other American dramatist of his time, put his art first, his success at the box office second. His characteristically forthright statement in 1899 is completely uncharacteristic of playwriting of the time:

There is no telling whether the public mind will take kindly to the new. If a man does the best

<sup>47</sup>Alexander Woolcott, Mrs. Fiske: Her Views on Actors, Acting, and the Problems of Production (New York, 1917), p. 48.

<sup>48</sup>Anton Chekhov, Letters on the Short Story, the Drama, and Other Literary Topics, ed. Louis S. Friedland (New York, 1924), p. 191.

<sup>49</sup>Eric Bentley, What Is Theatre?, p. 256.

he can there is hope for him; but, if he deliberately compromises what he believes to be true art for the sake of box-office returns, he makes a fatal mistake. I hold that the American dramatist, like the American novelist and artist, who is striving to be true to life and art, and who refuses to compromise with the artificial and false which has so largely ruled in the past, must as yet be content to live simply and with small returns. He must measure his success by achieving something which cannot be claimed by those who resort to all kinds of expedients to make money. He finds his reward in the satisfaction that he is helping rather than hurting his profession.<sup>50</sup>

Compromising as he did by turning out hack jobs and directing the box office plays of others, Herne hesitated to compromise in his own work. He learned his lesson with the ending of Shore Acres. When McVickers consented to produce the play in Chicago in 1892, he would not accept the pantomime ending Herne had written: "Oh, no, my dear Herne, I fear you have made a mistake. The public will not wait for that. It is too unconventional. Your story is told when the young couple have returned from the West and made up with Helen Berry's father. Let the curtain fall as soon as possible after the climax is reached."<sup>51</sup> Herne reluctantly gave in and allowed the curtain to fall on the comic scene where Uncle Nat accidentally fires the old gun--and the full company is on stage. The play was

<sup>50</sup>James A. Herne, "The Present Outlook for the American Drama," The Coming Age, I (1899), p. 255.

<sup>51</sup>Lewis C. Strang, Famous Actors of the Day (Boston, 1899), p. 34.



not successful, partly because this comic ending is ~~very~~ <sup>not</sup> inappropriate to the work.

When Field agreed to produce the play at the Boston Museum the following year, Herne, fearing that Field too would object to the ending, resorted to subterfuge--taking Edward Rose, Field's assistant, into his confidence--and planned to play the silent ending. Rose, who was to give the signal for the curtain, held the curtain after the gun scene until Herne (Uncle Nat), left alone on the stage, locked the door, banked the fire, put out the lights, and by the flame of a candle went up the stairs to retire.

"The result was as Herne had foreseen. The audience followed his pantomime with rapt attention, and even after the curtain had fallen, was slow to leave the theatre."<sup>52</sup> Herne is remembered fondly for this scene, a scene, incidentally, which ante-dates Chekhov's celebrated silent ending in The Cherry Orchard by twelve years. Alan Downer praises the scene as an "astonishing tour de force in a theatre that had always insisted on a thrilling curtain line."<sup>53</sup> Herne never again compromised his art to please a manager and his box office. Like their creator, the protagonists in Herne's plays are usually men and women

<sup>52</sup>Julie A. Herne, "Biographical Note," in James A. Herne, Shore Acres and Other Plays (New York, 1928), pp. xxiv-xxv.

<sup>53</sup>Alan S. Downer, American Drama (New York, 1960), p. 8.

making a decision, unaided. Reaching a decision, they act without compromise, disregarding all opposition.

Such determination to develop the drama in his own way, from his own native materials, was not evident in the theatre of Herne's contemporaries. Other men simply avoided writing for a theatre that had little room for the growth of a significant native drama. They knew that, unlike the distinctively American fiction of the period, the drama was hardly identifiable as growing from the American experience. And chances of success with an authentic American play were slim. The result was, as one critic observed, that "it deters writers who are able to put their ideas into any other form of literature from attempting to write for the stage."<sup>54</sup>

As the playwrights were shaped by the social background of life in America, they were also limited by the economics of the American theatre. A celebrated frontier actor, Noah Ludlow, presents a comprehensive record of inland America during the nineteenth century, giving a clear indication of the roots from which an American theatre was developing.<sup>55</sup> In that theatre, one would expect the dramatists to reflect the American cultural

<sup>54</sup>Julian Magnus, "The Condition of the American Stage," p. 172.

<sup>55</sup>Noah Ludlow, Dramatic Life as I Found It (Saint Louis, 1880), reprinted with an intro. by Francis Hodge (New York: Benjamin Blom, 1966).

background. Such is not the case. As Herne wrote, "I think that an American drama, dealing with our life and history in a real way, would appeal to a very limited audience."<sup>56</sup> Reviewing a 1917 matinee of scenes from famous American plays of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, Heywood Broun found one striking defect: the drama had little relation to American life; "it is naive, but not sincere."<sup>57</sup>

There is some doubt that there is any distinctly American drama at all before the 1890's. In 1886, Howells wrote, "We still have no drama."<sup>58</sup> The playwright Dion Boucicault wrote, in 1890, "There is not, and there never has been, a literary institution which could be called the American Drama."<sup>59</sup> Barrett H. Clark, who, interestingly, made American drama a supplement in his European Theories of the Drama, wrote, "The scissors and paste-pot school of Boucicault and the others has its place in history along with Godey's Lady's Book, Currier and Ives prints, Sandwich Glass, Anthony Comstock and The Tweed Rings. There is no need of my arguing the question at length:

<sup>56</sup>Herne, "The Present Outlook," p. 254.

<sup>57</sup>New York Tribune, January 23, 1917.

<sup>58</sup>William Dean Howells, "Editor's Study," Harper's Magazine, LXXIII (July, 1886), p. 315.

<sup>59</sup>Dion Boucicault, "The Future of American Drama," Arena, II (1890), p. 641.

I declare flatly that there is no play written by an American . . . from the very earliest days down to 1900, let us say, that's in any way comparable as a work of art to even the average second-rate fiction or verse produced in this country during the same period."<sup>60</sup>

The major obstacle to a native drama was European influence. In The Devil's Dictionary, Ambrose Bierce stated the situation succinctly when he defined a dramatist as "one who adapts from the French." (Herne's earliest surviving manuscript, Within an Inch of His Life, is an adaptation from the French.) In the words of one critic, "A century of domestic playmaking had produced second- and third-rate imitations of routine European styles."<sup>61</sup> The native health of American drama was, of course, not the only victim of French infection; it is sometimes overlooked that French influence was just as strong in English plays, although the English made an earlier recovery.<sup>62</sup>

William Dean Howells was upset by the American taste for foreign theatricals, especially the French. In 1869,

<sup>60</sup>Barrett H. Clark, An Hour of American Drama (Philadelphia, 1930), pp. 21-22.

<sup>61</sup>Jordan Y. Miller, American Dramatic Literature: Ten Plays in Historical Perspective (New York, 1961), p. ix.

<sup>62</sup>Henry Quilter, "The Decline of the Drama," Eclectic Magazine, June, 1887, p. 827.



he reviewed a Boston performance of Offenbach's light opera spoof of the Trojan War, La Belle Helene. Something was morally askew with Americans who could be amused by it. Such spectacles, he wrote, "draw no life from our soil; they do not flower and fruit again in our air. After we have praised these modern plays to their full desert, we must again recur to their foreign character. They have no relation to our life as a people."<sup>63</sup> But, Howells to the contrary, nineteenth century Americans were eager to participate in the European experience.

Herne knew what that audience wanted, but--except in the early plays--paid no attention to the other side of the Atlantic. In an interview he was asked, "Do you believe that the hour has arrived when the American people will support the American drama dealing with the life, history, aspirations, and dreams of the new world, as readily as they patronize the same originality and ability dealing with European life?" Herne answered,

There are some writers on the other side of the water who are doing good work picturing certain phases of life. They confine themselves for the most part to the little world called society. They introduce lords and ladies; they throw the glamour of wealth and rank around their plays. That appeals to the average American as much, if not more, than it does to the European. It is a fact--a sad fact--that a great many Americans would like to see a monarchy over here, and these

<sup>63</sup>William Dean Howells, "The New Taste in Theatricals," Atlantic Monthly, XXIII (May, 1869), pp. 643-644.

people all like to hear about the titled aristocracy. We have a large class of people who affect a liking for anything European, while they have a contempt for America. . . . Therefore, at the present time, I think a European society drama, with a few titled personages figuring in it, stands a better chance of success than an equally well written and staged American play picturing the life of our people.<sup>64</sup>

When Herne did show some originality in writing an American drama of ideas, the critics were quick to cry European influence, giving little credit to the possibility that Herne arrived at his notions of drama from American experience. In the Chicago Tribune review of Margaret Fleming, the critic bluntly labels Herne as Ibsen's "disciple," but "cruder."<sup>65</sup> Lars Ahnebrinck writes of "the Ibsen-inspired play Margaret Fleming."<sup>66</sup> There is no conclusive proof that Herne was influenced by Ibsen, as Arthur Hobson Quinn has shown.<sup>67</sup> Influence or not, the interesting fact is that the critics assumed Herne had to be influenced from abroad. Howells' fictional playwright, Brice Maxwell, has the same problem. The critics say of his play, "In its highest reaches it made you think, by its stern and unflinching fidelity to the

<sup>64</sup>Herne, "The Present Outlook," p. 254.

<sup>65</sup>"Music and Theatre," Chicago Tribune, July 8, 1892.

<sup>66</sup>Lars Ahnebrinck, The Beginnings of Naturalism in American Fiction (Upsala, 1950), p. 73.

<sup>67</sup>Arthur Hobson Quinn, "Ibsen and Herne--Theory and Facts," American Literature, XIX (May, 1947), p. 176.

implications, of Ibsen."<sup>68</sup> But, for Maxwell "the time had passed . . . when he wished to have this said of his play, not because he did not admire Ibsen, but because he preferred the original quality of his own work."<sup>69</sup>

The problem was, of course, the American inferiority complex about things European. The New York Globe reviewer of a potpourri matinee of scenes from earlier American plays, in 1917, wrote, "Why in the name of mediocrity did we have to be reminded that during the period that gave Goethe, Victor Hugo, Pailleron, Labiche, Henri Beque, and Ibsen to the world America's most illustrious contributions to dramatic literature were the works of James A. Herne, Bronson Howard, Charles Hoyt, James Edward Murdock, and Anna Cora Mowatt Ritchie? Why rub it in . . .?"<sup>70</sup> American plays were inferior, certainly, to the masterpieces of Europe, but not inferior to much of the nightly fare in the theatres of the Continent and England.

But the real issue is not so much inferiority as imitation, pointless surface imitation which suffocated any American breath in the plays. Daniel Frohman, a leading producer of the period, wrote, "The fault with some of our so-called American plays is that, while the

<sup>68</sup>Howells, Story of a Play, p. 128.

<sup>69</sup>Howells, Story of a Play, p. 185.

<sup>70</sup>New York Globe, January 23, 1917.

characters are dressed like Americans and talk like them, they are simply disguised French and German people undergoing the trials and tribulations incident upon the conditions of France and Germany."<sup>71</sup> Howells remarked that an American cow-catcher on a locomotive that nearly runs down the hero in After Dark did not make it an American play.<sup>72</sup>

While an American drama was not a matter of clear critical record, it was developing, separate from if not equal to European drama. A visiting English critic, William Archer, the translator of Ibsen, recalled that he was sent to America in 1899 and told that he would find only plays adapted from the French or native American plays "which were beneath contempt."<sup>73</sup> Instead, he found what he considered to be vital drama. "Yet," he wrote, in 1923, "I am quite sure that there are many people in America today who have not wakened up to the new state of affairs, and are still convinced that there is no American drama worth mentioning."<sup>74</sup> On that 1899 trip, Archer was most impressed by Herne's Griffith Davenport, "as strong

<sup>71</sup>Daniel Frohman, "Tendencies of the American Stage," Cosmopolitan, XXXVIII (November, 1904), p. 18.

<sup>72</sup>Howells, "The New Taste in Theatricals," p. 644.

<sup>73</sup>William Archer, The Old Drama and the New (London, 1923), p. 3.

<sup>74</sup>William Archer, The Old Drama and the New, p. 3.



and human a play as any modern stage can show. . . . One day, perhaps, this noble and moving picture from national history may be recognized as the cornerstone of a national drama."<sup>75</sup> Archer also saw Cyrano de Bergerac that season in New York: "Cyrano de Bergerac is a wonderful piece of work, and in its right place--on the French stage, in the French language--no one admires it more than I do. But it sickened me to see all America crowding to it, while a noble and moving American drama, like Mr. James A. Herne's Griffith Davenport, was played to the most meagre houses."<sup>76</sup>

An American critic, writing in 1924 of the difficulties of the emerging modern drama at the turn of the century, could perceive that "the movement started in England and on the Continent and, as we can now see, in America as well, though traditional American neglect of American literature led the first alert critics on this side of the Atlantic to lay all their emphasis on the

<sup>75</sup> William Archer, "The American Stage," Pall Mall Magazine, XX (1899), p. 37.

<sup>76</sup> Archer, "The American Stage," pp. 25-26. It was Archer's interest in Griffith Davenport which preserved the only surviving manuscript of Act IV. At Archer's request, Herne sent a copy of the play; Act IV was found among Archer's papers after his death. Herne's unpublished manuscript of the play was destroyed in a fire in 1916.

European innovators."<sup>77</sup>

If there was only limited awareness that drama was in a state of becoming a native product in America, there was even less awareness of what marked a play as American. Surveying critical commentary, particularly at the end of the century, one can find only a few generally agreed upon characteristics, and even those few are vague. In 1898, one critic found that all American plays were marked by strong melodramatic situations, farcical scenes, horse-play and song and dance, moral sentiments, and poetic justice.<sup>78</sup> Most American plays did exhibit these characteristics, but English and French plays had them as well. In fact, the newer American drama, of the kind Herne wrote, deliberately avoided these clichés.

Native subject matter may be a sign that the play is American. In the nineties, and later, the "real pump" school built colorful farmhouses, New York restaurants, slum streets, and second-rate hotel rooms on the stage and peopled them with American citizens. The producer-playwright Augustin Daly wrote, "Possibly our national drama, from a literary point of view, will reach its best period when native writers vie with each other in

<sup>77</sup>Percy H. Boynton, Some Contemporary Americans (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1924), p. 199.

<sup>78</sup>Alfred Hennequin, "Characteristics of the American Drama," Arena, I (May, 1890), p. 708.

illustrating native character and contemporaneous fashions and follies. It does not seem easy to get our best playwrights to practice in this field of exertion."<sup>79</sup> Hamlin Garland thought that a dramatist should look at life, "special, definite facts of life," as the subject of his American drama.<sup>80</sup>

But the use of native subjects and materials is not enough to insure a national product if they remain surface embellishments. Even a play like Shenandoah--a Civil War play across whose stage General Sheridan rides on horseback--is not very American, in the opinion of John Gassner.<sup>81</sup> Playwright Bronson Howard observed that American drama "is not by any means confined to plays on American subjects or with American characters. . . . Subject matter has nothing to do with the question."<sup>82</sup>

What, then, was a playwright to do to become an American?

He could project the American personality, which is

<sup>79</sup>Augustin Daly, "American Drama," North American Review, CXLII (May, 1886), p. 488.

<sup>80</sup>Hamlin Garland, "Truth in Drama," Literary World, September 14, 1889, p. 308.

<sup>81</sup>John Gassner, Masters of the Drama (New York, 1940), p. 634.

<sup>82</sup>Bronson Howard, "American Playwrights on the American Drama," Harper's Weekly, Supplement, February 2, 1889, p. 98.

quite another matter from using native material. Since the dramatist is the inescapable product of his nationality and inherits its temperament, he reflects, perhaps without knowing it, something of the national spirit.<sup>83</sup> At the turn of the century, William Archer wrote, "No country in the world, certainly, has attained a more comprehensive self-realization in literature than America of to-day. Comprehensive, I say: not necessarily profound; that is another question. American fiction is like a complete ordnance-survey of the spiritual surface of the land, already all-embracing, and becoming year by year more minute in its detail. In this movement the stage has certainly taken no lead, but it has made a spirited attempt to follow."<sup>84</sup> Archer's English contemporaries were creating the same kind of national personality on the London stage, as playwright Henry Arthur Jones insisted: "My contention is that the English drama should be the art of representing English life, so far as is possible, in all its fullness and grandeur and many-sidedness . . . to exhibit the largest qualities of the most permanent and vital qualities of English life."<sup>85</sup>

<sup>83</sup>John Mason Brown, Upstage (New York, 1930), p. 8.

<sup>84</sup>William Archer, "The American Stage," p. 25.

<sup>85</sup>Henry Arthur Jones, Renascence of the English Drama (London, 1895), p. 242.



Too often in America native materials passed for native personality, an extrinsic not an intrinsic part of the work. One critic wrote, "When it [national personality] appears as something consciously imposed by the artist upon his material, it is extraneous; when it is exhaled from his work as one of the integral characteristics, it is part and parcel of the creative personality and, as such, a component of art."<sup>86</sup> Herne's plays, as we will see in detail later, are more than interesting sketches of American materials. There is, as Archer observed, a spiritual quality that is at once original American art and universal art, passing the bounds of a narrow personal world of facts and implications.<sup>87</sup> Howells found this quality in both Margaret Fleming and Griffith Davenport.<sup>88</sup>

Along with a personality that is at once national and universal, as paradoxical as that seems, American drama developed a mind, becoming "a new intense drama of thought," in Sheldon Cheney's phrase.<sup>89</sup> Americans,

<sup>86</sup>Isaac Goldberg, The Drama of Transition (Cincinnati: Stewart Kidd Company, 1922), p. 49.

<sup>87</sup>Montrose J. Moses, The American Dramatist (Boston, 1925), p. 221.

<sup>88</sup>William Dean Howells, "Some New English Plays," Harper's Weekly, January 23, 1904, p. 124.

<sup>89</sup>Sheldon Cheney, The New Movement in the Theatre (New York, 1914), pp. 91-92.

however, did not probe as deeply or as subtly as their European counterparts; they were neither "searching psychologists nor profound sociologists."<sup>90</sup> Playwright Dion Boucicault, prophesying the future of American drama, recognized that the "rather philosophical and scientific mind" of the American playwright would "deal with popular problems of the hour, whether social or scientific."<sup>91</sup>

Another characteristic of American plays was a concern with the domestic scene, a preoccupation, as Arthur Miller says, "not with Man but with the family, the home, the private life, and . . . with sexuality."<sup>92</sup> The American playwright showed the members of a family "overwhelmed by the tragic or comic misfortunes that might overtake any man," wrote John Mason Brown.<sup>93</sup>

Howells felt that the domestic character of American drama could be a liability: "It is a defect in our playwrighting that it [society] does not carry over from the home to humanity. Its interest does not live from man to man, but from men to women, and from women to men; it has

<sup>90</sup>William Archer, "The Development of American Drama," Harper's Magazine, CXLII (December, 1920), p. 79.

<sup>91</sup>Dion Boucicault, "The Future of the American Drama," p. 652.

<sup>92</sup>Arthur Miller, "On Social Plays," intro. to A View From the Bridge (New York, 1955), p. 7.

<sup>93</sup>John Mason Brown, Upstage, p. 10.

no implications; its meanings are for the given time and place only."<sup>94</sup> By contrast, Howells noted, English plays of the period kept audiences busy with their social implications after they left the theatre: "They compel you to think of somebody besides the dramatis personae. They bid you consider the whole social world."<sup>95</sup> Domestic comedies and problem plays, the staple of the Broadway stage, have rarely reached the level of the universal.

An emerging American drama in the nineties, then, had sentimental, moralistic, and melodramatic elements. It did use native materials. But, more importantly, it expressed the American personality and spirit. It was a drama of thought dealing with social and psychological problems, at least in a superficial way. And it was concerned with the domestic family scene rather than a broader social panorama.

A school of American playwrights, writing a native drama, no longer seems as important today as it did at the end of the century.<sup>96</sup> Modern drama is played on an

<sup>94</sup>William Dean Howells, "Some New American Plays," Harper's Weekly, January 16, 1904, p. 88.

<sup>95</sup>William Dean Howells, "Some New English Plays," Harper's Weekly, January 23, 1904, p. 124.

<sup>96</sup>Augustin Daly believed that the drama was a world wide form, that there was no need for a particular school of American playwrighting. See "American Playwrights on the American Drama," Harper's Weekly, February 2, 1889, p. 97.

international stage. Anouilh's waltzing toreadors may live in a French milieu, Osborne's angry young men may fight an English class system, Lorca's peasant women may be trapped by Spanish social conventions, but these characters are interesting not as studies in native culture but as sincere human beings raising questions that people anywhere might ask. The usual American plays of the nineties rarely developed sincere native characters, much less characters with a universal appeal. The first step toward a larger drama was an intensified Americanization, even though exactly what Americanization meant was only a hazy notion.

Herne wanted his plays to be American, and he succeeded. Theatre historian Barnard Hewitt wrote, "Herne as actor and as playwright was groping toward an American theatre art comparable to that which Andre Antoine was creating in Paris and Otto Brahm in the Freie Buhne in Berlin."<sup>97</sup> "A truly American dramatist," wrote B. O. Flower of Herne in 1899.<sup>98</sup> Griffith Davenport was "among the first forerunners of a newer American drama," wrote George Pierce Baker, the director of the famous Harvard

<sup>97</sup>Barnard Hewitt, Theatre U.S.A., 1668-1957 (New York, 1959), p. 257.

<sup>98</sup>B. O. Flower, "Mr. Herne's Contributions to American Dramatic Literature," The Coming Age, II (1899), p. 404.



"Workshop 47."<sup>99</sup> "Margaret Fleming is a creation to which we as a literary and stage-possessing nation may point with justifiable pride, for none of the modern dramatists of Norway, Russia, Germany, Spain, France, Belgium or Italy have produced a better," wrote an enthusiastic reviewer in the Chicago Tribune about the 1907 revival of the play.<sup>100</sup>

It seems strange today that Herne has been so highly praised by many critics. The praise, though, may not seem so strange in the context of history, for Herne's achievement becomes more remarkable when we consider this theatre which surrounded him. Hampered by the demands of commercial interest and the popular audience that thrived on the proven formulas, Herne wrote plays that showed a vital inner form. Although he was never quite free of this theatre around him, he wrote works which are more interesting as plays than as antiques of a vanished America.

<sup>99</sup>George Pierce Baker, Modern American Plays (New York, 1920), p. ix.

<sup>100</sup>W. L. Hubbard, "Margaret Fleming," Chicago Tribune, January 30, 1907.

## CHAPTER II

### FORM AND FORMULA

To study the plays of James A. Herne as part of American dramatic literature--rather than a relic of American theatre--one must first define the nature of drama as an art form, attempt to discover what qualities in a play are likely to give it life beyond two hours on the stage. The search for definition is complicated by two important considerations. First, unlike any other literary form, the play is not completely formed until visualized in terms of living expression; the script, fundamental as it is to the live product, is not the whole play. Second, the essential form of a play can be blurred by a variety of problems inevitably raised in discussion of Herne's plays, such as the nature of tragedy, the strictures on the well-made play, and the influence of realism and naturalism.

Herne may have written tragedy in Margaret Fleming or he may have written a well-made play in the Scribe manner; he may have written local color realism in Shore Acres, or he may have created a situation in which his characters are aware that they are acting out the conventional plot of the disowned daughter returning to a forgiving family,



with babe in arms, on a snowy Christmas Eve. On the other hand, in either of these instances he may have been groping toward a dramatic form that has only tenuous relationship to the formula of tragedy or of Scribe or of Realism. A search for form, however, must be conducted with the cold awareness that no amount of theory can produce gold in Herne's plays if the prime matter is of a baser substance. But the search is, nonetheless, worth the effort: it suggests a direction which a student of literature might take if he is to consider plays--in particular, the modern American drama--within his ken.

Beginning his search for essential dramatic form, the student is confronted by a perplexing variety of definitions of "a play." For example, Alfred Hennequin in an 1890 manual for playwrights offers, "In the broadest sense, a play is a complete and unified story of human life acted out on the stage in a series of motivated incidents so arranged as to excite the greatest amount of interest and pleasure in the spectator by means of novelty, variety, contrast, suspense, surprise, climax, humor, and pathos."<sup>1</sup> This statement is an accurate description of many of the cliché-riddled plays of the time, with the emphasis on arousing emotions and responses in the audience and keeping up their interest by a flow of excitements.

<sup>1</sup>Alfred Hennequin, The Art of Playwrighting (New York, 1890), p. 83.



Another early theorist defines the drama rhetorically as "a species in the genus of fiction" whose business it is "to produce an intense emotional effect, and such an effect is most readily aroused by the spectacle of a struggle. . . . A play, then, is a fight, a sort of a glorified prize fight."<sup>2</sup> Another theorist of the well-made school makes a play a logical experiment, "a representation of a series of events linked together by the law of cause and effect and marching forward toward a predestined culmination."<sup>3</sup> Even though these formulas may describe the practice of many plays, they were inadequate to cope with new forms arising in the drama. William Archer, whose theory leans toward well-made formulas, was nonetheless aware of the new forces, particularly in the plays of Maeterlinck. This awareness perhaps led him to his vague definition of a play: "Any representation of imaginary personages which is capable of interesting an average audience assembled in a theatre."<sup>4</sup> Stark Young, also attuned to newer drama, avoided precise definition: "A play is a piece of literature about a section of life written in such a way that it will go over the footlights,

<sup>2</sup>Charlton Andrews, The Drama To-day (Philadelphia, 1913), p. 9.

<sup>3</sup>Clayton Hamilton, The Theory of the Theatre (New York, 1910), p. 3.

<sup>4</sup>William Archer, Playmaking--A Manual of Craftsmanship (New York, 1934), p. 48.

in such a way that what it has to say it can say in the theater. That is the sole test. If it can do this it is a play, good or bad. It is a play in so far as the idea, the content, of it is expressed in theater terms."<sup>5</sup>

These definitions share one major conviction: a play exists, finally, in the living theatre. The script itself is not the play. Frank Archer, an English actor offering advice to playwrights in 1892, wrote, "One thing is very certain, that the MS. of your play as it was first submitted to the manager, and the play that is being acted every evening are two very distinct things."<sup>6</sup> Understandably, the actor added that some of the best things in the play were probably due to the manager and the actors. Henry James, too, felt the performance and script inseparable: "I don't see how you can have it unless you have both, or you can have either unless you have the other. They are the two blades of a pair of scissors."<sup>7</sup> After a performance of Hedda Gabbler he wrote, "The play, on perusal, left us comparatively muddled and mystified, fascinated but--in one's intellectual sympathy--snubbed.

<sup>5</sup>Stark Young, The Theater (New York, 1927), p. 68.

<sup>6</sup>Frank Archer, How to Write a Good Play (London, 1892), p. 3.

<sup>7</sup>Henry James, "After the Play," New Review, I (June, 1889), reprinted in The Scenic Art, ed. Allan Wade (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1948), p. 237.

Acted, it leads that sympathy over the straightest of roads with all the exhilaration of a superior pace."<sup>8</sup>

William Gillette, a playwright better known as the actor impersonating Sherlock Holmes, put the matter as well as anyone, in an address before the American Academy of Arts and Letters:

Doubtless you all suppose that when a person hands you a play to read he hands you that Play--to read. . . . The person does nothing of that description. . . . The Play which you were supposed to be holding in your hand is not a Play at all, but simply the written or printed Directions for bringing one into being; and that Play will exist only when these Directions are being followed out. . . . No one on earth can read a Play. You . . . imagine as best you can what the Play would be like; but you could no more read the Play than you could read a Fire or an Automobile Accident or a Baseball Game. The Play--if it is Drama--does not even exist until it appeals in the form of Simulated Life.<sup>9</sup>

If the drama exists, finally, on the stage, what, then, has drama to do with literature? It depends on what one calls "literature." Many of Herne's contemporaries felt that literature was the unnecessary interference of fine writing. Joseph Jefferson, for instance, said, "You may have all the good literature you wish in a play,--if it does not interfere with the play's action. The absence of fine writing in a play will not injure it if the story

<sup>8</sup>Quoted in Brander Matthews, "Henry James and the Theatre," Bookman, LI (June, 1920), p. 391.

<sup>9</sup>William Gillette, "Illusion of the First Time in Acting," in Brander Matthews, Papers on Acting (New York: Hill and Wang, 1958), pp. 129-130.

and construction are right. Literary merit will enhance the chances of success if it be subservient to the action."<sup>10</sup> Belasco insisted the drama had no relation to literature at all, that "the drama is a thing apart, that no sort of judgement passed upon it outside of the theater is of any significance whatever."<sup>11</sup> In his own practice, Belasco approached playwrighting in terms of the physical stage. Working with Henry C. DeMille, in one instance, Belasco moved about the stage, blocking out the action before a line was written. From the stage, Belasco said to DeMille, "Now Henry, give me a speech that begins here, and takes me over here. Then I turn suddenly like this-- and see the woman I love."<sup>12</sup> Thomas Dickinson, a critic of the period, agreed with Belasco's practice of working from the actor's point of view: "Kindred as it is to literature, dramatic art is not literature. It starts with the expressive functions of the body."<sup>13</sup>

Even further removed from literature was a non-literary emphasis on the decor, the spectacle, of the

<sup>10</sup>Brander Matthews, A Study of Drama (Boston, 1910), p. 21.

<sup>11</sup>"Literature and Drama," The Nation, CXXVII (November, 1928), p. 511.

<sup>12</sup>Larzer Ziff, The American 1890s (New York, 1966), p. 323.

<sup>13</sup>Thomas H. Dickinson, The Case of American Drama (New York, 1915), p. 32.

play. Henry Arthur Jones complained of "the notions widely prevalent amongst playgoers that a costume play must necessarily rank higher as literature than the prose play of everyday modern life."<sup>14</sup> The producer Daniel Frohman accepted as fact the demise of literature in the commercial theatre: "Conditions of life are different from those of the period of the literary drama. The stage was then the arena for literary giants. Now we can get our literature in books, magazines, Sunday newspapers."<sup>15</sup> Joining in the sentiments of commercial theatre men, William Winter, the leading New York drama critic, wrote, "If intended for the stage it [a play] must possess action. If intended for the closet it must possess literature. There are plays which are good to act and also good to read, because they contain both action and literature, but such plays are few, and whenever they are acted much of their literature has to be cut out of them."<sup>16</sup> For many men in the theatre, literature was something extraneous, something vaguely to do with fine, poetic writing, not with the life of the stage.

<sup>14</sup>Henry Arthur Jones, "Literature and the Modern Drama," Atlantic Monthly, XCVIII (December, 1906), p. 798.

<sup>15</sup>Daniel Frohman, Memories of a Manager (New York, 1911), pp. 151-152.

<sup>16</sup>William Winter, The Wallet of Time (New York, 1913), p. 562.



Their vision was limited by a narrow definition of "literature;" they seem to associate literature with "literary," in a dilettantish sense of that word.

From outside the theatre, Howells could look in and observe, regretfully, "Our dramatists seem to be submissive to the impudent assumption of the theatre that a play cannot be good if literary, or other than the worse for its literature."<sup>17</sup> By contrast, in English plays, especially in those of Henry Arthur Jones and Shaw, he could, "taste the literary quality."<sup>18</sup> Howells choice of Shaw as an example suggests that he had in mind a quality quite apart from the dilettantish when he found "literature" in a play.

If theatre people were inclined to look at literature as an obstacle to effective production, there were those at the other extreme who, like Charles Lamb before them, preferred to construct the play in imagination rather than see it done, often shabbily, on the stage. Odell, the chronicler of the New York stage, for instance, wrote, "Personally, I should deem Margaret Fleming, like certain Ibsen dramas, more stimulating to read than to see in

<sup>17</sup>William Dean Howells, "The Recent Dramatic Season," North American Review, CLXXII (March, 1901), p. 469.

<sup>18</sup>Howells, "The Recent Dramatic Season," p. 469.

action on the stage."<sup>19</sup> Lamb could read Shakespeare at home; Odell could not read Margaret Fleming if he wanted to. It was not printed. Few American plays before 1900 were printed for the sound economic reason that no copy-right protected them. A printed play was virtually anyone's property.<sup>20</sup>

The lack of published plays is discussed by two Henry James characters in the essay "After the Play":

Doriforth: I mean our contemporary drama. To begin with, you can't find it--there's no text.

Auberon: So much the better!

Doriforth: So much the better if there is to be no criticism. There is only a dirty prompter's book. One can't put one's hand upon it; one doesn't know what one is discussing. There is no "Authority"--nothing is ever published.<sup>21</sup>

With no script available, William Archer wrote, "the divorce between the stage and literature was so complete

<sup>19</sup>George C. D. Odell, Annals of the New York Stage, 15 vols. (New York, 1927-1949), XV, p. 9.

<sup>20</sup>When, for instance, an unscrupulous manager toured the Midwest in his version of Hearts of Oak under the title Oaken Hearts, Herne had little control over his property. The best he could do was get an injunction against the use of so similar a title, and then tour in his own play. On January 9, 1881, the St. Louis Republican ran this announcement: "Hearne's [sic] 'Hearts of Oak' combination will open the season at the Olympic theatre this evening. Last season we had Dicky Lingard's 'Oaken Hearts,' which Hearne's lawyers said wasn't the thing. 'Hearts of Oak' has Hearne's name tacked to it as a guaranty that it is the Simon-pure original and in no danger of injunctions and lawsuits."

<sup>21</sup>Henry James, "After the Play," p. 236.

that people entirely lost the habit of reading plays, and have as yet imperfectly recovered it."<sup>22</sup> However, with the publication of Shaw and Ibsen they were beginning to read plays again, and one critic even credits the improvement of the stage to the revival of the written drama.<sup>23</sup>

Even without a script, a play has been considered literature for an audience, or "books by substitution."<sup>24</sup> What the script gives to the reader is the barest outline of dialogue, but that is all he needs. In a narrow sense, as Clayton Hamilton wrote, the dialogue is the "only purely literary element" in a play.<sup>25</sup> It is also, Stark Young wrote, the most important element in the theatre-- "what survives is words."<sup>26</sup> For Pirandello, the words are primary: "The literary work is the drama and the comedy conceived and written by the poet; what will be seen in the theatre is not and cannot be anything but a scenic translation, always and necessarily inferior to the

<sup>22</sup>William Archer, The Old Drama and the New (London, 1923), p. 252.

<sup>23</sup>Dickinson, The Case of the American Drama, p. 31.

<sup>24</sup>George F. Reynolds, "Plays as Literature for an Audience," University of Colorado Studies, Series in Language and Literature, IV (July, 1953), p. 5.

<sup>25</sup>Hamilton, The Theory of the Theatre, p. 5.

<sup>26</sup>Young, The Theater, p. 46.

original."<sup>27</sup> Some playwrights, he concludes, write only for translation: "Nothing but material for actors, to which actors will give life and consistency on the stage. . . . But for us the theatre must be something else."<sup>28</sup> The student of literature works properly with the original, not the translation, but he works in the knowledge that a play is intended for performance, where, as Stark Young explains, the play "is no longer a word on a page but is translated into another medium, the theatre, where it may pass from poor literature to at least better theatre, or shrink from good literature to very poor theatre."<sup>29</sup>

However, anything other than the dialogue is extra-literary, becoming merely a description of action, not part of the essential movement of the play as literature. Susanne Langer has said,

A playwright who writes only the lines uttered in a play marks a long series of culminating moments in the flow of the action. . . . Modern playwrights sometimes write pages of instructions to the actors. . . . Such "stage directions" are really literary treatment of the story . . . because they do not partake of the dramatic form. . . . The lines of the play are the only guide a good director or actor needs. What makes the play the author's work is that the lines are

<sup>27</sup>Luigi Pirandello, "Theatre and Literature," in Haskell M. Block and Herman Salinger, The Creative Vision (New York, 1960), p. 111.

<sup>28</sup>Pirandello, "Theatre and Literature," p. 112.

<sup>29</sup>Young, The Theater, p. 41.

the highlights of a perpetual, progressive action, and determine what can be done with the piece on the stage.<sup>30</sup>

The text, then, has primacy; it is the material with which the literary student works, even when he thinks in terms of translation. He creates the dramatic form from the dialogue, as Lamb preferred to, in the quiet of his study, which leaves still unanswered the question of what form emerges as these words become drama.

#### FORM

Distinctions between literature and play, between book and stage, however, skirt the basic quality of a play. Sheldon Cheney suggested this quality when he described the "new drama" at the turn of the century as "the art of soul crisis."<sup>31</sup> Even Daniel Frohman, a practical day-to-day producer recognized that "the subtle quality of a play is the essence embodied in the feeling it produces."<sup>32</sup> There is little need to labor the point. Emotion is the basis of the drama, even though emotion is often lost sight of outside the theatre. "Art," Susanne

<sup>30</sup>Susanne Langer, Feeling and Form (New York, 1953), p. 315.

<sup>31</sup>Sheldon Cheney, The New Movement in the Theatre (New York, 1914), p. 259.

<sup>32</sup>Frohman, Memories, p. 143.



Langer writes, "is the creation of forms symbolic of human feeling."<sup>33</sup> Robert Corrigan moves along the same lines in a recent essay: "Most serious contemporary playwrights are dramatizing a condition, and therefore they need a dramatic form which, as Ionesco put it, 'progressed not through a predetermined subject and plot, but through an increasingly intense and revealing series of emotional states.'"<sup>34</sup>

From the critic's point of view, the primacy of emotion raises the problem of the objectification of the subjective emotional responses: "The initial data for determining the effect of a play, then, are our own personal impressions, stripped as far as possible of irrelevances; and it is upon them that our critical structure must always be built. These impressions are strongly emotional, and it is extremely difficult to apprehend our emotions intellectually."<sup>35</sup> From the director's point of view the primacy of emotion raises the problem of understanding the emotional effect the playwright wants the audience to apprehend. Alexander Dean, in what was for years a standard college directing text, wrote of the

<sup>33</sup>Langer, Feeling, p. 40.

<sup>34</sup>Robert Corrigan, The Modern Theatre (New York, 1964), p. xvii.

<sup>35</sup>Alan Thompson, The Anatomy of Drama (Berkeley, 1942), p. 48.

emotional quality in art, "The artist or creator must first have had within himself the highly developed gift of being deeply moved emotionally and intellectually by some object in life. . . . Having the greatness to be moved, the artist then has in turn to move us. The purpose of art, therefore, is to stir us emotionally and intellectually in the same manner in which the artist was moved when he received his inspiration to create."<sup>36</sup>

Whatever the problems raised by an emotion-based approach to drama, the approach leads to dramatic art. Stark Young, a man of the theatre and a man of sound literary judgment, wrote, "The history of any art is a history of man's states of mind and spirit, not of the objective world around him. To be ignorant of that is to be ignorant of the theater as an art, and leads to a mere muddle of resemblances and recognitions, a confusion between life and the theater."<sup>37</sup>

The idea of the primacy of emotion in the drama is, of course, nothing new. William Arrowsmith, the classical scholar, complains of violation of the emotional experience of the Greek drama: "Up to now the most conspicuous failure of both the traditional and the new critics in respect to Greek tragedy has been the failure to realize

<sup>36</sup>Alexander Dean, Fundamentals of Play Directing (New York, 1946), p. 4.

<sup>37</sup>Young, The Theater, p. 26.

turbulence: turbulence of experience, turbulence of morality in the process of getting made, and the turbulence of ideas under dramatic test."<sup>38</sup> But even if the concept is not new, the nineteenth century theatre--blinded by tears of emotionalism--was too often unable to perceive essential emotional form. But it is unfair to suggest that everyone was blind. One critic, for instance, wrote of the art of Laura Keene, a famous actress, "The heart writes for the brain; as the mimic scene goes on, a sort of illegible shorthand creates the impression to which the drama of the night is entitled."<sup>39</sup> The critic seems to be aware of an emotional base under the drama, not of surface emotionalism which often passed for emotion. William Gillette approached acting as if he were recreating an emotional experience in each performance. "Each successive audience . . . must feel--not think or reason about, but feel--that it is witnessing, not one of a thousand weary repetitions, but a Life Episode that is being lived just across the magic barrier of the footlights. That is to say, the Whole must have that indescribable Life-Spirit."<sup>40</sup>

<sup>38</sup>William Arrowsmith, "The Criticism of Greek Tragedy," Tulane Drama Review, III (March, 1959), p. 34.

<sup>39</sup>John Creahan, Life of Laura Keene (Philadelphia: Rogers Publishing Company, 1897), p. 39.

<sup>40</sup>Gillette, "Illusion of the First Time," p. 133.

George Pierce Baker taught his playwriting class at Harvard that from emotions to emotions is the formula for any good play: "The greatest drama . . . uses action much less for its own sake than to reveal mental stages which are to rouse sympathy or repulsion in the audience."<sup>41</sup> William Archer stated in his treatise on playwriting, "The dramatic quality of an incident is proportionate to the variety and intensity of the emotions involved in it."<sup>42</sup>

Critics, playwrights, actors, all agree that emotion is central. The list of citations could go on, but it remains only to cite Herne's theory:

The three real essentials of a good play were these. First, it must be true and must deal in a real way with some phase of life; second, it must be expressed in the highest form of art; third, it must be vitalized by having that which moves the emotional nature--must have such human interest as it appeals at once to the heart and the imagination of the audience. Mr. Zangwill [the playwright] said that a play might lack the first two, but if strong in the third essential it might become a success, though it could not be called a great play. That was the case with my "Hearts of Oak." It was as true as I knew how to make it when I wrote it, and it was expressed in as good art form as I then knew. Of course, I see now that it was crude and often silly; but it did possess the third essential. It had real human interest--that vital something

<sup>41</sup>George Pierce Baker, Dramatic Technique (Boston, 1919), p. 36.

<sup>42</sup>William Archer, Playmaking, p. 97.

which held the people and made a strong impression.<sup>43</sup>

Such direct emotional experience of truth, Alan Downer believes, is "the characteristic of the most vigorous American drama after nearly two centuries of development."<sup>44</sup>

When emotion and appeal to the heart become the center of a discussion of the dramatic art, obvious dangers appear. Too much emphasis can, and usually did in nineteenth century drama, "bring forth an empty dramatic shell that is without the informing light of the true artist's conception, and is unredeemed by any literary distinction, but which tricks the emotions into a momentary response."<sup>45</sup> When Alexander Woolcott asked Mrs. Fiske whether emotion was the essential thing, she replied, "I am afraid of the word. It has been depreciated by 'emotionalism,' whatever that may mean."<sup>46</sup> John Gassner is opposed to too much cant about the importance of emotion in the drama. He reminds us that "it was emotionalism that made the pre-Ibsen

<sup>43</sup>James A. Herne, "The Present Outlook for the American Drama," The Coming Age, I (March, 1899), p. 254.

<sup>44</sup>Alan S. Downer, American Drama (New York, 1960), p. 12.

<sup>45</sup>Sheldon Cheney, The New Movement, p. 261.

<sup>46</sup>Alexander Woolcott, Mrs. Fiske: Her Views on Actors, Acting and the Problems of Production (New York, 1917), pp. 158-159.



nineteenth century stage so abysmally bad."<sup>47</sup> Nevertheless, emotion is the basis of dramatic form; one needs only to keep a balance, recalling that mere emotionalism is no more drama than pointless slaughter on the highway is tragedy, though both emotionalism and carnage may be elevated to drama when they are given artistic form.

Shying away from emotion, one can of course go too far the other way, into a logical scientific approach to art. But logic, as one critic observes, "won't work (unless we mean the illogical nature of human life, logically presented). Logic in any sense is a test of reason, and to make rationality the touchstone by which to judge works which succeed only by an appeal to the emotions is to fall into the error of neo-classic criticism."<sup>48</sup> Usual schooling in fact and logic is the education of thought; artistic training is the education of feeling. The logical approach is the approach of rhetoric, discursive reason, which is, as Langer writes, another thing altogether from art: "Good discourse seeks above all to be transparent, not as a symbol of feeling, but as a vehicle of sense; the artistic form is strictly bound to the literal function. That is why such writing is not poetry; the writer is not

<sup>47</sup>John Gassner, The Theatre in Our Times (New York, 1954), p. 465.

<sup>48</sup>Alan R. Thompson, "Melodrama and Tragedy," PMLA, XLIII (1928), p. 825.

free to create whatever semblance of intellectual or imaginative experience his motif, a discursive thought, puts in the reach of his imagination, but is committed to the envisagement of one living experience--the intellectual experience of following this discourse."<sup>49</sup>

Art cannot be confused with an exercise in criticism. "The natural result of the confusion between discourse and creation," Susanne Langer writes, "is parallel confusion between actual and virtual experiences. The problem of 'art and life,' which is of secondary importance for the other arts, becomes a central issue in literary criticism. . . . It promises well to throw the whole philosophy of art into a welter of morals and politics, religion and modern psychiatry."<sup>50</sup> The confusion may exist in academic study of literature: "The reason why literature is a standard academic pursuit lies in the very fact that one can treat it as something else than art. Since its normal material is language, and language is, after all, the medium of discourse, it is always possible to look at a literary work as an assertion of facts and opinions, that is, as a piece of discursive symbolism functioning in the usual communicative way. . . . The essential task of criticism seems to be to determine what the special mode

<sup>49</sup>Langer, Feeling, p. 303.

<sup>50</sup>Langer, Feeling, pp. 234-235.

of expression is, and how serviceable it is for saying what the author wants to say."<sup>51</sup>

Part of the critic's task is to make some order out of the emotional stages in the work of art, in spite of the possibility that, considering the emotional individuality of each critic, critical anarchy may result. Alan Thompson writes: "Obviously such judgments differ from scientific or legal judgments since their initial data are matters not of fact but of feeling; and as everyone's feeling is and must be peculiar to himself . . . it follows that no aesthetic judgment can ever be final. It is always limited by the temperamental peculiarities of the individual."<sup>52</sup> William Archer seems to ask each man to respond with his inner self and say, "That is true. That is real."<sup>53</sup>

In the face of such possible critical anarchy, the dramatist's task is to select symbols--actions and words--that are most likely to objectify the specific emotional state he wants to convey to his audience. Langer's broad definition of a symbol, "any device whereby we are enabled to make an abstraction, including an abstraction of

<sup>51</sup>Langer, Feeling, p. 208.

<sup>52</sup>Thompson, The Anatomy of Drama, p. 49.

<sup>53</sup>William Archer, About the Theatre (London, 1886), pp. 329-341.

emotion,"<sup>54</sup> serves well enough in this discussion. The symbol chosen need not be limited to a narrow section of life. Yet if he is to show the spiritual being, the dramatist chooses recognizable words and actions. As Chekhov said, and did in his plays, the only way to make the hero's state of mind clear is from his actions; it cannot be described discursively.<sup>55</sup> Herne practiced what he called "the important principle of selection" in his own work.<sup>56</sup> Especially in his later plays almost every action and every word serves as a symbol, an abstraction, of a state of mind, created for the apprehension of the audience.

The dramatist's script, then, with its carefully chosen symbols of emotion is the primary interest of the student. What is added in production must enhance, but it should not replace, the original symbolic intent of the artist. Productions in the theatre have not always paid close attention to the script; in fact, the literary student may find the script barely recognizable amid the

<sup>54</sup>Langer, Feeling, p. xi.

<sup>55</sup>Anton Chekhov, Letters on the Short Story, the Drama and Other Literary Topics, ed. Louis S. Friedland (New York, 1924), pp. 70-71.

<sup>56</sup>James A. Herne, "Art for Truth's Sake in the Drama," Arena, XVII (February, 1897), reprinted in Alan S. Downer, American Drama and Its Critics (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1965), p. 2.

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color and movement and light. Eric Bentley is the most outspoken of our contemporary critics in condemning the practices of a theatre that violates the author's script. In fact, he sees the present unhappy state of the theatre as a result of a dichotomy of the theatre and the drama.<sup>57</sup> As one example of the low estimation the theatre holds for the playwright's symbolic piece, he describes a performance of Rosmersholm at the Yale Drama School: "I heard the students comment on everything except Ibsen's lines and Ibsen's meaning. The young men and women could lecture you on lighting, costumes, décor, action, direction, but it seemed not to matter what was being lit, costumed, decorated, acted, and directed."<sup>58</sup> Stark Young, whom Bentley admires, found the same situation in the Belasco-dominated theatre: "You rarely, if ever, find Mr. Belasco going to the bottom of a scene--much less a play--to discover what is its essential shape and meaning. . . . He does not create any line, any movement or business, that carries the essential idea of the scene into what may be visual truth."<sup>59</sup>

The emotional effects in drama are not the instant

<sup>57</sup>Eric Bentley, The Playwright as Thinker (New York: Meridian Books, 1957), p. 242.

<sup>58</sup>Bentley, The Playwright as Thinker, p. 243.

<sup>59</sup>Stark Young, "Belascosity," New Republic, XXXVII (December, 1923), p. 95.

tears and laughter of theatrical gimmickry; they are the product of the playwright's symbolic creation of states of mind within the total fabric of his play.

Actually, talking about the symbols that present dialogue and action we are talking about the content of the play, content which is, as Henry James wrote, fused with the aesthetic form,<sup>60</sup> or, as Stark Young believes, implied in its form and "not expressed until in its own kind there is created a form for it."<sup>61</sup> For Susanne Langer, the content of the form is its import, or meaning: "The meaning (or to speak more accurately of a nondiscursive symbol, the vital import) is the content of the symbolic form, given with it, as it were, to perception."<sup>62</sup> Thus, every bit of subject matter must be used for artistic effect, not to be debated but to be presented as virtual experience.<sup>63</sup> Any debate or discourse outside of the emotional form is undramatic. Mary McCarthy has observed how O'Neill found, in the later plays, that the accumulated minutiae of action and dialogue become the

<sup>60</sup>David William Thompson, "William Dean Howells and Henry James: The Rise of Realism in American Drama and Theatre," unpubl. diss. (Cornell, 1947), p. 232. Thompson reaches this conclusion after a detailed study of James's criticism.

<sup>61</sup>Young, The Theater, p. 71.

<sup>62</sup>Langer, Feeling, p. 52.

<sup>63</sup>Langer, Feeling, p. 256.

meaning of the play: "There was no truth or meaning beyond the event itself; anything more (or less) would be a lie."<sup>64</sup>

The form, then, of drama is an accumulated series of symbols (the content) intended to express an emotional state to an audience. It does not capture real life as a camera captures surface reality; it creates a real life of emotion and spirit. The camera technique on the stage--real people, real life, real death--gives only a delusion of reality; the drama gives an illusion of reality. "The dramatic is not a copy but an imitation. It is intent upon effect; and that Coleridge rightly says, is illusion, not delusion," writes E. E. Stoll.<sup>65</sup> The drama, Susanne Langer explains, is an illusion of experience, which "always creates the semblance of mental process--that is, of living thought, awareness of events and action, memory, reflection, etc."<sup>66</sup>

The audience is asked to be aware of the illusion which is placed before it, not as a piece of feeling which invites audience participation in the impression the work makes on them, but as an expression of emotional states,

<sup>64</sup>Mary McCarthy, Mary McCarthy's Theatre Chronicles, 1937-1962 (New York, 1963), p. 224.

<sup>65</sup>E. E. Stoll, "Literature and Life Again," PMLA, XLVII (1932), p. 297.

<sup>66</sup>Langer, Feeling, p. 245.

created by the playwright. This distinction between expression and impression, between form and feeling, between significance and sensation is essential in an approach to the drama. Impression takes the point of view of the actor in front of an audience; expression the point of view of the creative process.<sup>67</sup> It is this distinction, it seems, that Ibsen had in mind when he wrote, "The Wild Duck just like all my other plays is arranged from the point of view of the audience and not from that of the actor. I arrange everything as I visualize it while writing it down."<sup>68</sup> In other words, he was concerned with what his work was expressing to the audience, not with what the actor could impress upon the audience. The approach is directly in opposition to Belasco's method of writing from the stage.

The audience participation drama of impression--the eye-watering stuff of mass entertainment--is only delusion, not illusion. To feel sorry for the broken Lear standing alone, his daughter dead in his arms, is to reduce him to the level of the old man next door whose daughter has just been the victim of a hit-and-run driver. There is, of course, an emotional response to that scene in King Lear,

<sup>67</sup>Langer, Feeling, p. 14.

<sup>68</sup>Henrik Ibsen, Ibsen: Letters and Speeches, ed. Evert Sprinchorn (New York: Hill and Wang, 1964), p. 243. Letter dated November 2, 1884, to August Lindberg, the director.

but the emotion expressed is of another order altogether.

Perhaps another example will clarify. Romeo and Juliet is taught by some high school teachers because it is, after all, about some mixed-up adolescents who run afoul of the unyielding conventions of the adult world, a chaotic world they did not make. To ask for identification is to ask students to participate, to say, "They're just like us." When Romeo and Juliet was updated for Broadway as West Side Story, Bernstein wrote a song for the lovers called, "There's a Place for Us," a direct appeal to the young to respond emotionally to their own plight in a world made by adults which leaves little desirable space for them. To go back to the original play, unperverted by adolescent psychology or the Broadway stage, is to find a very different emotional response, not participation, not "isn't it too bad things are this way," but an emotional perception which exists purely in the form of the work; it has no substance in the world outside of it.

"Of all the questions relating to the drama," Henry Arthur Jones wrote, "there is none so little comprehended, so much misunderstood, even amongst the most constant playgoers . . . as this question of 'being true to life' on the stage."<sup>69</sup> Langer has said, "The whole conception

<sup>69</sup>Henry Arthur Jones, Renascence of the English Drama (London, 1895), p. 235.

of theatre as delusion is closely linked with the belief that the audience should be made to share the emotions of the protagonists."<sup>70</sup> Delusion denies that drama is art.

Realistic objects, truth to life, can reach the level of significant form, as we shall see later, "so long as they are set free from their normal embodiment in real things so that they may be recognized in their own right, and freely conceived and composed in the interest of the artist's ultimate aim--significance."<sup>71</sup> The danger, though, is in being satisfied with the surface of life, the photograph of the real pump or the aroma of a real turkey being eaten by real Down East people.

Does this illusion have any specific characteristic that distinguishes it from other illusions which are art? Miss Langer believes it does. "Storytelling, narration, is something quite different from story-enactment in a theater. Many first-rate story-tellers cannot make a play. . . . They project a history in retrospect."<sup>72</sup> Literature, other than drama, is in the past, completed. "Literature projects the image of life in the mode of virtual memory; language is its essential material; the sound and meaning of words, their familiar or unusual use

<sup>70</sup>Langer, Feeling, p. 318.

<sup>71</sup>Langer, Feeling, p. 50.

<sup>72</sup>Langer, Feeling, p. 321.



and order, even their presentation on the printed page, create the illusion of life as a realm of events--completed, lived, as words formulate them--events that compose a Past."<sup>73</sup>

But the drama is not in the past, not in memory (except drama on the movie screen which, too, is in the mode of memory, the memory of a dream<sup>74</sup>); nor is it exactly in a present moment. It presents "the poetic illusion in a different light: not finished realities, or 'events,' but immediate, visible responses of human beings, make its semblance of life. Its basic abstraction is the act, which springs from the past, but is directed toward the future, and is always great with things to come."<sup>75</sup>

It is this constant state of becoming--the sense of the future--that distinguishes the drama and creates the particular sense of tension that is the dramatic experience. As soon as the lights come up on a bare stage, there is already the tension between what is there and the expectancy of what will happen the next moment. It is this sort of tension DeQuincy is talking about in his famous essay on the Porter in Macbeth. While we listen to the Porter's drunken words, we are at the same time aware

<sup>73</sup>Langer, Feeling, p. 306.

<sup>74</sup>Langer, Feeling, pp. 411-415.

<sup>75</sup>Langer, Feeling, p. 306.

of what will happen next, what will happen inside the castle when he finally does get the gate open.

"This tension between past and future, the theatrical 'present moment,' is what gives to acts, situations, and even such constituent elements as gestures and attitudes and tones, the peculiar intensity known as 'dramatic quality.'" <sup>76</sup> This present filled with its own future, Langer calls "form in suspense," a whole, indivisible piece of virtual history. <sup>77</sup> Robert Corrigan defines dramatic action in the same terms: "Dramatic action is historical in the sense that the perpetual present of each moment on the stage is created out of past events and is directed toward a definite, if yet unknown, future." <sup>78</sup>

Such then is the nature of the symbolic action we call dramatic. What structure does that action take? Structure can be the logical cause and effect of the well-made play, or it might be an intensified feeling that Archer calls the passion, the "rhythmic aspect" of the drama, a logic of emotion. <sup>79</sup>

In any case, the structure is something the artist makes as an expressive element in his composition, without

<sup>76</sup>Langer, Feeling, p. 308.

<sup>77</sup>Langer, Feeling, p. 310.

<sup>78</sup>Corrigan, The Modern Theatre, p. xiii.

<sup>79</sup>Archer, The Old Drama and the New, p. 4.

which there is no art. Stark Young writes, "There is one point we recognize too little about all dramas, whether tragedy, comedy, farce or melodrama. That is the truth of structure, by which I mean the degree to which the structure of a drama is part of its idea, as the height of a table is a part of its truth. . . . In a drama there is a certain final expression that lies in the sheer order of its development, in its proportions, in the emphasis of its parts."<sup>80</sup> For the student of literature this apprehension of order is a first concern. As Brander Matthews, among others, has observed, the real literary merit of a play resides in a solid structure.<sup>81</sup>

Logic of plot can be a surface thing as in the Scribe-Sardou school of intrigue of the nineteenth century drama. However, by the end of the century, as Howells observed, plays were no longer prisoners of tight plotting in that tradition; something new was emerging: "We believe that the American Drama, like the American novel, will be more and more a series of sketches, of anecdotes, of suggestions, with less and less allegiance to any hard and fast intrigue."<sup>82</sup> William Archer too saw new structure developing, especially in the looser form of Herne's

<sup>80</sup>Young, The Theater, p. 63.

<sup>81</sup>Matthews, A Study of the Drama, p. 20.

<sup>82</sup>William Dean Howells, "Editor's Study," Harper's Magazine, LXXIX (July, 1889), p. 315.



contemporary, Maeterlinck, who played down the element of crisis in the play. Maeterlinck's structure, Archer felt, was more theory than practice, for in the plays themselves Archer found that the Belgian playwright "constantly deals with crisis and often with violent and startling ones."<sup>83</sup>

What happened to structure when a playwright became more interested in states of mind than in clever intrigue? The form, as Howells predicted, was likely to become episodic, impressionistic, or as Robert Corrigan calls it, epiphanic: "They have developed a form (Chekhov was the first to use it fully) which might be called--to use the terminology of the new criticism of poetry--contextual or concentric. The structure of these plays, then, is epiphanic; its purpose is to reveal--literally 'to show forth'--the inner lives of the characters. . . . In these new plays a single situation has been stretched to take the place of plot. This inflation of the situation into the source of the dramatic action so that it replaces the plot is the vital secret of the dramaturgy of the new theatre."<sup>84</sup> Susanne Langer describes the structure thus:

That rhythm is the "commanding form" of the play; it springs from the poet's original conception of the "fabel," and dictates the major division of the work, the light or heavy style of its presentation, the intensity of the highest feeling and

<sup>83</sup>Archer, Playmaking, p. 47.

<sup>84</sup>Corrigan, The Modern Theatre, p. xviii.

most violent act, the great or small number of characters, and the degrees of their development. The total action is a cumulative form; and because it is constructed by a rhythmic treatment of its elements, it appears to grow from its beginnings. That is the playwright's creation of "organic form."<sup>85</sup>

This sort of structure describes Herne's practice in the later plays, aptly if not completely. Of Sag Harbor, for instance, one reviewer commented upon the apparent lack of plot and "stretches that drag a little."<sup>86</sup> In Griffith Davenport, in one critic's opinion, "he carried the idea of a chain of episodes, almost to the point of proving his theory."<sup>87</sup> Herbert Edwards finds the movement of Shore Acres to be much like a symphony.<sup>88</sup> Herne's friend, the artist J. J. Enneking, wrote, "Mr. Herne, although an avowed realist, a grubber for unadulterated truth, and a stickler for its objective representation, was impressionistically inclined."<sup>89</sup>

Episodic, apparently formless plays were nothing new

<sup>85</sup>Langer, Feeling, p. 356.

<sup>86</sup>Chicago Evening Post, March 21, 1900.

<sup>87</sup>Edwin Krows, Playwriting for Profit (New York, 1928), p. 35.

<sup>88</sup>Herbert Edwards and Julie A. Herne, James A. Herne: Rise of Realism in American Drama (Orono, Maine: University of Maine, 1964), p. 97.

<sup>89</sup>Hamlin Garland, J. J. Enneking, and B. O. Flower, "James A. Herne: Actor, Dramatist, and Man," Arena, XXVI (September, 1901), p. 285.





in drama, as Brander Matthews demonstrates.<sup>90</sup> Aristotle disapproved of them; so, possibly, they existed even then. They only seemed new at the end of a nineteenth century that had grown up on the tightly plotted thrill-a-minute theatre.

A structure and form like this are most often called poetic--the description is of the quality of the play as a whole; the term has nothing to do with diction. The diction, whether poetry or the baldest prose, is only a smaller element assimilated into the larger art, much as the composer assimilates (and annihilates) a poem when he makes a song. The discussion over poetry of words in the drama may continue, seems in fact never likely to end, but poetry in that sense falls to unimportance as the play creates a form, which has been called a poetry of the theatre.<sup>91</sup>

Susanne Langer considers the drama a poetic art "because it creates the primary illusion of all poetry--virtual history. Its substance is an image of human life--ends, means, gains and losses, fulfillment and decline and death. It is a fabric of illusory experience, and that is the essential product of poesis. But drama is

<sup>90</sup>Brander Matthews, Rip Van Winkle Goes to the Play (New York, 1926), p. 56.

<sup>91</sup>Francis Fergusson, The Idea of a Theater (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday Anchor Books, 1955).

not merely a distinct literary form; it is a special poetic mode."<sup>92</sup> In the same sense, Hugh Davies insisted that the dramatist is a poet simply by his "imaginative ordering of experience," creating his own myth.<sup>93</sup> Or as Cheney saw it, "The poetry in a play can be measured only by the breadth and delicacy of the dramatist's vision."<sup>94</sup>

Saroyan's comment that the playwright's art is an "operation of the imagination in the realm of the normal, having to do with spirit, rhythm"<sup>95</sup> specifies the area in which this poetic experience is ordered, the spirit. And Stark Young's observation that the poetry is a force of life seeking expression, seeking form, also suggests the inner spiritual nature of a drama.<sup>96</sup> Maeterlinck believed that the poetry of a play is a secondary dialogue of the soul underlying the actual words, "an intangible and unceasing striving of the soul towards its own beauty and truth."<sup>97</sup>

<sup>92</sup>Langer, Feeling, p. 306.

<sup>93</sup>Hugh Sykes Davies, Realism in the Drama (London, 1934), p. 58.

<sup>94</sup>Cheney, The New Movement, p. 271.

<sup>95</sup>William Saroyan, "Coming Reality: Preface to The Time of Your Life," Theater Arts, XXIII (December, 1939), p. 875.

<sup>96</sup>Young, The Theater, p. 82.

<sup>97</sup>Maurice Maeterlinck, "The Tragical in Daily Life," in Barrett H. Clark, European Theories of the Drama, rev. ed. (New York, 1947), p. 413.

In this created rhythm of spiritual life, the virtual history tracing the playwright's vision, lies the poetic. Herne must have felt something of the kind when he said of the controversial ending of Shore Acres, "And so you find in 'Shore Acres' an unconventional ending, and one which it seems to my poor judgement has the merit of poetic suggestion, if nothing more."<sup>98</sup>

Francis Fergusson remarks the difficulty of precisely defining this poetic inner spiritual action (the emotional form)--especially in distinguishing it precisely from the ordering of events that make up the surface plot--but he finds it not unlike the Aristotelian "imitation of an action," which Aristotle clearly means to be something other than plot.<sup>99</sup> This kind of action, Fergusson believes, is defined practically, if not completely, in the Moscow Art Theatre practice of stating the action in an infinitive phrase, e.g., in Oedipus the action might be defined as "to find the culprit," a definition that encompasses both the surface action of the play and the spiritual emotional action.<sup>100</sup> The distinction, as Fergusson's study indicates, is made clear more effectively through definition. In Herne's case, the action of Shore Acres

<sup>98</sup>Lewis G. Strang, Famous Actors of the Day (Boston, 1899), p. 35.

<sup>99</sup>Fergusson, The Idea of a Theater, pp. 242-244.

<sup>100</sup>Fergusson, The Idea of a Theater, p. 244.

might be defined as an attempt to find some sort of humane order in a world disrupted by modern commerce and science, but the plot of the play is clearly a hoary melodrama. In a curtain speech at the Chicago opening of Sag Harbor, Herne disclaimed any originality for his story (i.e., plot). "But," as a reviewer wrote, "what Mr. Herne justly claims is originality of methods," creating "what a painter would call composition."<sup>101</sup> Sag Harbor creates its own reality of virtual history, art, form.

Again, the concept of inner action, or the real action, of the play is nothing new. Good plays of any age and place have it. But to those searching for distinctions for the modern drama, it often seemed new, if only because it had so little place in the nineteenth century drama. Sheldon Cheney, a vocal apostle of the "new movement," wrote, "The new art of the theatre differs from the old in depicting the inner spiritual forces that are dramatic, rather than the chance happenings that are merely theatrically effective."<sup>102</sup> Robert Corrigan believes, "It is certainly clear that the theatre's general pattern of development during this time [at the turn of the century] can best be described as a gradual but steady shift away from universal philosophical and social concerns

<sup>101</sup>Chicago Journal, March 20, 1900.

<sup>102</sup>Cheney, The New Movement, p. 35.

toward the crises and conflicts of men's inner and private life."<sup>103</sup> Another critic writes that the new interest was "in the inner crisis worked out in the outer clash."<sup>104</sup> When the interest remained only in the outer clash, good drama did not result in the plays produced at the end of the century, as Walter P. Eaton, a Herne admirer, has demonstrated.<sup>105</sup>

At the risk of overstating the point, we can cite any number of others--critics, historians, actors, playwrights, directors--who operate from the assumption that this inner drama is the essence of the form of modern drama. The 1920's critic, Storm Jameson wrote, "From the external action of a drama concerned with 'facts of life' it passes to the spiritual progress of human beings."<sup>106</sup> Robert Edmond Jones, the designer and director, wrote of "the exploration of man's inner life, in the unexpressed and hitherto inexpressible depths of the self."<sup>107</sup> John Mason Brown, the critic, felt that realism must stand more than

<sup>103</sup>Corrigan, The Modern Theatre, p. ix.

<sup>104</sup>Elizabeth Woodbridge Morris, Drama: Its Law and Its Technique (New York, 1898), p. 136.

<sup>105</sup>Walter Prichard Eaton, The American Stage of Today (Boston, 1908), p. 136.

<sup>106</sup>Storm Jameson, Modern Drama in Europe (New York, 1920), p. 70.

<sup>107</sup>Robert Edmund Jones, The Dramatic Imagination (New York, 1941), p. 15.

a test of outward truth; it must be spiritual truth behind the surface veneer.<sup>108</sup> Brown found this quality, interestingly, in the work of Herne's daughter Chrystal in Craig's Wife.<sup>109</sup> John Gassner sees modern drama as escaping surface realism into "a realism of mind and spirit that penetrates into the heart of some matter."<sup>110</sup>

Sculley Bradley writes in The Literary History of the United States, "In the first years of the new century, the dramas which best stand the test of time are concerned with the mysteries of the human mind and spirit."<sup>111</sup>

(Herne's plays, incidentally, were performed regularly in the first years of the century, much as a popular Broadway show continues on the road and in revival for several years today.) Mrs. Fiske, one of the great actresses of the period, tried to express this inner quality when she played Ibsen: "Great acting, of course, is a thing of the spirit; in its best estate a conveyance of certain abstract spiritual qualities, with the person of the actor as medium."<sup>112</sup> And finally, Montrose Moses writes of

<sup>108</sup>John Mason Brown, "Ramifications of Realism," Theater Arts, IX (1925), p. 779.

<sup>109</sup>Brown, "Ramifications of Realism," p. 780.

<sup>110</sup>John Gassner, "The Playwright Is Not a Camera," p. 37.

<sup>111</sup>Literary History of the United States, 3rd ed. rev. (New York, 1963), p. 1015.

<sup>112</sup>Woollicott, Mrs. Fiske, p. 76.

Herne's work, "He became interested, as Maeterlinck would say, in conditions of soul."<sup>113</sup>

This form, this virtual history of states of mind is complete in itself and timeless as a Grecian urn. Tennessee Williams has written, "In a play time is arrested in the sense of being confined. By a sort of legerdermain, events are made to remain events, rather than being reduced so quickly to mere occurrences. The audience can sit back in a comforting dusk to watch a world which is flooded with light and in which emotion and action have a dimension and dignity that they would likewise have in real existence, if only the shattering intrusions of time could be locked out."<sup>114</sup> "How can a play become old," Pirandello conjectured, "if it is represented in action, in perfect, incorruptible form? Only the time has come in which we have discovered it 'created,' in which all the reasons of its being are seen to consist in the necessity of its being what it is; and no longer new, never old, not arbitrary, or obscure, or imprecise, or unfinished, but finally necessary in every way: that,

<sup>113</sup>Montrose J. Moses, "The Drama 1860-1918," Chapter XVIII in The Cambridge History of American Literature, Vol. III (New York, 1947), p. 285.

<sup>114</sup>Tennessee Williams, "The Timeless World of a Play," introduction to The Rose Tattoo (New York, 1951), pp. viii-ix.



and that alone, which it had to be."<sup>115</sup>

This expressive organic form is violated when elements are added for other values--to be photographic, to impose tragedy, to be melodramatically exciting. In many of the plays at the turn of the century--especially those of Klien, Walker, Broadhurst, and Belasco--Richard Burton found that the playwrights were not imitating action but copying something they vaguely called life and its problems, something which could be the basis for discursive presentation.<sup>116</sup> The problems of real life cannot be resolved in a play, as Pirandello has shown dramatically in Six Characters in Search of an Author, where the problems in a work of art refuse to be reduced to the problems of daily living. He has said,

Their irreducibility consists in their expression as representation. Think of Hamlet: to be or not to be. Take this problem from Hamlet's mouth, empty it of Hamlet's passion, conceptualize it in intellectual terms, and in the light of criticism you may play with it as long as you like. But leave it there on Hamlet's lips a living expression, an active representation of the torment of that life, and the problem of being or not being will never be resolved in eternity. . . . And these problems are in that form, and will always be, for everyone, problems of life, thus, they live through the form, through the expression. They

<sup>115</sup>Luigi Pirandello, "New Theaters for Old," in Haskell M. Block and Herman Salinger, The Creative Vision (New York, 1960), p. 123.

<sup>116</sup>Richard Burton, The New American Drama (New York, 1913), p. 203.

are able to live in this way because their expression is finished, completed.<sup>117</sup>

Pirandello concludes, "In Art what was created new remains new forever."<sup>118</sup>

Not art for art's sake, but as Herne put it, art for truth's sake, a truth of organic form. Herne described the shaping of this form during the composition of Shore Acres. He worked on the script, first called The Hawthornes, during a vacation trip to Maine, the setting of the play:

What an exalted idea of God one gets down in that old pine state! One must recognize the sublimity which constantly manifests itself there. . . . In such a spot a man must realize, if he never realized it before, that he and this planet are one, a part of the universal whole. Under the influence of such spiritual surroundings The Hawthornes struggled to adapt itself to a new environment. It sloughed off its old skin and took on new form and color. Its stage people began by degrees to assume the character and affect the speech of the typical men and women of Maine, imbued with all the spirituality and intensity of coexistent life. Stage traditions vanished. The Hawthornes lost its identity and emerged a survival of the fittest, and Mrs. Herne called it Shore Acres. I have been autobiographical because I wanted to show what a persistent force truth is, and how it compels the unconscious medium to express it. I did not put myself to the task of writing Shore Acres as it now stands; it grew, and I grew with it; and while I did not realize all its spirituality until its stage presentation set that spirituality free, still

<sup>117</sup>Pirandello, "New Theaters for Old," p. 122.

<sup>118</sup>Pirandello, "New Theaters for Old," p. 129.

it must have had possession of me while writing,  
or I could not so have written.<sup>119</sup>

The experience illustrates what Herne meant when he said,  
"Art is a personal expression of life. The finer the form  
and color and the larger the truth, the higher the art."<sup>120</sup>

To return again to the literary student who reads a  
script in search of form: his task is analogous to the  
task of a musician reading a score. The musician must  
have an inward hearing of the work, an imagined sense ex-  
perience which turns the score into music--a difficult  
task.<sup>121</sup> The student of drama reads a script as an imag-  
ined sense experience, not as discursive matter. He  
begins with the work in toto, aware, as Langer says, that  
"the understanding of a work of art begins with the intu-  
ition of the whole presented feeling. Contemplation then  
gradually reveals the complexities of the piece, and of  
its import."<sup>122</sup>

In a theatrical production of the work, a student may  
find something quite other than his own imagined sense  
experience; he may in fact see something quite unlike the  
playwright's imagined experience, which raises again the  
vexing problem of reading a play as opposed to seeing it

<sup>119</sup>Herne, "Art for Truth's Sake," pp. 7-8.

<sup>120</sup>Herne, "Art for Truth's Sake," p. 8.

<sup>121</sup>Langer, Feeling, p. 137.

<sup>122</sup>Langer, Feeling, p. 379.

in the theatre. Like all students of the drama, Bentley feels a strong watchdog interest in what happens to a script in the theatre:

The defenders of the arts of the theatre are infected by the commodities of the theatre once they forget that all the arts of the theatre are means to one end: the correct presentation of a poem. It goes without saying that a dramatic poem is a particular kind of poem: that the stage poet must visualize stage action in all its intricacy; and that there is such a thing as undramatic poetry, as the theatricalists always remind us; I am reminding them--since they end by throwing out poetry altogether--that there is also dramatic poetry. Now poetry which is dramatic, being shaped to the human throat, and directed at the human heart and head, cannot but be readable. What are the great theatrical pieces that make boring reading? Is Oklahoma! an instance? If so, it is comforting to know that the plays of Shakespeare, Congreve, Moliere, Ibsen, and Shaw are not. Even O'Neill, prince of melodramatists, is highly readable.<sup>123</sup>

When the student of literature reads a play he tries to apprehend the single impression, the whole not the fragments. Even when he reads a play that may be considered only a theatrical curiosity of the nineties, as Herne's plays have been considered, he reads first for that single impression and only secondarily for signs of naturalism or realism or stage techniques and the like. Herne's reviewers did perceive, sometimes hazily, a larger form struggling to complete itself in his work. Managers, for instance, feared that he was getting too "arty" in his

<sup>123</sup>Bentley, Playwright as Thinker, p. 242.

plays.<sup>124</sup> Exactly what they meant by "arty" is unclear, but their attitude is probably reflected in this review which appeared when Shore Acres opened: "Those who know Mr. Herne need not be informed that there is a large vein of the poetic genius running through his fibre. He dislikes to be tied down and bound by the conventionalities of the past in his dramatic work, and he prefers to produce an effect that will appeal to the intelligence and sentiment of his audience, rather than to arrive at his conclusions in the old stereotyped fashion."<sup>125</sup> A reviewer of a revival of Shore Acres in 1910 recognized that it belonged to a dying race of plays, but "it lives because it is larger than its defects."<sup>126</sup> A reviewer of the original production of Sag Harbor was puzzled by the form: "As a coherent series of character sketches the thing is true, and has the pungency and zest of truth. But Sag Harbor is not merely a series of character sketches, it is also a play; and as a play . . . it fairly makes you groan."<sup>127</sup> The reviewer responded to the truth of the sketches (the form?) but could not quite make them

<sup>124</sup>Julie A. Herne, "Biographical Note," in James A. Herne, Shore Acres and Other Plays (New York, 1928), p. xvii.

<sup>125</sup>Boston Journal, February 23, 1893.

<sup>126</sup>Boston Transcript, February 8, 1910.

<sup>127</sup>Boston Evening Transcript, October 25, 1899.

out as a conventional play.

Reading Herne's manuscript plays, Montrose Moses wrote, "I am sure that were his plays printed, even though they might seem strange to the ear in their sentiments, their melodramatic passions, the rhythms of life itself would grip at moments with such force as to give us pause to think that they were written between 1890 and 1899."<sup>128</sup> For rhythms of life, for form, the student of literature searches as he reads the plays today.

The dramatic form, then, with which we are concerned is based in emotion which is objectified in symbols of language and action, creating an illusion of reality, a virtual history, in an ever-becoming future, not in the past mode of memory. It may be loosely plotted, but it is unified by the controlling poetic vision of the playwright into a timeless entity, complete in its own rhythms of life, real of itself, not of the world around it.

Essential form can be realized in works that are called realistic or tragic or comic or well-made problem plays, but such terms, while they identify particular qualities of the works, are perhaps best distinguished from essential form by calling them formulas. The designation "formulas" is not intended to suggest irreverence,

<sup>128</sup>Montrose J. Moses, The American Dramatist (Boston, 1925), p. 211.

but merely to suggest irrelevance to essential form.

The requirements of formula need not strangle the virtual form of a work. If they do, it is because the formula is adhered to without understanding, becoming an end in itself, not a means to expression of an inner idea. The Old Homestead may be realistic local color of the Shore Acres variety, but does it have virtual form? Death of a Salesman may be an exercise in modern tragedy, but does it have form?

Toward the end of the nineteenth century, the struggle between formula and form was intense. One instance is exemplary, the case of Wagner. No matter what Shaw or Nietzsche may have made of his ideas, Wagner's major contribution to the dramatic species of opera is in essential form. His one comedy, Die Meistersinger, is built around the conflict of form and formula. The guild of master-singers has established formulas for creating poetry and song, and any aspiring artist must stand trial to prove his competence within the rules. Young Walter faces the trial--more for amorous than artistic reasons, to be sure. Beckmesser, the ludicrous score-keeper of the guild, knows his formula so well, and follows it so blindly, that before Walter's trial song is finished, Beckmesser's markings on the chalk board have defeated the young man's originality. In the end, Beckmesser is publicly exposed as the fool he is, and Walter, in an inspired burst of song wins



the acclaim of all. But Walter hesitates to join the guild. Why should he? He has won Eva, and he does not need the guild's guidance in his own poetry. Hans Sachs finally convinces him that his free spirit is welcome and needed in the guild: form can find a place within formula. Wagner expresses this idea in the emotional form of the work. By any boy-gets-girl formula, the emotional climax of the work should come in the victory of Walter's "Prize Song," but the real climax, the most moving moment in the work, comes in the following scene as Sachs convinces Walter to join the guild. And the final chorus hails the wisdom of Sachs, not the victory of Walter.

At the risk of reducing the marvelous complexities of Die Meistersinger to allegory--which it most definitely is not--one may remark that the aspiring young Walters of the second half of the nineteenth century, Wagner among them, had to fight the guild. Some dramatists, in fear of Beckmesser's chalk board, gave in and followed the rules, the formulas. But the best of them--Ibsen for an instance--found an essential form and learned to live with the established formulas of the well-made play or classical tragedy, or the newly postulated formulas of realism and naturalism.

The conflict continues into the twentieth century, where one could cite Six Characters in Search of an Author as a dramatic example. But Pirandello resolves his

conflict between the formula theatre and the form-seeking characters in quite another way: there is no victory chorale at the end. But that is the twentieth century.

#### FORMULA: NATURALISM AND REALISM

In literature we try to make a distinction between Realism and Naturalism. Naturalism is said to have a surface of gloomy and sordid low-life details--the slice of life--and a foundation of philosophical determinism. In the drama the distinction is difficult to make. One can find in Margaret Fleming, for instance, a factory girl who is the product of her environment and a lecherous husband who is the victim of his animal desires. Their union is a sordid affair; neither has any moral sense. Margaret Fleming could be called naturalistic.<sup>129</sup> But Margaret is the central character, and she is a triumphant humanist. The play gains form from the expression of her states of mind.

One could say, as a theatre critic has, that naturalism is "doing things naturally," presenting life as it is found.<sup>130</sup> Or one might say it is "doing away with

<sup>129</sup>Dorothy S. Bucks, "The American Drama of Ideas from 1890 to 1929," unpubl. diss. (Northwestern University, 1944), p. 45.

<sup>130</sup>Bruce Carpenter, The Way of the Drama (New York, 1929), p. 178.

established forms and principles and the free expression of anything in anyway."<sup>131</sup> One might use the term indiscriminately, as Allardyce Nicoll does: "The producer's task was to secure an impression of reality on the stage. This tendency towards naturalism . . ."<sup>132</sup> One might note, with John Mason Brown, that a dramatist "had to realize that outward naturalism--in other words, those details devoted to documenting the physical life of the body--has little to do with, and could only serve as an impediment to, the interior and spiritual stuffs."<sup>133</sup> But one will do better than any of these if he listens to John Gassner: "Naturalism . . . did not cause any changes in dramatic form that were not implicit in realism as practiced by courageous playwrights."<sup>134</sup> That is the point. Naturalism had little effect on dramatic form. In fact, in the theatre, naturalism most often defines acting and setting, but not a play. Since we are concerned with form here, and naturalism as a literary idea had little effect on the form of Herne's plays, we will look at it only briefly, examining those aspects of naturalism that

<sup>131</sup>Carpenter, The Way of the Drama, p. 178.

<sup>132</sup>Allardyce Nicoll, Late Nineteenth Century Drama, 1850-1900 (London, 1959), p. 34.

<sup>133</sup>John Mason Brown, Dramatis Personae (New York, 1963), p. 25.

<sup>134</sup>John Gassner, Directions in Modern Theatre and Drama (New York, 1965), p. 69.

had some effect--mostly bad--on the drama.

The slice of life technique on the stage demanded a loose construction, or, as one critic said of French Naturalistic plays, "In a word, a Naturalist play is not 'constructed,' and comes to no conclusion; hence it is neither a work of art nor a lesson in morality."<sup>135</sup> The slice of life, strictly followed, allowed no structure at all for the play, or more precisely, no action upon which to build a structure. Another critic observed: "Stage naturalism chooses background, atmosphere, and mood in lieu of action."<sup>136</sup> He makes a useful distinction: "The naturalist . . . does not intensify actuality like the realist, nor does he transform it like the idealist; he endeavors to reproduce it."<sup>137</sup>

Thus, if there were a purely naturalistic play, it would be done without art of any kind. Carried to its limits, this sort of naturalism might be an eight-hour show of a man asleep. That is a naturalistic slice of life, but it is not drama, although it may be argued that it is art, of a sort. By contrast, dramatic art "consists in treatment and interpretation. Now naturalism neither

<sup>135</sup>P. M. A. Filon, Modern French Drama, trans. Janet E. Hogarth (London, 1898), p. 66.

<sup>136</sup>Frank W. Chandler, Aspects of Modern Drama (New York, 1914), p. 33.

<sup>137</sup>Chandler, Aspects of Modern Drama, p. 32.

interprets its material nor subjects it to any process of treatment."<sup>138</sup> Aldous Huxley wrote, "One can imply the existence of the whole Truth without laboriously cataloguing every object within sight."<sup>139</sup>

Naturalism also descends to the lowly. Alan Thompson describes the movement as in large part "inspired by the feeling that the stagey hero of tradition no longer represented anything real in actual life, and that on the contrary the little man or woman alone could do so."<sup>140</sup> These little men and women disgusted William Winter who was upset with Daly for exposing the New York public to L'Assomoir, and even more upset that the Zola play should be popular.<sup>141</sup> Popular, vice may be; but it has no relevance to dramatic form. "No great school or art," Henry Arthur Jones wrote, with more indignation than understanding, "can ever be founded upon the study of vice and ugliness and disease."<sup>142</sup>

Naturalism may concern itself with sociology. Corrigan describes the invigorating effects of social

<sup>138</sup>Filon, Modern French Drama, p. 65.

<sup>139</sup>Aldous Huxley, "Tragedy and the Whole Truth," Virginia Quarterly Review, VII (1931), p. 184.

<sup>140</sup>Thompson, Anatomy of Drama, p. 10.

<sup>141</sup>William Winter, Life of David Belasco (New York, 1918), p. 185.

<sup>142</sup>Henry Arthur Jones, Renascence of the English Drama, p. 254.

interest on the playwrights of the nineties and after:  
 "Thus for nearly three decades the theatre had a vitality of spirit and a forcefulness of manner which it had lacked for better than a century. . . . To the playwright writing at the time, the human and social problems, which were the source materials of the naturalistic play, appeared capable of solution if only man and society would learn to use their common sense."<sup>143</sup> Boucicault, a playwright in the period, could find little dramatic source material in sociological problems: "The drama is no longer an imitation of human passions and weaknesses; it is a philosophical school of sociology for the illustration and argument of ethical problems!"<sup>144</sup> He could not share the zeal for sociology, but he saw it around him in the work of others.

Naturalism may be scientifically objective or mathematical, in the Zola manner.<sup>145</sup> The plot should show a cause-to-effect sequence, a sense of necessity, and it should show it objectively as a scientific experiment.<sup>146</sup>

<sup>143</sup>Corrigan, The Modern Theatre, p. xiv.

<sup>144</sup>Dion Boucicault, "The Future of American Drama," Arena, II (November, 1890), p. 643.

<sup>145</sup>Emile Zola, "Preface to Therese Raquin," in Barrett H. Clark, European Theories of the Drama, rev. ed. (New York, 1947), p. 401.

<sup>146</sup>Paul L. Soper, "Backgrounds of Naturalism in the Theatre," Quarterly Journal of Speech, XXXIII (February, 1947), p. 51.

Strindberg said that drama should show even suffering and death without arousing any emotion other than the joy of knowing.<sup>147</sup> However, scientific accuracy, Norman Hapgood wrote, has little to do with the kind of emotional truth that a play conveys.<sup>148</sup>

Naturalism may presuppose a philosophy of determinism--man the victim of forces beyond his control, "a stress on meaningless mechanism, external causation," which "may reduce a tragic hero to a beetle, crushed under a rock."<sup>149</sup> The issue of free will vs. determinism, however, has more effect on the notions of tragedy than on the form of the play. In a penetrating study of tragedy, Alan Thompson wrote,

If one genuinely believes it [determinism], he tends to see men as mere squirming parts of a blind nature and hence essentially insignificant. That plays continue to move even such determinists is a sign that few men are able to accept such a view emotionally, with all its implications, and suggests that the traditional view that men are free and morally responsible is not only something we want to believe, but something we must believe, if we are to find any significance or hope in our lives. If these conclusions are sound it follows that the deeper a play goes in the study of human conduct the more firmly it

<sup>147</sup>Soper, "Backgrounds of Naturalism in the Theatre," p. 51.

<sup>148</sup>Norman Hapgood, "The Drama of Ideas," Littell's Living Age, CCXX (February, 1899), p. 166.

<sup>149</sup>Orin E. Klapp, "Tragedy and the American Climate of Opinion," Centennial Review of Arts and Sciences, II (Fall, 1958), pp. 409-410.

must be based on the assumption of free will.  
 . . . Most of the tragic plays of recent  
 times failed to be tragic . . . because their  
 power has been undermined by deterministic  
 assumptions."<sup>150</sup>

What naturalism there is in Herne's plays--slice of life, ugliness, sociology, philosophy, or scientific objectivity--did not affect the larger form. For most dramatists, naturalism became synonymous with a servile imitation of nature and had nothing to do with art. John Gassner writes, "Naturalism began to pall quickly in the eighteen-nineties. Its objectivity came to be regarded as cold and forbidding, and its representation of slices of life ceased to command interest. In due time naturalism was vulgarized into the mindless sensationalism associated with Belasco productions and the meretricious photographic detail of Hollywood motion pictures."<sup>151</sup>

What effect naturalism did have is associated with stagecraft (which is where Susanne Langer puts it<sup>152</sup>) or with acting. Herne's stagecraft is always naturalistic imitation. He furnished his stage with carefully chosen props--real plows and pumps, and, as detailed earlier, real food cooked on a real stove. His acting techniques, too, are founded in naturalism, in this sense of being

<sup>150</sup>Thompson, Anatomy of Drama, p. 21.

<sup>151</sup>Gassner, Theatre in Our Times, p. 13.

<sup>152</sup>Langer, Feeling, p. 317.



natural. One theatre chronicler records his practice as a director: "At rehearsals he had a great knack in directing, and could draw abilities out of players that they scarcely knew they had. He used to urge them to regard their parts as real people--to know what those people had been doing before the play began. The whole life of the character was what the performer must have in mind. In Russia, Stanislavsky had not yet started the Moscow Art Theatre, yet here was Herne using Stanislavsky's philosophy."<sup>153</sup> Others have also observed this Stanislavsky "method" in Herne's work.<sup>154</sup> Carried to extremes such biographies of characters lead to absurdities like Mrs. Clarke's study of the girlhood of Shakespeare's heroines.<sup>155</sup> Garland recognized the extremes in a naturalistic approach to acting, and he admired Herne's work not because it reproduced people precisely, which it did not, but because it "produced that effect upon an audience."<sup>156</sup>

Naturalism, then, did contribute to the theatre arts, but as Gassner observed, the contributions to drama were

<sup>153</sup>Helen Ormsbee, Backstage with Actors (New York, 1938), p. 172.

<sup>154</sup>Edward W. Mammen, The Old Stock Company School of Acting (Boston, 1945), p. 63.

<sup>155</sup>Mary Cowden Clarke, The Girlhood of Shakespeare's Heroines in a Series of Tales (New York, 1878).

<sup>156</sup>Hamlin Garland, Roadside Meetings (New York, 1931), p. 76.



negligible or were incorporated into the broader movement of realism.

Herne stands first among the American playwrights who developed realism into dramatic art. It was his mission, Alan Downer believes, "to show the American theatre that settings and properties could be something more than inanimate actors, could be useful vehicles for expressing theme and attitude."<sup>157</sup> Others in the theatre were slow in following Herne's lead; some, in fact, could not, or would not, see where he was going. In 1908, Walter Prichard Eaton asked, "How far has the prose drama of contemporary life advanced beyond the point where Herne left it? How much nearer is the ideal goal of literature?"<sup>158</sup>

The development of realism in the drama was a hesitant, sometimes misguided, progress through, roughly, three stages: realism of surface, realism of content, and inner realism.<sup>159</sup> Many of Herne's contemporaries remained behind in the first stage, or, if they moved to the second, wrote perishable didactic problem plays, more journalism than drama. Herne observed, "I am reminded of the

<sup>157</sup>Alan S. Downer, American Drama (New York, 1960), p. 8.

<sup>158</sup>Walter Prichard Eaton, The American Stage of Today (Boston, 1908), pp. 12-13.

<sup>159</sup>Downer, American Drama, p. 8.

erroneous impression which some people entertain as to what realism on the stage means. As I understand it there is poetry and imagination in realism. Perhaps I do not correctly interpret the meaning of the word, but I have met so many different opinions on the subject that I have come to the conclusion that no one has a very clear conception of just where realism begins and ideality leaves off."<sup>160</sup>

A major source of the confusion over realism arose from the misconception that life should be a mirror of nature--that is, literally holding up the mirror to see the surface of natural objects and real people reflected perfectly in it--allowing the shadowy reflection, itself not real, to pass for substance. Belasco, for instance, put such a reflection as his proper goal on the stage: "As I conceive it, the purpose of the theatre is to hold the mirror up to nature. I know of no better place to obtain the effects of nature than to go to nature itself."<sup>161</sup> The stories of Belasco's attempts to reproduce nature are legion. For the finalé sunset of The Girl of the Golden West, he sat for several evenings observing just such a sunset over the California hills, then tried to reproduce that effect in his stage lighting. Puccini

<sup>160</sup>Boston Journal, February 25, 1893.

<sup>161</sup>Toby Cole and Helen K. Chinoy, Directing the Play (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill Company, 1953), p. 100.

created the effect in a few strokes of poignant music in his operatic version of the play, as The Girl and her lover ride away into the sunset singing, "Adio, California." Puccini captures at least some of the emotional effect of the united lovers; Belasco captured only the sunset. Or in Madame Butterfly, Belasco divides the action in his play by Butterfly's night-long vigil: "During the vigil the night comes on. Susuki [the maid] lights the floor-lamps. The stars come out, the dawn breaks, the floor lights flicker out one by one, the birds begin to sing, and the day discovers Susuki and the baby fast asleep on the floor; but Madame Butterfly is awake, still watching, her face white and strained."<sup>162</sup> The effect of this scene is to reproduce the marvel of seeing night turn to day before your very eyes, on the stage. It is interesting to note what Puccini does with the same scene. The stage effects remain the same but with the music of the haunting "Humming Chorus," he leads his audience through the pathos and longing of Butterfly's vigil, ended ironically by music depicting the life of the bustling harbor below, where her unfaithful lover waits. The passage is still pretty much scene painting (Puccini too has birds singing), but it has at least some emotional content, even if it

<sup>162</sup>Arthur Hobson Quinn, Representative American Plays, 7th ed., rev. (New York, 1953), p. 633.

tends toward melodramatic pathos.<sup>163</sup>

Not only did the sights and sounds of nature pass for realism, they attempted to be better than nature itself. An anecdote in point was making the rounds at the turn of the century. At a rehearsal, Henry Irving upbraided a stage hand for a poor imitation of thunder the man had produced. "Please, sir," replied the man, "that wasn't me that made the noise. It's the real storm outdoors: it's ragin' so 'ard I couldn't 'ear you tell me when to begin."<sup>164</sup> Such real reproductions of nature, it was assumed, were exactly what the audience wanted in those pre-movie days. Brice Maxwell, the playwright in The Story of a Play is well aware of this desire. Observing the bathers at a public beach, he remarks drearily:

I'm surprised . . . that some realistic wretch hasn't put this sort of thing on the stage. It would be tremendously effective; if he made it realistic enough it would be attacked by the press as improper and would fill the house. Couldn't we work a sea-bathing scene into the "Second Chapter?" [his play in progress]. It would make the fortune of the play, and it would give Godolphin [the leading actor] a chance to show his noble frame in something like the majesty of nature. . . . We could have Atland [the hero] rescue Salome, and Godolphin could flop round among the canvas breakers for ten minutes, and come on for a recall with the

<sup>163</sup>The music which bridges these two acts can be played as one piece, without a break in the action, as in the Belasco play. In the opera house, however, an act division is usually observed after the "Humming Chorus."

<sup>164</sup>Andrews, The Drama To-day, p. 48.

heroine, both dripping real water all over the stage.<sup>165</sup>

Such a scene is what John Mason Brown would call "the fairy-tale version of realism, an effortless gift for the appraisal of external values and a relentless determination to go no further."<sup>166</sup> The effects may be real, but the play remains tied to the smiling aspects of life.<sup>167</sup> Godolphin, for instance, is not likely to drown in the canvas breakers. The sequence ends, has to end, happily. The American playwright, Brown has said, "exercises the right, and his audiences prefer it when he does so, of slapping on a fairy book ending of happiness and sunshine and virtue triumphant."<sup>168</sup> The effect is literal, not literary, or, as Robert Edmond Jones remarked, the plays seem to be "dictated by the village iceman or by a parlor maid peeping through a keyhole."<sup>169</sup> Journalism of this sort seeks only what belongs to the sensational moment; literature is made of more permanent stuff than bathing bullies and beauties, literally rendered.

Nor is historical accuracy the point. E. E. Stoll

<sup>165</sup>Howells, The Story of a Play, p. 81.

<sup>166</sup>John Mason Brown, Upstage (New York, 1930), p. 16.

<sup>167</sup>Bernard R. Bowron, "Realism in America," Comparative Literature, III (1951), p. 273.

<sup>168</sup>Brown, Upstage, p. 10.

<sup>169</sup>Robert Edmond Jones, Dramatic Imagination, p. 132.

has pointed out that O'Neill's New England is not a true history picture and should in no way be judged on that ground; it has nothing to do with the play.<sup>170</sup> Herne's New England, too, is not a real picture but an imaginative recreation of the locale. No real New England man would disrupt his anniversary celebration as Martin does in Shore Acres, no matter how perturbed he might be.<sup>171</sup> Of course, he must interrupt, for the development of Herne's play, but in life it is questionable that even a New England farmer would exhibit such bad manners.

The error of literal representation lies in the attitude it takes to the audience. It hopes not to express anything to the members of the audience but to impress them into participating in the play, to feel that they too, if so moved, could plunge into the canvas breakers up there behind the footlights. Susanne Langer writes, "The representation power of art becomes a haven of refuge, a guarantee of meaning in the familiar mode of actuality."<sup>172</sup> Such work "evokes feelings which obscure the emotional content of the form."<sup>173</sup> The audience is given a shallow critical power to judge a play by how well its

<sup>170</sup>Stoll, "Literature and Life Again," p. 286.

<sup>171</sup>Boston Globe, February 21, 1893.

<sup>172</sup>Langer, Feeling, p. 54.

<sup>173</sup>Langer, Feeling, p. 52.



surface corresponds with what they know, or think they know, about the surface life around them. One is reminded of the Citizen and his Wife in The Knight of the Burning Pestle. They interrupt a play with the demand that it present things they know, trying to turn a romance into a "realistic" play with a hero recognizable from their own literal background.<sup>174</sup>

To give the audience such simple-minded power has nothing to do with art. Stark Young has written, "How disastrous it is to arm an audience with some plausible and single-minded realism! To set abroad in the theatre of a democracy so dangerous a theory as that which says that any man can judge the art of theatre by comparing it with what he knows to be our daily facts, is disastrous."<sup>175</sup> He explains:

Here on the one hand is realism, basing its truth on actual surfaces of living, seeming to assume that it gives us things as they are. On the other hand is democracy, in which all are born equal, the pupil is as good as the master, the ass as good as the rider. . . . Everyone, then, being naturally familiar with things as they are and being born equal to anyone else is a born judge of the theatre: Everyman is a full-blown critic. Nothing, so far as this Every man can tell, is needed but for him to estimate how much this art that he observes is similar to life, not to life abundant, everlasting, and mysterious,

<sup>174</sup>Beaumont and Fletcher, The Knight of the Burning Pestle, in Six Plays, ed. C. B. Wheeler (London, 1915).

<sup>175</sup>Stark Young, "Realism in the Theatre," Yale Review, XVI (1926), p. 124.

but to daily surface displayed to his eyes and ears. . . . Exactly as democracy has flattered him, the politician and the wheedling press, telling the merest imbecile that he has a right to judge his government's imperialistic problem . . . so too has the realistic theory flattered him. All he needs to know is nature and life. He can tell you whether the work of theatrical art is true or not, by comparing it with life.<sup>176</sup>

A particular type of realism, local color, was most likely to appeal to the audiences of the nineties as a theatre piece they could participate in, and judge. Reading reviews, it is difficult to decide whether they saw a difference between Shore Acres and plays like Denham Thompson's The Old Homestead. Both plays show the surface of quaint New England life. For many, one suspects, there was little difference between Josh Whitcomb and Nathaniel Berry. Both were recognizable real people, people much like the city audience may have known in earlier days in rural surroundings. One commentator observed the impression made by Denham Thompson's play, a series of tableaux of country life: "The old New York or Boston or Chicago merchant, his fashionable but warm-hearted wife, ah! they forget these times of club-life and opera-box in this play. They are carried back to the countrified environment and feelings of childhood. The present seems

<sup>176</sup>Young, "Realism in the Theatre," p. 116.

unreal, the theatrical hours seem the truth."<sup>177</sup>

In an impression like this, the play is not the thing; rather the scenery and the properties, homely and recognizable, are most important. A sector of a vanishing America is captured for an increasingly industrialized audience. In Dramatic Technique, George Pierce Baker, explained how these plays were often made: "A writer thinks of some setting that will permit him a large amount of local color. . . . Recognizing or not that most of this local color is unessential to the real action of the play, he does see that one or two incidents which are necessary and striking may be set against this background."<sup>178</sup>

Of Shore Acres, one critic observed, "All the practical appliances of our everyday life are there,--wheelbarrows, scythes, tin dinner horn, cooking stove, and everything you can think of down to numberless babies."<sup>179</sup> Ingredients like these, he concludes, make the play "one of the sweetest, most truthful representations of New England life and character that has been presented."<sup>180</sup> When Herne created the local color of the Old South in

<sup>177</sup>Frederick E. McKay and Charles L. Wingate, Famous American Actors of Today (New York, 1896), pp. 391-392.

<sup>178</sup>George Pierce Baker, Dramatic Technique (Boston, 1919), p. 245.

<sup>179</sup>Boston Times, February 26, 1893.

<sup>180</sup>Boston Times, February 26, 1893.

Griffith Davenport, for instance, Montrose Moses praised his handling of the simple details of Southern life, but felt he had gone too far in over-accenting the "darky characteristics" of his slaves.<sup>181</sup> They become interesting studies in themselves, "real" negroes unlike the conventional minstrel negro of the stage, but to make them real Herne developed them with such detail that they tend to step out of the background, the local color, where they belong. However, Herne felt such detailed development particularly necessary in Griffith Davenport because "the conditions are peculiar to a time and place now unfamiliar, and these in themselves so largely affect the psychological development of the characters, that a clear grasp of them is essential."<sup>182</sup>

The result was often a confusion between local color realism and the purposes of the drama. A reviewer of Sag Harbor said, "Mr. Herne . . . has carried his creed to such an extent that even his friends gasp at his temerity. Stage realism to be the most effective should be an adjunct rather than a leading motive. . . . But when realism is in preponderance and other and more vital matters are made subservient, and are only employed as foils,

<sup>181</sup>Moses, The American Dramatist, p. 220.

<sup>182</sup>Marco Tiempo, "James A. Herne in 'Griffith Davenport,'" Arena, XXII (1899), p. 380.

then its value is not only lost, but it becomes tedious."<sup>183</sup>

Aside from setting, local color attempts to capture realistic character types on the stage. Often, as observed previously, these characters were the unsophisticated inhabitants of a rural America which disappeared when the industrial revolution brought sophistication to New England.<sup>184</sup> The "stage Yankee" is one such type. Certainly both Uncle Nat in Shore Acres and Captain Dan'l in Sag Harbor are the end products of a long tradition, going back at least to Jonathan in Royal Tyler's The Contrast.<sup>185</sup> More direct ancestors for Herne's characters are found in plays like Woodworth's The Forest Rose or Jones's Silver Soon, although they are cruder than Herne's creations.<sup>186</sup> By the nineties the Yankee was often a "simple-minded, phenomenally shrewd old man from New England, with a soul that soared no higher than the financial value of a bar'l of applesass."<sup>187</sup> In other words, he had become simply a stage convention. By 1904, Howells observed of Our New Minister by Denham Thompson that it

<sup>183</sup>Boston Transcript, October 25, 1899.

<sup>184</sup>Boston Globe, February 21, 1893.

<sup>185</sup>Marston Balch, "Jonathan the First," MLN, XLVI (May, 1931), pp. 281-288.

<sup>186</sup>Arthur Hobson Quinn, A History of the American Drama, 2 vols. (New York, 1927), II, 127.

<sup>187</sup>Laurence Hutton, Curiosities of the American Stage (New York, 1891), p. 40.

used the genre without adding anything either real or dramatic; "it seemed a bad composition of all the old conventions of the rural drama."<sup>188</sup> Another reviewer, who saw Charles Doty's Common Sense Bracket in 1904, wrote, "In the emotional rural drama the highest point was reached by the late James A. Herne. The tendency of recent plays of the kind, by reason of the commercial instinct to please at any cost is toward conventionalism."<sup>189</sup>

But Herne's stage Yankees are not the conventional type found in the "by gosh" drama. He comes closer to the real materials of the regional play, a concern with folk mores and folk beliefs and folk wisdom which are the essential lines that form the composition.<sup>190</sup> Moses specifies the main distinction of Herne's plays in his article in the Cambridge History of American Literature: "Herne's observation was based on profound appreciation of character and human relationship, and the Yankee-type drama was dependent on outward eccentricity."<sup>191</sup>

Drama in the formula of local color--the simple,

<sup>188</sup>William Dean Howells, "Some New American Plays," Harper's Weekly (January 16, 1904), p. 90.

<sup>189</sup>"Current Plays," Theatre Magazine, V (February, 1905), p. 33.

<sup>190</sup>Felix Sper, From Native Roots: A Panorama of Our Regional Drama (Caldwell, Idaho: The Caxton Printers, 1948), p. 273.

<sup>191</sup>Cambridge History of American Literature, III, 285.

nostalgic creation of a bygone era--may seem strange to a modern reader, with an atomic-age sensibility. Robert Corrigan, writing particularly of the rural plays of Lorca and Synge, said that regional plays "are filled with human significance, and they celebrate affirmatively man's greatness, his inevitable defeat, and the possibility of spiritual victory. But as much as we are moved by these plays, we must ultimately reject them as irrelevant to our times. For most people living in highly industrialized urban situations, these rural dramas can evoke only nostalgia. . . . It is a world in which the individual insists upon making every relationship a personal one--an heroic society based upon the feudal aristocratic values of honor, generosity, and revenge."<sup>192</sup>

Thomas Beer, in The Mauve Decade, considered Herne the best representative of the type.<sup>193</sup> But the question for the student in search of drama is not one of type but of exception. Did Herne go beyond the confines of the type, the formula of local color, to create a larger form in his drama? Are the plays to be regarded, as Arthur Hobson Quinn suggests, as "largely a combination of sentiment, humor, and faithful reproduction of humble sailors

<sup>192</sup>Corrigan, The Modern Theatre, p. xv.

<sup>193</sup>Thomas Beer, The Mauve Decade (New York, 1926), p. 117.

and rustics"?<sup>194</sup> Is this drama to be considered only a part of the same literary movement which recognized the fiction of Sara Orne Jewett and Mary Wilkins, as Garland thought?<sup>195</sup> Those are the important questions when one studies the plays.

Local color drama is a limited formula; the broader realistic drama is not limited by geography or nostalgic antiquarian study, even though its surface elements may be much like those of local color--settings which are usually recognizable, characters who are convincing human beings.

Realistic settings began to be important long before the rural drama had established itself. Sometime around 1840 a strange thing happened on the stage: David Hill discovered what he called a photograph, reproducing real life, and by 1850 dramatic realism began to crystalize as a form of stage production, in acting, *décor* and *mise en scène*; such developments were effected by 1870.<sup>196</sup> Important to this development was the box set, used possibly for the first time in 1862, replacing the "unrealistic" drop and wing sets.<sup>197</sup> Along with the box set came an

<sup>194</sup>Arthur Hobson Quinn, The Literature of the American People (New York, 1951), p. 806.

<sup>195</sup>Hamlin Garland, A Son of the Middle Border (New York, 1921), p. 332.

<sup>196</sup>Gassner, Directions in Modern Theatre and Drama, p. 18.

<sup>197</sup>Mammen, The Old Stock Company, p. 30.



increasing use in stage furniture, replacing the stock furniture and settings of the earlier theatre. "The average theatre of the sixties had about eight sets: a rocky mountain pass, a dark wood, a light landscape, a throne room, a center door set, a chamber, a kitchen, a prison," with a few pieces of interchangeable furniture.<sup>198</sup> When these meager trappings were replaced by individualized settings and furniture to suit the individual play, there was a strong possibility that décor could submerge the drama. Two Henry James characters discuss the possibility:

Auberon: Very likely that's the future of the drama . . . an immense elaboration of the picture.

Dorriforth: . . . an immense elaboration of the picture and an immense sacrifice of everything else. . . . I have no doubt that the scenic part of the art . . . is only in its infancy. . . . The probable extension of the mechanical art is infinite.<sup>199</sup>

Frank Archer gives this advice in his manual on playwriting: "The public has been taught to look for this costly display, and with the keenness of competition what was once a luxury has become a necessity. Without this elaborate treatment many plays would have no chance of proving acceptable."<sup>200</sup>

William Archer thought that the whole business of

<sup>198</sup>Mammen, The Old Stock Company, p. 30.

<sup>199</sup>James, "After the Play," p. 232.

<sup>200</sup>Frank Archer, How to Write a Good Play, p. 45.

realistic settings was suspect, had, in fact, little to do with the realistic drama: "Either you are familiar with the thing represented or you are not; in the former case you learn nothing; and have merely the childish pleasure of admiring on the stage the real pump you see every day in your own backyard; in the latter case you have no means of testing the truth of what you see and must simply take the word of the author."<sup>201</sup> Especially must one take the word of the author in an exotic play. In Madame Butterfly, for instance, Belasco allows the Japanese bride to punch out three peepholes in the paper windows in her home, as she keeps vigil for her lover. No audience apparently questioned the realism of this act.<sup>202</sup> But it is most unlikely that a well-bred Japanese girl would carry out such willful destruction on her house. Audiences, though, had nothing to judge by, if they did not know Japanese customs. They accepted the playwright's use of the setting.

This new-found ability of the stage to be photographic, to spend its time and money on scenery and décor, had a profound effect on the plays written for it. As

<sup>201</sup>William Archer, About the Theatre, pp. 330-331.

<sup>202</sup>Nor do audiences today question Butterfly's action in some productions of Puccini's opera, even though the current Metropolitan production, directed by a Japanese, shows her sliding back a panel.

Cheney has observed, the play was secondary to setting.<sup>203</sup> Only when playwrights were dramatists first and mechanics second, like Herne, did the setting become just one element in the total production.

These settings were populated with people who could be found in life. In Herne's plays there are fishermen, farmers, a small-time businessman, a circuit rider. As noted before, these characters were created with a Stanislavsky-like fidelity to a whole biography, to a living person who has a past that has led him to his present moment of action.

Such are the ingredients of the formula we have called the first stage of realism--a realism of surface--real people acting in real places. The reasons why such a concept of realism is not likely to produce drama are obvious if we reflect on the earlier discussion of form. Hamlin Garland believed that realism was not a theory but a "condition of mind."<sup>204</sup> He wrote, "It [realism] has only one law, to be true, not to objective reality, but to the objective reality as the author sees it."<sup>205</sup> The critic J. A. Symonds also felt that "realism is the presentation of natural objects as the artist sees them, as he

<sup>203</sup>Cheney, The New Movement, p. 102.

<sup>204</sup>Hamlin Garland, "Ibsen as a Dramatist," Arena, II (1890), p. 82.

<sup>205</sup>Garland, "Ibsen as a Dramatist," p. 72.

thinks they are."<sup>206</sup> The artist cannot reproduce the actual, only what he idealizes as his vision of the real. Stark Young writes that he must "convey pure idea" rather than recognizable materials for their own sake.<sup>207</sup> He creates an ideal world of illusion, of virtual history, not a temporal world of delusion, of actual history.

"Realism," Mary McCarthy believes, "is forever begging the question--the question of reality. To find the ideal realist, you would first have to find reality."<sup>208</sup> Stark Young has said, "To say that realism shows us life as it is, became long ago such nonsense as only a simple soul indeed would swallow, since at the very outset there is no is-ness to life."<sup>209</sup> Herne, too, was under no delusion that a mirror of life could pass for art. He knew he worked in an art form where "the ideal was the choicest expression of the real."<sup>210</sup>

The assumption that real objects and real men can be presented on the stage, however, may be artistically viable when such presentation is arranged to heighten our

<sup>206</sup>John A. Symonds, "Realism and Idealism" Littell's Living Age, CLXXV (October, 1887), p. 114.

<sup>207</sup>Stark Young, "Realism in the Theatre," p. 120.

<sup>208</sup>McCarthy, Theatre Chronicles, p. 229.

<sup>209</sup>Young, "Realism in the Theatre," pp. 115-116.

<sup>210</sup>Garland, "James A. Herne: Actor, Dramatist, and Man," p. 286.

perception of them. William Archer wrote, "It [realism] presents the commonest objects to us . . . and behold! these commonplace things leap into new clearness and undreamt of significance."<sup>211</sup> Even the "real pump" may show us something if it is presented in a new light and our attention is concentrated upon it through the artist's selection and interpretation. Ibsen was always irritated when people saw his plays as life rather than art; he insisted on illusion and not reality as the basis of art.<sup>212</sup> But his "contemporaries, and many of his critics and commentators, failed to observe the ritual of handing over their identity with their coats in the cloakroom as they came into the theatre, and walked in, bringing with them the conventions and prejudices of ordinary life, not adopting those of the stage."<sup>213</sup> One anecdote may serve as summary statement on stage realism of the surface variety. The noted French actor Got, who created the role of the hunchback Triboulet in Hugo's Le Roi S' Amuse (better known today in Verdi's operatic treatment, Rigoletto) said as he prepared the part, "I shall simply elevate my shoulders in those scenes where I wish to call attention to the fact that Triboulet is hunchbacked. . . .

<sup>211</sup>Archer, About the Theatre, p. 335.

<sup>212</sup>Peter F. D. Tennant, Ibsen's Dramatic Technique (Cambridge, England: Bowes and Bowes, 1948), p. 16.

<sup>213</sup>Tennant, Ibsen's Dramatic Technique, p. 15.

If I have merely the appearance of a hump, I shall be able to make it disappear in those passages when Triboulet ought to be simply terrible and pathetic."<sup>214</sup> Just enough illusion to suggest the reality, but not too much photographic effect to cause a distraction from the intention of the drama.

In the second stage of realism, the dramatist went beyond the surface of life around him, and explored contemporary problems, both social and philosophical. Realism became a teacher. Emma Goldman, for instance, saw the theatre as a platform from which to awaken social consciences: "Perhaps those who learn the great truths of social travail in the school of life, do not need the message of the drama. But there is another class whose number is legion, for whom the message is indispensable. . . . Therefore another medium is needed to arouse the intellectuals of this country, to make them realize their relation to the people, to the social unrest permeating the atmosphere. The medium which has the power to do that is the Modern Drama, because it mirrors every phase of life and embraces every strata of society."<sup>215</sup> When the modern dramatists became concerned with these social problems,

<sup>214</sup>Arlo Bates, "Realism and the Art of Fiction," Scribner's Magazine, II (1887), p. 247.

<sup>215</sup>Emma Goldman, The Social Significance of the Modern Drama (Boston, 1914), pp. 6-7.

Storm Jameson wrote, they identified the drama with an attack on existing convention, religious, social or intellectual.<sup>216</sup> Drama became concerned not with the older questions of spiritual values or ethical questions, but with material and social values, man and his fellows in the social contract.<sup>217</sup> "In the new plays," Shaw stated, "the drama arises through a conflict of unsettled ideals rather than through vulgar attachments, rapacities, generosity, resentments, ambition, misunderstanding, oddities and so forth."<sup>218</sup> In his own practice this conflict led to discussion as a major source of the action. Examining Ibsen's practice, Shaw wrote of a method which could describe his own practice as well, "Formerly you had in what was called a well-made play an exposition in the first act, a situation in the second, and an unravelling in the third. Now you have exposition, situation, and discussion; and the discussion is the test of the playwright."<sup>219</sup> Sheldon Cheney puts it another way: "In the drama of thought story development is emphasized not for its own sake but as an illustration of theme. . . . The

<sup>216</sup>Jameson, The Modern Drama, p. 136.

<sup>217</sup>Arthur Nethercott, "Drama of Ideas," Sewanee Review, XLIX (1941), p. 374.

<sup>218</sup>George Bernard Shaw, The Quintessence of Ibsenism, 3rd ed., reprinted by Dramabooks (New York, 1957), p. 176.

<sup>219</sup>Shaw, Quintessence, p. 171.

play is not developed primarily for a big scene . . . but for a burning idea, for social passion."<sup>220</sup>

John Gassner sums up this second stage as "almost forensic" in form and in tone, existing primarily for the presentation of ideas and the examination of issues.<sup>221</sup>

The popular theatre of the nineties, and after the turn of the century, did not think highly of such dramas of ideas, as might be expected. William Winter, for an instance, wrote, "Ibsen and his followers have altogether mistaken the province of the Theatre in choosing it as a fit medium for the expression of sociological views,-- views, moreover, which, once adopted, would disrupt society. . . . Since when did the Theatre become a proper place for a clinic of horrors, and the vivisection of moral ailments?"<sup>222</sup> Daniel Frohman the manager, wrote, "It must be remembered that the success of a play is due largely to attractiveness, a subject for discussion around the family hearthstone. . . . Unfortunately the 'problem' play or the freak drama always suggest subjects that are not only often immoral, but portray phases of life, which,

<sup>220</sup>Cheney, The New Movement, p. 263.

<sup>221</sup>Gassner, Directions in Modern Theatre and Drama, p. 84.

<sup>222</sup>William Winter, "Ibsenites and Ibsenism," in Montrose Moses and John Mason Brown, The American Theatre as Seen by Its Critics, 1752-1934 (New York, 1934), p. 95.



though common, are grim and unattractive, if not actually repulsive."<sup>223</sup>

As Herne's plays reflect the first stage of realism with their real kitchens, real meals, and real, down-to-earth people, they also reflect this second stage of a content of ideas that concern men in their daily life. Shore Acres, for instance, exhibits Herne's conversion to Henry George's Single Tax. The plot hinges, in part, on land speculation, involving a division of the old farm into plots for a resort development. The play can be seen as a condemnation of such speculation in the results it has on the lives of simple, honest people. At the time of its production the play did evoke considerable discussion as a play of ideas based on Henry George.<sup>224</sup> Even after he became rich (ironically, with this play) Herne remained a devoted follower of George until death.<sup>225</sup> In a eulogy in The Single Tax Review, Henry George's son recorded Herne's comment that his father's philosophy "explained what before was to him inexplicable, and that he would do all in his power to preach it."<sup>226</sup>

<sup>223</sup>Frohman, Memories of a Manager, p. 144.

<sup>224</sup>H. H. Waggoner, "The Growth of a Realist: James A. Herne," New England Quarterly, XV (March, 1942), p. 63.

<sup>225</sup>Herbert Edwards, "Herne, Garland, and Henry George," American Literature, XXVIII (1957), p. 364.

<sup>226</sup>Henry George, Jr., "James A. Herne," Single Tax Review, I (July 15, 1901), p. 1.

Also in Shore Acres Herne puts in the hands of his heroine a copy of Howells' A Hazard of New Fortunes as an example of advanced ideas. In Margaret Fleming, Herne considers the then burning issue of women's independence. On the surface Margaret resembles Ibsen's Nora, but only on the surface, as we will see in detail when we examine that play. It is for this use of ideas, the important second stage in realism, that Herne is valued by many critics. John Anderson, for instance, wrote, "Here was an idea, and it takes an idea to make the theatre live. America was beginning to feel its way to a drama of its own."<sup>227</sup> Jordan Miller considers Herne "the most important American proponent of the realistic 'problem play.'"<sup>228</sup>

It is obvious that this second stage had its limitations. The use of the theatre as a sounding board for problematic ideas is no more guarantee of drama than is the attempt to present real people and real places. The danger in such a play is the lure of ascending the pulpit rather than the stage. Alan Thompson wrote, "The dramatist with a thesis faces a dilemma: forcing his characters to fit the thesis renders them unreal, but subordinating his thesis to life-like characterization renders it

<sup>227</sup>John Anderson, The American Theatre and the Motion Picture in America (New York, 1938), p. 56.

<sup>228</sup>Jordan Y. Miller, American Dramatic Literature (New York, 1961), p. 38.

confused or insignificant."<sup>229</sup> Sheldon Cheney makes a similar observation: "Because the drama of thought is so clearly a social force, it is easy to distort it to mere propaganda, completely losing sight of the sensuous and emotional elements, leaving only something drab and didactic, like a sermon or a school lesson."<sup>230</sup>

Arthur Miller presents a cogent summary of the effect the drama of ideas has had on playwrights subsequent to the nineties: "In today's America, the term 'social play' brings up images which are historically conditioned, very recent, and I believe, only incidentally pertinent to a fruitful conception of the drama. The term indicates to us an attack, an arraignment of society's evils such as Ibsen allegedly invented and was later taken up by left-wing playwrights whose primary interest was the exposure of capitalism for the implied benefit of socialism or communism. The concept is tired and narrow, but its worst effect has been to confuse a whole generation of playwrights, audiences, and theater workers."<sup>231</sup>

The real contribution which the drama of ideas has made to the development of the drama is in its preparation for the third stage of realism in the drama; an inner

<sup>229</sup>Thompson, Anatomy of Drama, p. 78.

<sup>230</sup>Cheney, The New Movement, p. 264.

<sup>231</sup>Arthur Miller, "On Social Plays," introduction to A View from the Bridge (New York, 1955), p. 3.

realism of spirit. Miller, again, writes: "The tremendous growth in our consciousness of social causation has won for these writers [Shaw and Ibsen] their victory in this sense: it has given us a wider consciousness of the causes that form character. What the middle of the twentieth century has taught us is that theirs was not the whole answer. It is not enough anymore to know that one is at the mercy of social pressures; it is necessary to understand that such a sealed fate cannot be accepted."<sup>232</sup> When man no longer accepts and discusses social problems and ideas but reacts to them, as Miller implies, the drama moves on an emotional base not a conceptual base. Pirandello puts the distinction between a drama of ideas and a mature drama based on an emotional framework in terms of criticism: "Because contemporary criticism does not give enough weight to the absolute difference between the philosophical problems set forth through concepts in an intellectual construction and the problems of life expressed in the immediate representation of art--creator of form, in this sense inviolable--very often today this criticism of contemporary works of art avoids probing as deeply as it could, not merely into the representation of spiritual debate accidentally expressed in the work, but into the very objects of that debate, and tries instead to

<sup>232</sup>Arthur Miller, "On Social Plays," p. 13.

discover its logical contradictions and looks only at the conceptual design of the work of art. . . . But the conceptual framework, on the one hand, is absolutely nothing more than a pretext, a stimulus to create, and, therefore, in the evaluation of the created work . . . could not and must not find a place."<sup>233</sup>

No one denies that good drama has always been concerned to some extent with ideas, but if a play is concerned with ideas alone, it is unlikely to be drama. Even Shaw, whom we certainly think of most often in terms of ideas, wrote, "The material of a dramatist is always some conflict of human feeling with circumstances; so that, since institutions are circumstances, every social question furnishes material for drama. But every drama does not involve a social question, because human feeling may be in conflict with circumstances which are not institutions, which raise no question at all, which are part of human destiny."<sup>234</sup> Sheldon Cheney stresses the importance of emotion to the drama of thought: "The drama of thought is emotional drama with the emphasis transferred to underlying theme, appealing to the emotions and through them to

<sup>233</sup>Pirandello, "New Theatres and Old," p. 124.

<sup>234</sup>George Bernard Shaw, "The Problem Play--a Symposium" in Shaw on Theatre, ed. E. J. West (New York, 1958), p. 59.

the intellect."<sup>235</sup>

Robert Brustein speaks specifically of Ibsen's Ghosts, a drama of ideas with another dimension: "The validity of the work is preserved because, on its deepest level, the drama of ideas is always kept subordinate to a pattern of tragic action. The central character, Mrs. Alving, is not simply a raisonneuse, mouthing the author's opinions, but also a tragic protagonist whose suffering demonstrates the hollowness of even the most emancipated opinions when not backed with radical acts."<sup>236</sup>

Thus, the final stage in realism in the drama: the inner drama of the spirit. When Alan Downer writes, "Realism of character and situation are a prelude to realism of action," he uses "action" in the sense Francis Fergusson or Susanne Langer use the term, the emotional action which gives form to the work.<sup>237</sup> Similarly John Gassner says, "The pioneering realists . . . had in view neither plot nor spectacle, regardless of the degree of illusionism or verisimilitude in production. Verisimilitude, for them, was a means for furthering a meaningful experience, just as plot was regarded merely the means for sustaining an

<sup>235</sup>Cheney, The New Movement, p. 262.

<sup>236</sup>Robert Brustein, Seasons of Discontent (New York, 1965), p. 58.

<sup>237</sup>Alan Downer, Fifty Years of American Drama, 1900-1950 (Chicago, 1951), p. 45.



action of social or psychological character."<sup>238</sup> Another critic speaks of this inner reality as "the result of an analytical or psychological process within the artist's mind" and a "reproduction of this process in the medium."<sup>239</sup> The use of the word "psychological" is not to be confused with the psychoanalyst's practice, but rather it refers to the creative process by which the artist orders and expresses the basic emotional states--or "soul states"--to his audience. The final stage of realism, as we have discussed at length earlier in the consideration of form, is itself a realization of essential form, virtual history, not representational reality.

One critic summed it up: "Thus our conclusion is perhaps not a very striking one: that a certain amount of realism is to be found in all periods of the drama, and that it is not the particular asset of any period or school."<sup>240</sup> Such an awareness led Mrs. Fiske, the actress, to say of Ibsen's plays: "I have found in his plays that life-sized work that other players tell us they have found in the plays of Shakespeare."<sup>241</sup> And again, "Many a play

<sup>238</sup>Gassner, Directions in Modern Theatre and Drama, p. 47.

<sup>239</sup>Paul L. Soper, "Backgrounds of Naturalism in the Theatre," p. 50.

<sup>240</sup>Davies, Realism in the Drama, p. 120.

<sup>241</sup>Woollicott, Mrs. Fiske, p. 60.



is like a painted backdrop, something to be looked at from the front. An Ibsen play is like a black forest, something you can enter, something you can walk about in. There you can lose yourself: you can lose yourself."<sup>242</sup>

No one would claim that Herne's plays stand in anything like the same rank as Ibsen's; yet there is that same quality in his realism, a life-sized expression of inner truth, not simply a homely backdrop of local color or an exposition of "modern ideas." One chronicler of the theatre, observed that his effects were too quiet to satisfy the theatrical taste of the time: "Like Duse, Herne wanted to discard all tricks."<sup>243</sup> The comparison is illuminating. Eleanor Duse wanted to do away with surface tricks as Herne did. Even though many who saw the actress understood none of what she said, she conveyed to her American audiences all the spiritual stages, the inner development of the character through her external actions.

At times Herne seems to lose this thread of inner realism in the plays--concentrates too heavily on the surface, or seems to be preaching an idea for its own sake. When he does, the formulas of realism hinder his inner essential form from developing. At his best, in Shore Acres, he rarely loses the thread.

<sup>242</sup> Woolcott, Mrs. Fiske, p. 61.

<sup>243</sup> Ormsbee, Backstage with Actors, p. 171.

## FORMULA: THE WELL-MADE PLAY

At the turn of the century, realism--especially that brand of it served up as slices of life--was regarded by many as a healthy substitute for a well-made play prepared from proven recipes by a master of the craft. Brice Maxwell, the playwright in Howells' The Story of a Play, for instance, tried to free his realistic piece from the conventions of the well-made play, but at every scene in his script, he was advised by his star, Godolphin, to make changes more or less structural to keep the play within the conventions: "There was no end to his [Godolphin's] inventions for spoiling the simplicity and truthfulness of Maxwell's piece."<sup>244</sup> Godolphin looked upon a play as a recipe which would become a palatable product only after constant trial and error with the quality and quantity of ingredients.

Like the fictional Maxwell, the critic Ludwig Lewisohn found such recipe theatre to be the most stultifying obstacle in the path of an emerging drama: "The theory of the 'well-made' play installed the ingenious as lords of the theatre and discredited the creative energy of the great masters at the expense of their supposed craftsmanship. It opened the doors of dramatic art to the

<sup>244</sup>Howells, The Story of a Play (New York, 1898), pp. 20-21.

type of mind that likes to solve conundrums and disentangle puzzles and invent a new can-opener and treat the business of both literature and life with astuteness, deftness, and decorum."<sup>245</sup> Lewisohn cites Bronson Howard and Augustus Thomas among his contemporaries as examples of this kind of playwrighting.<sup>246</sup> Howard had remarked, in fact, of his own work that he was unsuccessful when he tried to write plays; success came only when he tried to build them.<sup>247</sup>

Playwrighting is, of course, a craft, just as the arts of fiction and poetry are crafts; and the playwright must learn its elements. But Eric Bentley deplores the notion that a play, particularly a Broadway-bound vehicle, is built and patched, "pieced together, not composed with one man's passion and intellect, but assembled by the ingenuity of all who stop by at a hotel bedroom, preferably during the rehearsal period."<sup>248</sup> When a play is thus constructed, playwrighting is demoted from the fine to the useful arts, and not very useful at that.

If one looks upon a play as a patch work, he is primarily concerned with structure and with the plot,

<sup>245</sup>Ludwig Lewisohn, The Drama and the Stage (New York, 1922), pp. 90-91.

<sup>246</sup>Lewisohn, The Drama and the Stage, p. 91.

<sup>247</sup>"Chronicle and Comment," The Bookman, X (February, 1900), p. 514.

<sup>248</sup>Eric Bentley, What is Theatre? (Boston, 1956), p. 256.

character, and conflict worked out within that structure. The first of these elements, plot,--in the sense of a good story which moves swiftly--is easy to mistake for drama. Even if there are, in one critic's way of thinking, only thirty-six plots, or more precisely, thirty-six basic situations which might be elaborated, the dramatist is by no means boxed in: what he does with the story is what matters.<sup>249</sup> Rather than emphasizing the basic situation, George Pierce Baker defined plot as the "story proportioned and emphasized so as to accomplish, under the conditions of the theatre, the purposes of the dramatist."<sup>250</sup>

Attention to arrangement and proportion in the plot is the starting place for the well-made play, as Donald Stuart, a historian of the modern drama has pointed out.<sup>251</sup> Eugene Scribe, among the most famous draftsmen of the well-made play, was concerned above all else with plot that moves along swiftly, so concerned, in fact, that it is usually the incidents alone which develop in his plays. Even Baker taught his classes the principle that "the interest of the audience must be pointed by the incidents of

<sup>249</sup>George Pierce Baker, Dramatic Technique (Boston, 1919), p. 63.

<sup>250</sup>Baker, Dramatic Technique, p. 59.

<sup>251</sup>Donald Stuart, The Development of Dramatic Art (New York, 1937), p. 517.

the plot."<sup>252</sup> But when the incidents of the plot become the sole excuse for the play, the play is, more often than not, a mere excitement. Belasco is so easily the lack-lustre example of all that is worst in the theatre of the nineties that his practice comes to mind perhaps too quickly: in this case, his acknowledged method of starting with a plot idea and building a scenario from it is an illustration of the extent to which emphasis on plot situations can be carried. He once remarked, "Putting a plot together was an easy matter; we had only to get a series of eccentric situations, with love scenes and bright lines."<sup>253</sup> For Belasco, the possibilities of utilizing the cigarette-case gun carried by E. H. Sothern in Lord Chumley was a sufficient spark to fire off an entire scenario.

When the playwright concentrates on plot, we have pretty much the same old thing because "in nine cases out of ten it is built of material which has been used so many times before that the carpenter who puts it together knows whether or not he can trust it to sustain its own weight."<sup>254</sup> The appeal of such well tried plotting is irresistible. Even Henry James felt the necessity for

<sup>252</sup>Baker, Dramatic Technique, p. 55.

<sup>253</sup>Winter, The Life of David Belasco, Vol. I, p. 343.

<sup>254</sup>James L. Ford, "The Independent or Free Theatre of New York," Lippincott's Magazine, XLIX (1892), p. 375.

using it in his dramatization of The American, insisting that while he loathed the method, he recognized "that his only chance was in having, in a businesslike way, the courage of it."<sup>255</sup> He did, for an instance, keep a romantic secret from his audience until the end of the play. The early Herne plays also suffer from an excess of this careful plotting. In Hearts of Oak, everything works out too smoothly in the well-worn plot of two men loving the same woman. When Herne later used this same plot for Sag Harbor, he called it "an old story"--apparently assuming that most of the audience could guess the obvious resolution of the triangle--and turned instead to matters of character and mood.

Well-made plays often carry their ingenuity into a subplot, more or less related to the main plot. When there is no relation at all between main and subplot, when the two plots cross only occasionally if at all, the well-made play falls apart. One of the hangovers of melodrama in Herne's Drifting Apart is a secondary plot developing the fortunes of two aspiring actors whose paths are frequently forced to cross the paths of the main characters, geographically, but have no contact, dramatically, with the main plot. If these characters can be justified in any way, it is as comic foils for the near-tragic main

<sup>255</sup>Henry James, Selected Letters, ed. Leon Edel (London: Rupert Hart-Davis, 1956), p. 148.

characters. Herne himself found the subplot the weakest element in the play when he reconsidered it years later.<sup>256</sup>

If the subplot is to be an integral part of the well-made play, it must be directly involved with the main action. Howells' Brice Maxwell discovers that the subplot is only getting in the way of the serious play he is trying to write. He finally decides that he has in fact two plays and must write one serious play and one light play, "with the semi-comic motive of the love-business for the motive of the whole" because "the sin-interest will kill the love-business, or the love-business will kill the sin-interest."<sup>257</sup>

Had Maxwell's playwrighting venture been postponed a decade, he would have found himself under less pressure to produce quick moving plots and subplots. Already in 1889, Howells remarked his "heresy that for a play a plot of close texture is no more necessary than for a novel; that for either, in dealing with modern life, it would be an anachronism."<sup>258</sup> During the run of Shore Acres, Herne is said to have remarked that the play of plot was "dead as a doornail."<sup>259</sup> In Ibsen's Ghosts, Garland found "hardly

<sup>256</sup>Herne, "Art for Truth's Sake," p. 6.

<sup>257</sup>Howells, The Story of a Play, p. 70.

<sup>258</sup>Howells, "The Editor's Study," Harper's Magazine, LXXIX (July, 1889), p. 319.

<sup>259</sup>Ormsbee, Backstage with Actors, p. 174.

anything approaching plot."<sup>260</sup>

The emphasis on involved plotting seems old-fashioned today, but to say that it is old-fashioned is not to deny that an interesting plot can be a central element in the play. The twentieth century de-emphasis of plot has not gone unlamented. Eric Bentley, for one, has remarked of the well-made plays of Scribe, "Plot without much else makes better drama than much else without plot."<sup>261</sup>

Bentley is not in harmony with those critics who praise a playwright for getting rid of dramaturgy: "Since the onset of naturalism half a century ago, we have had a spate of 'truth,' and by now we are again willing to acknowledge that life is not art for the reason that chaos is not cosmos. Which means, among other things, that we are willing to recognize the merit of the greatest non-genius of the drama, Eugene Scribe."<sup>262</sup> A few years ago, Howard Taubman reviewed an off-Broadway revival of Boucicault's intricately plotted The Octoroon and found it "honestly affecting."<sup>263</sup> He surprised himself by becoming

<sup>260</sup>Hamlin Garland, "Ibsen as a Dramatist," Arena, II (June, 1890), p. 75.

<sup>261</sup>Bentley, What is Theatre?, p. 67.

<sup>262</sup>Bentley, What is Theatre?, p. 67.

<sup>263</sup>Howard Taubman, "Theatre: Fun and Hisses," The New York Times, January 28, 1961, p. 13. See also Sidney Kaplan, "100-year-old Drama Still Speaks," New York Times, January 22, 1961, II, p. 3. Kaplan found that the play held the audience in spite of some creaking moments.



involved in the plot.

But, on the whole, nostalgia for the older formulas of plotting, devised to hold the audience's attention to the exclusion of everything else, finds little sympathy in the theatre today. More important for modern dramaturgy is the emphasis on the well-made, logical structure with attention to exposition, climax, denouement, and matters like the scene á faire. When a critic in the nineties discovered the virtues of a Pinero play or a drawing room comedy he was most likely talking pure well-made structure. If, on the other hand, he approached Shaw's Man and Superman after an evening with Pinero, he would find a detached, ironic awareness of the well-made structure: Shaw is not taken in by what the characters are supposed to do to build the structure of his play, even though he makes his characters act, puppet-like, precisely as they must to fulfill those requirements. When Tanner at the end of the play resigns himself to Ann, he accepts her dominant "Life Force" at one level, but in the well-structured comedy he also accepts the inevitable denouement of that structure when he says, "The trap was laid from the beginning" and "It is very easy for you to call me a happy man: you are only a spectator. I am one of the principals; and I know better." Part of the fun in the play is that Shaw too, of course, knows better.

In the nineties and after, essays and texts written

to guide the playwright invariably focused on the well-made structure. William Archer in Playmaking, for example, divides his book into a discussion of The Beginning, The Middle, and The End, consciously indebted to Aristotelian division.<sup>264</sup> He considers separate chapters on such matters as exposition, foreshadowing, logic, the peripety, probability, climax, and anti-climax. Brander Matthews in A Study of the Drama states his primary concern with "the structural framework which the great dramatists of various epochs have given their plays."<sup>265</sup> George Pierce Baker, not as restricted as either of these, nevertheless considers matters of proportion and arrangement.<sup>266</sup> In such a critical atmosphere, playwrights predictably were concerned with well-made structure. H. L. Mencken, introducing an edition of Ibsen's plays, observed, "He gave infinitely more thought to questions of practical dramaturgy--to getting his characters on and off stage, to building up climaxes, to calculating effects--than he ever gave to the ideational content of his dramas."<sup>267</sup> Chekhov was concerned with well-made structure in quite the

<sup>264</sup>Archer, Playmaking (New York, 1934).

<sup>265</sup>Matthews, Study of the Drama, p. v.

<sup>266</sup>Baker, Dramatic Technique.

<sup>267</sup>H. L. Mencken, "Introduction," The Master Builder, Pillars of Society, Hedda Gabler (New York: Boni and Liveright, n. d., "Intro." dated 1917), p. ix.

opposite way: he wanted to do away with convention. Criticizing Maxim Gorky's The Petty Bourgeois, he found the major defect to be a conservatism, a too ready reliance on the accepted.<sup>268</sup>

Without denying the validity or the desirability of well-made structure, it is sensible to suggest at least three major requirements of that structure that can become for playwrights mere form to be followed and for critics a provident measuring stick to gauge the playwright's success: the emphasis on logic, the concept that a play is a draftsman's blueprint (often the blueprint of a pyramid) and the rigid attention to conventional devices.

The first of these, logical structure, led the playwright to a syllogistic formula like William T. Price's notion of the "Dramatic Proposition," which he explained as "the brief logical statement or syllogism of that which has to be demonstrated by the Complete Action of the play."<sup>269</sup> The beginning he calls the situation; the middle, the cause; the end, the result. Since the proposition must include all that is in the play from beginning to end, it is analogous to the writer's task of being forced to

<sup>268</sup> Anton Chekhov, Letters on the Short Story, the Drama and Other Literary Topics (New York: Minton, Balch and Company, 1924), p. 178. A letter to Maxim Gorky.

<sup>269</sup> William T. Price, "The Dramatic Proposition," in Barrett H. Clark, European Theories of the Drama (New York, 1947), p. 487.

sum up his entire essay in what textbooks sometimes call a thesis statement. One of Price's students, Edwin Krows wrote a manual, aptly titled Playwriting for Profit, to help the novice to structure his play as a syllogism.<sup>270</sup>

A play written with careful strokes of logic may easily satisfy an audience that likes to see a puzzle worked out, but a list of such plays is not likely to include many of the world's lasting works for the theatre, plays which do not easily reduce to logic. One could, for instance, attempt to reduce Oedipus Rex to a sort of logic: There is trouble in Thebes (beginning), Oedipus is the source of the trouble (middle), and thus the discovery that Oedipus is the source of the trouble brings relief to Thebes (conclusion). But such an approach makes the play something of a grand murder mystery, which may be one way to approach it. With many enduring works of the theatre, one is hard put to find a logical proposition that will even begin to encompass the action of the play. If one always expects logic in his play he may be looking for something that is not there, nor should be there. Brander Matthews felt that the only logical end for William Gillette's Secret Service (1895) was tragic. As he understood it, the play had carried the audience "straight to the tragic end which is the only logical issue of the

<sup>270</sup>Edwin Krows, Playwriting for Profit (New York, 1928).

circumstances and the characters, and then at the culmination, when the prompters hand was on the bell to ring down the curtain, the author suddenly reprieved his hero and married him off in the twinkling of an eye."<sup>271</sup> Matthews suggested that the comic scenes in the play were partly responsible for the failure, on the part of the audience, to take the play as tragedy.<sup>272</sup> But there is in fact no more of a development toward a logical issue of characters and circumstances in the play than there is in spy thrillers today, and the illogical romantic ending fits. American plays, like the American novel and the temperament out of which it is created, rarely sacrifices the romantic to an exercise in cold logic. In Herne's plays the strain of romantic idealism is much too strong for reason to prevail.

This strong emphasis on logical structure in the well-made play carried with it the requirement of a carefully blue-printed arrangement in an emphatic order of climax. Freytag's pyramid is a celebrated attempt to provide a graphic realization of the movement of a play: one side of the pyramid--the rising action--ascends to the climactic apex, and the other side--the falling action--

<sup>271</sup>Matthews, Study of the Drama, p. 196.

<sup>272</sup>Matthews, Study of the Drama, p. 196.

descends.<sup>273</sup> This sort of structure unfortunately suggests a mechanical craftsmanship. Critics have observed that it has the defect of suggesting that the dramatic intensity falls away in the latter part of the play.<sup>274</sup> The student of drama, especially the modern drama, encounters too many plays that will fit the pyramid only if forced to do so. For instance, if the student has the task of graphing King Lear, it is entirely conceivable that he could say the climax of the action is the heath scene and that all that follows is falling action, or he might decide that the climax occurs in the first scene when Lear gives away his kingdom, and that the entire play is falling action. Such diagramming games, however, have little to do with the emotional action which gives the play form.

Brander Matthews suggested a revision of Freytag's pyramid to avoid the suggestion that the latter part of the play was a falling away. He suggested that a play be represented by an ascending line from beginning to end, "a diagram of interest."<sup>275</sup> While this revision may remedy some of the deficiencies of the Freytag pyramid, it still suggests that a play can be easily graphed, mechanically. Another manual for playwrights suggested that the dramatist

<sup>273</sup>Krows, Playwriting for Profit, p. 71.

<sup>274</sup>Krows, Playwriting for Profit, p. 71.

<sup>275</sup>Matthews, Study of the Drama, p. 213.

make his scenario a kind of diagram showing rises and falls so that "he sees their proportions, and builds them up or pulls them down to suit their relative importance."<sup>276</sup> Even recently, playwrighting texts have suggested an essentially well-made structure. There is, for instance, Selden's "Iron Checklist" of the structural parts:

P--preparation, exposition  
 A--attack, word or act to precipitate the conflict  
 S--struggle, the conflict  
 T--turn, climax  
 O--outcome, ending<sup>277</sup>

Of these parts, the handling of the exposition--the skill with which the playwright manages to communicate necessary information in the first act--has long been considered a test of the playwright.<sup>278</sup> One hoary method of dispensing information is to bring the domestics on stage for a chat about the activities of their superiors. A more subtly made play allows the exposition to unfold gradually within the development of the action. In Ghosts, for instance, Ibsen passes along much valuable information in the opening dialogue between Regina, the servant, and Engstand, her father, but at the same time introduces a dramatic conflict that is necessary to the theme and

<sup>276</sup>Franklin Fyles, The Theatre and Its People (New York, 1900), pp. 116-117.

<sup>277</sup>Kenneth MacGowan, A Primer of Playwriting (New York, 1951), p. 164.

<sup>278</sup>Matthews, Study of the Drama, p. 184.

development of the play.

From exposition, the playwright moves through his attack and a developing conflict toward the climax, the turning point of the action, defined by Baker as the scene which produces the strongest emotion in the audience.<sup>279</sup> There can be several climaxes in a play, but if the structure is to be a pyramid, the high point should be the one scene in which all of the forces at work in the play come together in an emotional splash. The climax passed, the playwright may still have problems with the falling action. The use of an explanatory fifth act is common in nineteenth century plays, and playwrights of the nineties were slow to turn away from the practice. Thus, the structure of Herne's Within an Inch of His Life, is completed in a typical last act where all is explained, and each character is neatly disposed of. The problem with such a technique, as George Pierce Baker has pointed out, is that the suspense which could keep interest until the end of the play is lost, and the audience spends the last few minutes not anticipating but knowing exactly what will happen, waiting for the careful knots to be tied off in prearranged bows.<sup>280</sup>

Such a well-made structure, with its careful beginning,

<sup>279</sup>Baker, Dramatic Technique, p. 218.

<sup>280</sup>Baker, Dramatic Technique, p. 211.



middle, and end, demanded several technical devices and conventions, most notably the scene á faire, the obligatory scene, the scene which is shown in action on the stage because the structure demands that it must be. These scenes usually involve a struggle of contending wills, "the interview wherein there is the actual collision of the several resolves."<sup>281</sup> William Archer considered the interview between Griffith Davenport and Governor Morton in Griffith Davenport such a scene.<sup>282</sup> Interestingly, this scene gave Herne problems in his first draft. Originally, he felt obliged to bring President Lincoln on stage for the interview with Davenport, but Lincoln dominated the scene, destroying the dramatic struggle within the protagonist. Herne substituted Governor Morton as Lincoln's emissary, thus fulfilling his obligation to put the scene on the stage but at the same time keeping the focus on Davenport.

Also necessary to the well-made formula is a struggle, a conflict, of which Brander Matthews wrote, "In every successful play . . . we shall find this clash of contending desires, this assertion of the human will against strenuous opposition of one kind or another."<sup>283</sup> Walter

<sup>281</sup>Matthews, Study of the Drama, p. 106.

<sup>282</sup>Archer, Playmaking, p. 254.

<sup>283</sup>Matthews, Study of the Drama, p. 94.

Prichard Eaton, another exponent of the well-made play, found struggle to be "the essence of drama . . . at the heart of every true play."<sup>284</sup> Henry James expands upon the role of conflict: "A play appears to me of necessity to involve a struggle--a question of whether and how, will it or won't it happen? and if so, or not so, how and why?--which we have the suspense, the curiosity, the anxiety, the tension, in a word, of seeing, and which means that the whole thing shows an attack upon oppositions."<sup>285</sup>

An examination of typical plays of almost any time and place will discover a contest of wills at the dramatic core. But to remain valid for succeeding generations of playgoers, such conflicts must develop out of the wills of complete characters, not merely out of ideas in opposition, for ideas that suggest vital conflict to one generation may seem unimportant to another. One critic has posed the question this way: "Confronted with the society of today, where the familiar conflicts of . . . the drama are becoming less and less important, what is left for the playwright to do?"<sup>286</sup> For instance, feminine chastity

<sup>284</sup>Walter Prichard Eaton, The Drama in English (New York, 1930), p. 4.

<sup>285</sup>Henry James, a letter dated 1909, in Brander Matthews, "Henry James and the Theatre," Bookman, LI (June, 1920), p. 392.

<sup>286</sup>Edouard Bourdet, "The Play in Transition," in Edith Isaacs, Theatre: Essays on the Arts of the Theatre (Boston, 1927), p. 54.



and fidelity--an age-old source of conflict--may carry little weight today for some audiences. But when the conflict over feminine chastity involves a strong conflict between the wills of fully developed characters, as in Othello, the idea of fidelity cannot be dated, within the context of the play.<sup>287</sup>

William Archer tried to avoid the problem of putting too much emphasis on the struggle by renaming it a crisis: "A play is a more or less rapidly-developing crisis in destiny or circumstance, and a dramatic scene is a crisis within a crisis, clearly furthering the ultimate event."<sup>288</sup> Archer's crisis is, however, little more than an undefined new term, no more specific nor inclusive than what it replaces. Baker rejected it, suggesting that in the modern drama any conflict or crisis in the older sense is an unwarranted expectation: "Surely inertness, supineness, stupidity, and even torpor may be made to excite emotion in an audience. Conflict covers a large part of drama but not all of it."<sup>289</sup>

What replaces conflict in the older sense, or to be more precise, what gives dramatic vitality to the conflict, is complete characters through whom the conflict is

<sup>287</sup>Thompson, Anatomy of Drama, p. 145.

<sup>288</sup>William Archer, Playmaking, p. 36.

<sup>289</sup>Baker, Dramatic Technique, p. 44.

expressed. In the more mechanically formulated well-made plays, characters may be little more than vehicles to move a neatly structured plot along. Often, character is lost to stereotype in a role easily assigned to a "character actor." When Garland wrote to Howells of his plans for A Member of the Third House, Howells replied, "I'm interested by what you say of the drama and if you can fit your character play to some character actor, you'll succeed."<sup>290</sup> More perhaps than Howells suspected, his advice was along the lines of the play-making formulas suggested by play builders like Frank Archer who believed that it made little difference whether the plot was arranged for the characters or the characters for the plot.<sup>291</sup> Archer was the captive of a formula that called for characters who could be found in the standard equipment of the old stock company--The Leading Man, The First Old Man, The Comedian, The Villain, The Juvenile (male), The Leading Lady, The First Old Woman, The Comedienne, The Soubrette, The Ingenue, and The Juvenile (female).<sup>292</sup> So firmly entrenched were such concepts of casting that Archer prophesied, "We

<sup>290</sup>William Dean Howells, Life in Letters of William Dean Howells, ed. Mildred Howells, 2 vol. (Garden City, N.Y., 1928), Vol. I, p. 407.

<sup>291</sup>Frank Archer, How To Write a Good Play (New York, 1892), p. 82.

<sup>292</sup>Alfred Hennequin, Art of Playwrighting (Boston, 1890), pp. 81-82.

may safely assume that as they have lasted so long, they are sure of a fair popularity in the future."<sup>293</sup> Typical of such characters were the stage Yankee, into which type-casting critics tended to place Herne's Uncle Nat, and "loafer" characters, into which they cast Joseph Jefferson for life.

But such type-cast characters were not to survive as the center of the modern drama (which is not to say that their varied descendants are absent from the current stage). The reason for this shift in characterization was apparent to Baker: "Fundamentally, type characterization rests on a false premise, namely, that every human being may be adequately represented by some dominant characteristic or small group of related characteristics. All the better recent drama emphasizes the comic or tragic conflict in human beings caused by many contradictory impulses and ideas."<sup>294</sup> Considering the plays which Baker had at hand to observe, it is easy to accept his denial of the utility of stereotypes in a new drama, but later in this century the stereotypic approach to character has been reevaluated as a useful beginning pattern in communicating character. Once the basic pattern of a character has been discovered, we can begin to understand the function of that character

<sup>293</sup>Frank Archer, How To Write a Good Play, p. 119.

<sup>294</sup>Baker, Dramatic Technique, p. 235.

in the play as a whole. Patricia McIlrath has written, "Any indictment of characterization merely because a stereotype is symbolized is inaccurate and shallow."<sup>295</sup> But starting from a basic pattern the playwright can try for "individualized behavior--the basic conflict of character."<sup>296</sup> The appeal of stereotypes is to a low-level of organization in thinking. Plays like Hearts of Oak appeal at that level. But with the same basic system of stereotyped organization, the playwright can build a more elaborate, complex character whose appeal is to a higher order. Herne attempted to raise his stereotypes in Hearts of Oak to a higher level when he rewrote them in Sag Harbor.

To effect this higher appeal, the playwright chooses his actions, his plot situations, to reveal the complexity of character. Henry James remarked that Ibsen's great quality was "his habit of dealing essentially with the individual caught in the fact."<sup>297</sup> To catch the character in the fact of his actions is to return to an emphasis on plot, but in a different way than in the carefully plotted plays of the early French school, where the plot develops

<sup>295</sup> Patricia McIlrath, "Stereotypes, Types, and Characters in Drama," Educational Theatre Journal, VII (March, 1955), p. 5.

<sup>296</sup> McIlrath, "Stereotypes," p. 5.

<sup>297</sup> Henry James, The Scenic Art, ed. Alan Wade (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1948), p. 255.

outside of character. In newer plays, plot and character are not treated as separate entities.<sup>298</sup> It should be noted here that extreme emphasis on character, outside of plot, may be equally undesirable. Robert Corrigan has said, "Whenever the personality of the character, rather than the action of which the character should be a part becomes the playwright's chief concern, dramatic process dissolves into explanation."<sup>299</sup>

Stark Young, ever a reliable index of the trends in modern drama, treats character as one aspect of plot: "The dramatist discovers creative actions, actions expressive of his characters. A plot in a play derives from these actions brought into combination, as they meet and cross one another, in the world of life that they embody and express. If the characters express themselves in their actions, and the sum of their actions implies the plot, it follows that the plot includes, or can at least include, them both, and can be therefore of all the elements in the play the most inclusive, and therefore most largely and completely expressive of the play's essential idea or quality."<sup>300</sup> We are back to one of the oldest comments on the drama, back to Aristotle's observation

<sup>298</sup>Thompson, Anatomy of Drama, p. 80.

<sup>299</sup>Robert Corrigan, The Modern Theatre (New York, 1964), p. xi.

<sup>300</sup>Young, The Theater, pp. 50-51.



that the primary element in the drama is the plot, plot that is conceived as part of an organic whole developed from the inner lives of the characters of the play, the psychology of the characters, not as a carefully built structure within which to place characters who will move it forward. The modern drama becomes more a matter of character development than of plot structure. The playwright builds his play, as Eaton observed, with "situation held down to a minimum, while the maximum sense of life unfolding itself from the characters is sought."<sup>301</sup>

The practice of Ibsen, who worked within a well-made framework, is typical of the modern approach to handling character and plot: "Before I write down one word, I have to have the character in mind through and through. I must penetrate into the last wrinkle of his soul. I always proceed from the individual; the stage setting, the dramatic ensemble, all of that comes naturally and does not cause me any worry, as soon as I am certain of the individual in every aspect of his humanity. But I have to have his exterior in mind also down to the last button, how he stands and walks, how he conducts himself, what his voice sounds like. Then I do not let him go until his fate is fulfilled."<sup>302</sup> Gerhart Hauptmann worked in much

<sup>301</sup>Walter Prichard Eaton, "Revolt from Realism," Virginia Quarterly Review, X (1934), p. 519.

<sup>302</sup>A. E. Zucker, Ibsen: The Master Builder (New York, 1929), p. 194.

the same way, with "characters imbued with the fullest vitality by my spirit . . . spiritually strong men and women, who have become capable of making judgments."<sup>303</sup>

Observing the work of playwrights like these around him, William Archer, whose manual Playmaking tends to the well-made tradition, found that he needed to make room for this inner development of character if he were to allow living space for the newer drama. His approach to the drama, more descriptive than prescriptive, suggests that characters do not change but that characterization is rather an unveiling, a disclosure.<sup>304</sup> A natural development was to expect the characters to change onstage, not in offstage action, as was too often the case in plot-centered plays. The audience, Baker wrote, "balked more and more at hearing of changes instead of seeing them."<sup>305</sup>

To men working in a theatre thoroughly bound to formulas of the well-made play, the audience may have seemed slow to balk at conventions, but gradually there was a place for the subtle well-made plays of Ibsen and others. Shaw observed, overstating the point, in the Quintessence of Ibsenism that "the writer who practices

<sup>303</sup>Gerhart Hauptmann, "On the Drama," trans. F. B. Wahr, in Robert Corrigan, The Modern Theatre (New York, 1964), p. 51.

<sup>304</sup>Archer, Playmaking, p. 373.

<sup>305</sup>Baker, Dramatic Technique, p. 140.

the art of Ibsen . . . discards all the old tricks of preparation, catastrophe, denouement, and so forth without thinking about it."<sup>306</sup> Aware of what was required of them, playwrights like Herne nevertheless set out on their own, without thinking so much about breaking formulas as about making effective expression in the theatre. They were moving toward what Susanne Langer has said of the essential illusion of the play: "The illusion which constitutes the work of art is not a mere arrangement of given materials in an aesthetically pleasing pattern; it is what results from the arrangements, and is literally something the artist makes, not something he finds."<sup>307</sup> Such an attitude toward arrangement and structure allows creative possibilities and avoids the sterility of formulas and pyramids and neat beginnings and endings that once earned the play the encomium "well-made."

#### FORMULA: MELODRAMA

In a discussion of the well-made play, especially in its early stages, I have suggested several characteristics that also describe melodrama: the emphasis on surface excitement of plot, characters designed to fit into the plot

<sup>306</sup>George Bernard Shaw, The Quintessence of Ibsenism, 3rd ed. (1922) reprint by Dramabook (New York, 1957), p. 183.

<sup>307</sup>Langer, Feeling, p. 68.

(as opposed to characters who create plot), and exciting climaxes. Unlike the well-made play, melodrama shows little proclivity for inner psychology and logic. For psychologically developed characters, melodrama substitutes a fearful identification with a character who escapes from a perilous situation into a "happy ending," adding along the way the vicarious pleasure of power and success and the salving altruism of sentimental emotions. For logic, melodrama supplies a world that is indifferent to reason. It does not attempt to make its audience believe that it is witnessing reality; in fact, the audience is invited to participate in the illusion by cheering the hero and applauding his escapes.<sup>308</sup>

The audience for a nineteenth century melodrama came into the illusory world of the theatre in a carnival mood. Herne tells one characteristic incident during a performance of Pizarro. Charles B. Bishop was playing the Sentinel.

Now it happened that "Pizarro" was on the boards for the evening of the day on which Bishop was married to Miss Josephine Parker, who had long been the popular chamber-maid of the stock company. Bishop rehearsed his part in the morning, was married in the afternoon, and duly appeared as the Sentinel at night. The scene is "corridor of prison." The Sentinel is discovered on guard, passing to and fro armed with spear, helmet, shield, and buckler. Rolla enters

<sup>308</sup> Alan Thompson, "Melodrama and Tragedy," PMLA, XLIII (1928), p. 824.

and endeavors to obtain access to the dungeon. He carries the customary bag of gold, filled with broken china which jingles temptingly, and seeks to persuade the Sentinel. Then come the lines:

Sentinel: Wouldst bribe me? I know my duty better.

Rolla: Soldier, hast thou a wife?

Sentinel: I have.

Here there was a wild burst of applause from the audience, which took Bishop quite unawares. It was the first time he had received a round of applause at that point: but he was not long in realizing its significance, and with that came a sinking feeling as he thought of the next lines.

Rolla: And children?

Sentinel: Four honest, lovely boys.

Then followed such a roar as I suppose was never before or afterward heard in that theater.<sup>309</sup>

In such an atmosphere, melodrama sufficed. Most critical observers think of melodrama, chiefly, as rigging the consequences of probability in manipulating a plot and the happy ending. William Archer, for instance, defined melodrama as "illogical and sometimes irrational tragedy."<sup>310</sup> Ludwig Lewisohn wrote, "Melodrama, it is commonly held, owes its character to astute plotting and to moments of intensely heightened conflict. The briefest observation of our stage destroys that theory at once. The average melodrama is structurally stupid."<sup>311</sup>

<sup>309</sup>Herne, "Forty Years Behind the Footlights," The Coming Age, II (August, 1899), p. 126.

<sup>310</sup>Thompson, "Melodrama and Tragedy," p. 816.

<sup>311</sup>Lewisohn, The Drama and the Stage, p. 32.

The quick resolution of every complication and the happy ending escape the logical emotional conclusions inherent in the structure of the action. A popular example is Daly's Divorce in which Herne acted in 1874. The title of the play suggests social problem drama, but in the play the divorced couple, Lu and DeWolfe, are reconciled in a sudden reversal at the end, and remarry. The earlier divorce, granted through the chicanery of a lawyer, is presented as an exciting exercise in legal strategy, allowing the playwright to ignore any of the vital questions which the problem of divorce might easily have stimulated in 1874.<sup>312</sup> A melodramatic ending of another kind is the result of a law of the drama--Bronson Howard for one considered it a law--that a pure woman cannot die on the stage. She must be saved, structural logic to the contrary. An erring woman, of course, can die as the audience "looks on with complacent tears."<sup>313</sup> Dumas' Camille may still bring a tear, complacent to be sure, as she expires on the operatic stage. Melodrama bothers itself with final truths only so much as it chooses.

Herne never quite avoids the illogical structure so characteristic of melodrama. Even in the low-keyed Shore

<sup>312</sup>Marvin Felheim, The Theatre of Augustin Daly (Harvard University Press, 1956), p. 117.

<sup>313</sup>Jordan Y. Miller, American Dramatic Literature (New York, 1961), p. 8.

Acres, he inserted the melodramatic lighthouse scene in Act III, a scene which William Archer found "hopelessly out of key with the rest of the play."<sup>314</sup> Alan S. Downer suggests that "real success eluded Herne because of his tendency to overwrite the climactic scenes."<sup>315</sup> But the melodramatic elements in Herne's plays did appeal to contemporary audiences, and his promoters sometimes turned this appeal into boxoffice lure. In one poster advertising Shore Acres, Uncle Nat is shown looking earnestly down at Helen saying, "I ain't yer father, Nell."<sup>316</sup> Inside the theatre the customer would discover that the line is a kindly prelude to Uncle Nat's rustic advice to his niece.

Like this misleading poster, the melodramatic excitement creates an emotion in the audience which is a trick, an empty response. One critic puts it this way: "The emotional expression exceeds the emotional content."<sup>317</sup> Herne, however, accepted the formula-ridden melodramas for what they were; he wrote, "They deal with life as it goes on around us; they all have a spark of truth; they possess,

<sup>314</sup>Archer, Playmaking, p. 20.

<sup>315</sup>Alan Downer, Fifty Years of American Drama (New York, 1951), p. 31.

<sup>316</sup>Oral S. Coad and Edwin Mims, Jr., The American Stage, Vol. 14 in The Pageant of America (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1929), p. 286.

<sup>317</sup>Bruce Carpenter, The Way of the Drama (New York, 1929), p. 122.

in a degree, that human interest which appeals to the emotional nature. Hence, in spite of their crudities and artificiality, they are frequently money-makers; and that is about all that can be said in favor of them."<sup>318</sup>

#### FORMULA: TRAGEDY

The appeal of both melodrama and tragedy develops from the prerequisite of arousing emotional response. To point out the less than serious nature of the emotion in melodrama is not to dismiss it as beside the dramatic point. Melodrama has been called "poetry in the rough"<sup>319</sup> and "tragedy that has approached the ridiculous instead of the sublime."<sup>320</sup> Alan Thompson writes, "No tragedy has ever succeeded on the stage which has not been built solidly on a basis of 'melodrama,' that is to say, that a tragedy must first excite the identifying emotions . . . before it can pass to the universal one."<sup>321</sup> The difference is that tragedy gives a wider range to the emotions, a universal experience caused by deeper reflection upon the incident to discover how the emotion aroused harmonizes

<sup>318</sup> Herne, "The Present Outlook for the American Drama," The Coming Age, I (March, 1899), p. 254.

<sup>319</sup> Norman Hapgood, "The Drama of Ideas," Littell's Living Age, CCXX (February, 1899), p. 163.

<sup>320</sup> Cheney, New Movement in the Theatre, p. 249.

<sup>321</sup> Thompson, "Melodrama and Tragedy," p. 835.



or jars with the past experience and habitual faiths of the audience.<sup>322</sup> The lesser appeal of melodrama is almost uncivilized, basically innocent, arousing response in uncomplicated natures.

Like melodrama, tragedy may be considered illogical, if we mean logic in a syllogistic sense, not in the sense that there is a natural (logical) illogicality to life. Rather than logic we can expect plausibility of action which arises from reasonable motivation of characters. In that sense, as Clayton Hamilton has said, there are few limitations on plausibility in melodrama where the characters are made to fit the invented incidents, but in tragedy "we demand an unquestionable inevitability: nothing may happen . . . which is not a logical result of the nature of . . . [the] characters."<sup>323</sup> The audience responds emotionally to these characters, with excitement in melodrama, with reflection in tragedy. The response is different because the basic emotional form is different. Establishing the different order of emotional form in tragedy is complicated by the confusing variety and profusion of commentary on the subject. For our purposes here, the discussion will be limited to those areas that illuminate the tragic quality in Herne's plays.

<sup>322</sup>Thompson, "Melodrama and Tragedy," p. 828.

<sup>323</sup>Hamilton, Theory of the Theatre, p. 129.

By some definitions, tragedy may be impossible in our times: Krutch, for example, has shown that tragedy in a classical sense hardly fits the modern temper.<sup>324</sup> A sociologist has suggested that Americans can have little understanding of tragedy, for it does not fit the American spirit.<sup>325</sup> Arthur Miller is a celebrated case of a playwright who finds it necessary to try to remake the old definitions of tragedy to fit the contemporary tragedies he writes. Even those who find Death of a Salesman lacking as tragedy find at least enough resemblance to the genre to argue the point, at length.<sup>326</sup>

It seems reasonable to assume that concepts of tragedy are both a reflection of men and of their times, and are interesting for that reason. It seems reasonable, too, that concepts of tragedy can go just so far in saying something about the work of art. To be able to cite a particular play as "tragedy" according to one man's vision, or version, is of interest as it illuminates the work and its likeness or unlikeness to other works. But the

<sup>324</sup>Joseph Wood Krutch, "The Tragic Fallacy," The Modern Temper (New York, 1929), pp. 115-143.

<sup>325</sup>Klapp, "Tragedy and the American Climate of Opinion," pp. 396-413.

<sup>326</sup>George Jean Nathan, "Death of a Salesman," in The Theatre Book of the Year, 1948-1949 (New York, 1949), pp. 279-285. Considering what is usual in tragedy, Nathan concludes that plays about the common man do not belong, except under rare circumstances, in "The temple of dramatic art."

conclusion that a play is or is not a "tragedy" is of no more final interest than deciding that it is "comedy, history, pastoral, pastoral-comical, historical-pastoral, tragical-historical, tragical-comical-historical-pastoral, scene individable, or poem unlimited."

Particular concepts aside, emotion is, as has been suggested, the central quality of tragedy--emotion that leads us, as Alan Thompson has said, "to impassioned contemplation of ultimates. To a person thus reflecting as well as feeling, emotions become generalized."<sup>327</sup> Edith Hamilton writes, "Tragedy's one essential is a soul that can feel greatly."<sup>328</sup> But emotion without form, deep feeling without consequent reflection, is not enough for tragedy.

Tragedy seeks its form, as all plays do, in the mythos or plot-structure in the Aristotelian sense, Northrop Frye has observed.<sup>329</sup> What is this particular plot structure--mythos--that becomes a tragedy? The event, the thing that happens in a tragedy, Northrop Frye writes, is the movement of the hero to a perception of "the determined shape of the life he has chosen" and a contrasting perception of

<sup>327</sup>Thompson, Anatomy of Drama, p. 273.

<sup>328</sup>Edith Hamilton, "Tragedy," in Edith Isaacs, Theatre: Essays on the Arts of the Theatre (Boston, 1927), p. 88.

<sup>329</sup>Northrop Frye, Anatomy of Criticism (Princeton, 1957), p. 207.

the uncreated personal life he has forsaken."<sup>330</sup> Our response should be, "This does happen." Susanne Langer describes the rhythm of the mythos of tragedy as "the growth and full realization of a personality."<sup>331</sup> She sees tragedy as "form in suspense": "The prime agent of tragedy is heroic; his character, the unfolding situation, the scene, even though ostensibly familiar and humble, are all exaggerated, charged with more feeling than comparable actualities would possess. This intensification is necessary to achieve 'form in suspense'. . . . The tragic ending must recapitulate the whole action to be a visible fulfillment of a destiny that was implicit in the beginning."<sup>332</sup> Man, in Langer's view, conceives of life as a journey, a single span with death the inevitable end. Even when he is reconciled to this inevitable end, he still tries to realize himself--his own personality--by living as much and as intensely as possible in that span. Tragedy presents such a man, conscious of his destiny and his limitations, acting out the plot, the mythos of his life.

This man has, in Unamuno's phrase, "a tragic sense of life." And it is this sense, this tragic vision which

<sup>330</sup>Frye, Anatomy, p. 212.

<sup>331</sup>Langer, Feeling, p. 352.

<sup>332</sup>Langer, Feeling, p. 357.

Sewall considers central to tragedy: "It is the sense of ancient evil, of the mystery of human suffering, of the gulf between aspiration and achievement. It colours the tragic artist's vision of life (his theoretic form) and gives his works their peculiar shade and tone. It speaks, not the language of symbolic thought but through symbolic action, symbol and figure, diction and image, sound and rhythm. Such a recognition should precede any attempt to talk 'systematically' about tragedy, while not denying the value of the attempt itself."<sup>333</sup> In such a vision, the event which evokes the response "This must be" is primary, the explanation if it is secondary. We respond with pity and fear in almost a folk sense that we are witnessing a common fate and, as Ludwig Lewisohn wrote, "a terror lest we wrong our brother or violate his will, not lest we share his guilt and incur his punishment."<sup>334</sup> It awakens in us an emotional awareness of the community of human suffering.<sup>335</sup> The essential emotional form in tragedy leads to no solution of problems (what problems are finally solved, like succession to the throne of Scotland or Denmark, are tangential to the essential form). The

<sup>333</sup>Richard S. Sewall, "The Tragic Form," Essays in Criticism, IV (October, 1954), p. 348.

<sup>334</sup>Ludwig Lewisohn, "A Note on Tragedy," in Moses and Brown, The American Theater, p. 196.

<sup>335</sup>Lewisohn, "A Note on Tragedy," p. 196.

rhythm of tragedy leads us through the resolution of a personality. In a broader sense, it cannot come to more than a temporary resolution for that one man, for even if his sorrows are ended, the inevitable sorrows of man are not. Sewall writes, "Basic to the tragic form is its recognition of the inevitability of paradox, of unresolved tensions and ambiguities, of opposites in precarious balance."<sup>336</sup>

The form is concerned with an inner action of personal discovery and realization, not with the outer workings of Fate or naturalistic, determined forces. The suffering and sorrow which come to the tragic hero come from his own willful choice. Lear, for instance, chooses and sets in motion his own destiny when he divides the kingdom. In the superstitious world of his Britain, men like Gloucester may talk about the stars and fate, but they are talking about the external, and uninteresting, forces that blind them to a perception of the willful personality who can and does create his own world. Lear lives out the destiny, conscious of the alternate destiny he has forsaken when he made his choice. As Cordelia, the emblem of the life he has given up, becomes more and more prominent in the play, Lear's awareness of the consequences of his choice increases.

<sup>336</sup>Sewall, "The Tragic Form," p. 183.

In the plays of Ibsen, the characters are on the surface caught in a web of inevitable circumstance, but the outer circumstances--society and heredity--do not interest us as they may have interested Ibsen's contemporaries. Instead, his plays remain interesting, in part, for "the action of the tragedy as it was lived in the minds of the responsible participants."<sup>337</sup> Even so silly and wrong-headed a woman as Hedda Gabler remains interesting because of the strength of the personality she tests against the action of the play she is in. If she is seen only as a woman fighting for a social cause or as a doomed victim of her family, there is no tragedy. As Sewall has said, "When man's affairs are reduced to an affair with the social order, or environment, or the glands . . . the muse of tragedy walks out."<sup>338</sup> If the past of the character (his environment and heredity) becomes merely a destroyer of his future, there is no tragedy. But if these past forces clash within the character forcing him to choose a destiny, he is potentially tragic.<sup>339</sup>

E. E. Stoll has described this inner clash as

<sup>337</sup>Thomas H. Dickinson, Outline of Contemporary Drama (New York, 1927), pp. 86-87.

<sup>338</sup>Sewall, "The Tragic Form," p. 351.

<sup>339</sup>Winthrop H. Root, "The Past as an Element in Naturalistic Tragedy," Germanic Review, XII (1937), p. 177.





distinguishing the kind of tragic hero the Elizabethans could make--man facing the externals of villains or Fate--and the modern hero--man facing an inner fate; the tragedy of each period, he writes, reflects the taste of the times.<sup>340</sup> Similar comparison can be made with the mythical tradition of Greece which treated Fate as a mysterious power inherent in the world rather than in the man. Yet in the Greek plays, as Susanne Langer has observed, the interest centers on the man who will act out the fate in a series of occasions which the world will provide:<sup>341</sup>

What he [the tragic hero] brings is his potentiality: his mental, moral, and even psychical powers, his powers to act and suffer. Tragic action is the realization of all his possibilities, which he unfolds and exhausts in the course of the drama. His human nature is his Fate. Destiny conceived as Fate is, therefore, not capricious, like Fortune, but is predetermined. Outward events are merely occasions for its realization.<sup>342</sup>

In Oedipus Rex the interest is not in the external Fate but in the way Oedipus chooses to confront that Fate. Sophocles' play begins at the point where Oedipus begins to realize his own personality as he discovers the occasions that have made him what he is, Oedipus The King. It is instructive to note by comparison that Cocteau's modern

<sup>340</sup>Stoll, "Literature and Life Again," p. 289.

<sup>341</sup>Langer, Feeling, p. 353.

<sup>342</sup>Langer, Feeling, p. 352.

version of the story, The Infernal Machine, chronologically follows Oedipus through each of the fateful occasions until he becomes the victim of the machinery of Fate. But Cocteau's play is not tragedy, it is modern irony. Fate as force, Miss Langer demonstrates, is something other than tragedy, while fate as oracular prophecy works as an intensifying symbol of the necessity that was really given with the agent's personality.<sup>343</sup>

The tragic poet is not interested alone in forces and laws but in man's perception, however dim, of some sense of order. Northrop Frye describes the heroes' relation with law as "the mystery of their communion with that something beyond which we can see only through them, and which is the source of their strength and their fate alike. . . . Tragedy seems to lead up to an epiphany of law, of that which is and must be."<sup>344</sup> In the hero's perception lies his victory, a spiritual victory that transforms the character. Sewall writes, "Perception is all that can be summed up in the spiritual and moral change that the hero undergoes from first to last and in the similar change wrought by his example in those around him."<sup>345</sup> The change comes by suffering: "I suffer, I

<sup>343</sup>Langer, Feeling, p. 353.

<sup>344</sup>Frye, Anatomy, p. 208.

<sup>345</sup>Sewall, "The Tragic Form," p. 356.

will to suffer, I learn by suffering; therefore I am."<sup>346</sup>

This sufferer is more than usually aware of the world around him, of paradoxes and disappointments, and of the gap between what he aspires to as ideal and what he lives. An insensitive sufferer is merely pathetic, not tragic. Edith Hamilton tells the story of a seven-year old girl in Roman history, the daughter of a man judged guilty and condemned to death, and so herself condemned to die. As she passed through the crowds to her execution she cried and asked, "What have I done wrong? If you will tell me I will never do it again."<sup>347</sup> The story is heart-breaking, but the experience is not tragic. By contrast, in the context of Lear's play we can feel and reflect with him upon the tragedy of Cordelia's death, so seemingly meaningless that she too could have asked her executioner, "What have I done wrong?"

If the tragic hero's victory is a spiritual rise in perception, why is it so often accompanied by a fall in position or strength? The hero does not fall, as Frye has shown, because of a moral flaw or by fate; rather he falls because he chooses to exchange one condition for another when he enters a life of his own creation.<sup>348</sup> Frye says

<sup>346</sup>Sewall, "The Tragic Form," p. 353.

<sup>347</sup>Hamilton, "Tragedy," p. 88.

<sup>348</sup>Frye, Anatomy, p. 211.

of *The Fall*, "As soon as Adam falls, he enters his own created life, which is also the order of nature as we know it . . . a world in which existence itself is tragic."<sup>349</sup>

Nor does tragic man fall through pride, at least not pride alone. Sewall has written that "pride, like everything about tragedy, is ambiguous."<sup>350</sup> Pettiness and arrogance are likely to be as much a part of his pride as his independence and his humanity. He may have pride when he recognizes the life he has willfully created for himself, but that pride is, as we have said, his victory, not his defeat. To say that Hamlet or Oedipus or even Willy Loman is too proud and must fall is to pass a moral judgment and to by-pass the tragic action. Arthur Miller describes the pride of the tragic hero: "As a general rule, to which there may be exceptions unknown to me, I think the tragic feeling is evoked in us when we are in the presence of a character who is ready to lay down his life, if need be, to secure one thing--his sense of personal dignity."<sup>351</sup> Miller's hero, Proctor, in The Crucible, is a significant embodiment of this principle as he defends and is willing to die for his name, which to

<sup>349</sup>Frye, Anatomy, p. 212.

<sup>350</sup>Sewall, "The Tragic Form," p. 352.

<sup>351</sup>Arthur Miller, "Tragedy and the Common Man," The New York Times, February 27, 1949, II, pp. 1, 3.

him means his integrity. To his opponent, Governor Danforth, he is simply stubborn and proud and too eager to become a martyr. But Proctor's pride is the pride of tragic man who, recognizing the life he has made, plays out the part he has chosen. His wife, Elizabeth, gives the tragic epitaph in the last line of the play: "He hath his goodness now." It is not beside the point to note here that The Crucible has never had the commercial success of Miller's earlier, more ambiguous tragedy, Death of a Salesman. In that play, it is never quite clear whether Willy Loman is acting merely to take the easy way out or in realization of the destiny he has created; yet this ambiguity seems to make Willy more acceptable to audiences. Strong tragic figures like Proctor are not easy to accept today. A sociologist has suggested why Americans are reluctant to accept such heroes and why, in general, they fail to understand tragedy: "The average American, while he may admire a martyr with a clear-cut cause of service, does not like to follow a course through to tragic consequences. He has too much sense, for one thing. There is in him the spirit of the world, of compromise, of opportunism. He is proud of being flexible, able to start in a new direction when one line of action peters out."<sup>352</sup>

<sup>352</sup>Klapp, "Tragedy and the American Climate of Opinion," p. 411.

But the tragic hero must be something out of the ordinary. If he is reduced by an attempt to humanize him, to cut down his proud heroics, his play loses the force of tragedy. Consider what happens to Cocteau's Oedipus when the classic man of myth is reduced to a slangy, naïve country boy confronting the modern world of a decadent France. He is not tragic, even in the last act which begins and ends where Sophocles' play does. Or consider what happens to the Antigone when Anouilh reduces it to the setting and milieu of Vichy France. Anouilh's Creon is more human--a dictator with a problem--but his decisions seem to be the result of expediency not of tragic choice.

In these modern French plays, the mythical characters are presented more or less realistically. Since the development of realism in the late nineteenth century, tragedy, some critics say, has disappeared from the stage. There is a doubt that characters who are drawn closely from scientific observations of life and developed as products of their everyday environment and heritage can be tragic at all. (The problem is particularly relevant to a discussion of the so-called thesis plays of Herne.) Mary McCarthy, for one, believes that heroes in so-called realistic tragedies are more histrionic, less tragic, than real tragic heroes: "There is always a stillness at the center of the Shakespearean storm. It is as if the realist, in reaching for tragedy, were punished for his hubris

by a ludicrous fall into bathos. Tragedy is impossible by definition in the quotidian realist mode, since . . .

tragedy is the exceptional action one of whose signs is beauty."<sup>353</sup> When the realist tries to show everything, what Aldous Huxley calls the Whole Truth, he is writing a form incompatible with tragedy where "the artist must isolate a single element out of the totality of human experience and use that exclusively for his material."<sup>354</sup>

Lionel Abel, for another, feels that while tragedy is not impossible today, it is unlikely because "authentic tragedy, which can give a stronger feeling of reality than 'realism,' implies an acceptance of values which contemporary writers are unlikely to hold."<sup>355</sup>

Whether tragedy is possible or not, it is different in a realistically oriented theatre, as a later examination of Margaret Fleming will show. It is useful to end this discussion, for the moment, with Gassner's distinction which allows at least some room for tragedy in the modern world:

In my view, the distinction is fundamentally one in the quality of tragic enlightenment. There is a difference between earth-bound realizations,

<sup>353</sup> McCarthy, Theatre Chronicles 1937-1962, p. 222.

<sup>354</sup> Huxley, "Tragedy and the Whole Truth," pp. 181-182.

<sup>355</sup> Lionel Abel, Metatheatre: A New View of Dramatic Form (New York, 1963), p. 112.

limited to 'psychology' or social situation . . . and the wide prospect of a world-view that permeates . . . 'high tragedies.' In so far as the world-view is omitted, diminished or obfuscated by modern realism, sociology, or psychological science, modern drama cannot at best rise higher than 'low tragedy.' The characters of the drama may struggle intensely, but their stakes and the author's gambit in treating them are likely to be limited.<sup>356</sup>

Even when the modern temper seems to bar the possibilities of a tragic spiritual victory, the playwrights have not stopped trying. Even so sensational a play as Williams' Sweet Bird of Youth comes at least close to tragedy in its final scenes as the hero waits for his destiny, his castration, to be accomplished. What is more likely to bar tragedy is a too strict adherence to the formulas of tragedy as they have been defined classically and redefined ever since. If a critic tries to apply Aristotelian definition to modern tragedy, the modern play has difficulty measuring up. But such measuring may be as much an injustice to Aristotle as it is to the modern play, for Aristotle wrote no formula. He described what he saw in the successful typical tragedy of his time. Later critics who have canonized the Aristotelian definition have placed an unnecessary restriction on the playwrights to conform to the formula; some have taken up the challenge of the definition, in our time notably Arthur Miller.

<sup>356</sup>John Gassner, The Theatre in Our Times (New York, 1954), p. 70.



With Herne, however, there is little evidence to suggest that Aristotelian definition is a factor at all. His training in the drama came in a theatre which called the heroic drama of the late eighteenth century "tragedy." The first play he saw produced, The Gladiator, evoked an immediate melodramatic effect, but called for little reflection from the audience. Alan Downer has written that Americans had neither the time nor the instinct to see life in the new nation as offering possibilities for tragic contemplation.<sup>357</sup> It is entirely reasonable that Herne and his contemporaries in the theatre would call Drifting Apart a tragedy, unconcerned with classical definitions and precedents. But Herne did sense the tragic vision, the tragic form discussed above.

The critics, also, may be blinded from seeing and feeling the tragic form if they worry too much about the disputable elements in the Aristotelian definition, "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 kinds 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."

<sup>357</sup>Alan S. Downer, American Drama (New York, 1960), p. 3.

The important elements of this definition are in harmony with the discussion of form above. "Imitation," something that is made, not something natural. "Of an action," the series of occasions, of events, the mythos which allows the character to act out his destiny. "Serious," concerned with universal relationships of man and his destiny. "Magnitude," in the personality of the willful tragic hero, unusually sensitive to his tragic human condition and raised by his sensitivity above the plodding day to day problems. "Complete," the resolution of a personality.

Other elements in this definition, however, may seem to ask for more than the basic form; but the case is rather the other way around: too much is asked of them.

"Language with each kind of artistic ornament" may suggest inflated "poetic" language, a high diction. Tragedies of the past may exhibit language not common in ordinary usage, especially the language of verse forms. While no successful playwright transcribes actual speech, he may create the rhythm of natural speech--as modern poets do--and his "ornament" is more controlled than we can expect to find in ordinary speech. In Williams' Streetcar Named Desire, for instance, the ape-man, Stanley Kowalski, describes the sex act as "getting those colored lights going." The image, out of context, is a strange one for this semi-literate animal, but in the context of

the play it seems natural enough, fitting into the pattern of color and light that runs through the dialogue and the setting.

In Herne's plays, too, the language--at least in the intense dramatic moments--is not natural speech but a kind of artistic ornament. But the diction seems natural in the context of the play. In some nineteenth century plays, however, the playwright uses ornate--and archaic--ornament. Boker's Francesca da Rimini indicates the pervasiveness of the belief that high tragedy had to have a special diction removed from the world of men. The Prince of Parthia in the eighteenth century, generally considered the first play written and produced in America, is so inflated as to be ridiculous. In our own century the verse plays of Maxwell Anderson remain interesting experiments in blank verse tragedies, although they are not, certainly, in the inflated style of the nineteenth century.

Another misunderstanding is of the character of the hero. In The Poetics the hero is "an intermediate kind of personage, a man not pre-eminently virtuous or just." That he is also a noble man of high station in most classical tragedies has caused some confusion, a confusion that has led to misunderstanding that the tragic hero must be noble.

Hennequin's 1890 handbook of playwriting, for instance, suggests, "Tragedy calls for characters of unwonted

strength of will and depth of seriousness, events of great significance, and an elevated style of diction, usually verse."<sup>358</sup> Another critic of the period writes that an author glorifies life by putting "magnified characters in ideal situations, working out exceptional plots."<sup>359</sup> He insists this is a law of tragedy that has stood the test of time and is not likely to yield to new theories. The form of tragedy does not require so exalted a man; he needs only perception and sensitivity, the power to feel his tragedy. That power is most easily discerned in an extraordinary man, but it is available to men of any condition. If modern man, particularly modern American man, has no ready-made magnificent people to supply as heroes, he must look for the extraordinary man in the guise of the average American citizen.

One other Aristotelian comment can stand in the way of recognizing the basic tragic form: "pity and fear," which the destruction of the hero evokes, and the attendant catharsis. First, it is necessary to understand exactly what is meant by pity and fear. Pity does not mean patronizing sorrow for one less well off than we are. Rather, we pity because we feel, for the moment, the tragic hero's vision of the sorrowful life we share with

<sup>358</sup>Hennequin, Art of Playwrighting, p. 35.

<sup>359</sup>Hapgood, "The Drama of Ideas," p. 160.

him. Fear does not mean terror or horror at what is happening to the hero, with a thought that there but by Grace go I. Rather, we fear in the sense that one is "God-fearing"; we are in awe and wonder at the event we see another human being go through. We fear for him not in personal identification with his situation but in concern for his human situation as he is pushed to his limits.

That leaves us with the problem of catharsis. If we are to be purged, as is often said, of pity and fear, we might be forced to conjecture that the tragic hero acts out a Fate we identify with, and when he pays the sacrificial price, he does it in our place. Symbolically, such an effect might happen, as in the great tragedy of The Cross, but dramatically--in a play--it does not happen. It is just as unlikely to believe that audiences at Epidaurus put themselves in the place of Oedipus as to believe that a modern sophomore might do so.

Two comments by Walter Prichard Eaton in 1908 are relevant here: "It [tragedy] is no longer a cathartic for the modern man. Its blood and physical death are primitive to the point of disgust. . . . Violence and murder are very far away from us. There is something pitifully archaic in the classic tragedy. . . . At best, death in the modern drama inspires a shudder of physical repugnance. . . . Not what end a man meets but what use he makes of his life before he dies is now what interests us, or what

effect he has left on those behind."<sup>360</sup> "Perhaps death is not a tragedy, after all. Perhaps for us heavy-eyed children of the Twentieth Century life is a tragedy. Such doubts, at any rate, have sounded the knell for the so-called tragedy of the classic theater. A modern audience cannot share its reality."<sup>361</sup> Eaton misses the basic tragic form when he places such importance on the shudder of death. In tragic form, as we have shown, death (or whatever other tragic resolution) is the final completion of a personality who has acted out his created life. The effect is not a shudder but a sense of inevitable completeness. We are moved beyond the pathos of pity and the shudder of fear to a certainty--the one certainty--and we are left with what Northrop Frye calls buoyancy. We find a sense of completeness we cannot find in the uncertainty of our still uncreated and uncompleted lives.

The form of tragedy, then, we may discover if we are not misled by misunderstandings that reduce the elements of the form to formula. A recent reconsideration of the dramatic form of tragedy, Metatheatre by Lionel Abel, claims that the modern theatre is free of the older forms, that in fact the older concepts of tragic form are no longer applicable. What does Abel mean by the term he has

<sup>360</sup>Eaton, The American Stage of Today, pp. 324-325.

<sup>361</sup>Eaton, The American Stage of Today, p. 326.

invented, "metatheatre"? It is "the necessary form for dramatizing characters who, having full self-consciousness, cannot but participate in their own dramatization. Hence, the famous lines of Jaques, Shakespeare's philosopher of metatheatre, 'All the world's a stage, and all the men and women merely players.'<sup>362</sup> He extends the definition:

The plays I am pointing at do have a common character: all of them are theatre pieces about life seen as largely theatricalized. By this I mean that the persons appearing on the stage in these plays are not there simply because they were caught by the playwright in dramatic postures as a camera might catch them, but because they themselves knew they were dramatic before the playwright took note of them. . . . But then the playwright has to acknowledge in the very structure of his play that it was his imagination which controlled the event from beginning to end.<sup>363</sup>

For Abel, Hamlet is the first metaplay: "For the first time in the history of drama, the problem of the protagonist is that he has a playwright's consciousness."<sup>364</sup> More obvious examples are plays like Six Characters in Search of an Author or Enrico IV or the current Marat/Sade.

All of these plays just mentioned contain, not by coincidence, plays-within-plays as well as characters who are concerned with giving form to a drama which seems to have no form or in which they are miscast. Pirandello commented that the "only technique" is "the will thought

<sup>362</sup>Abel, Metatheatre, p. 79.

<sup>363</sup>Abel, Metatheatre, pp. 60-61.

<sup>364</sup>Abel, Metatheatre, pp. 57-58.

of as free, spontaneous, and immediate movement of form."<sup>365</sup> These descriptions of the form echo our earlier discussion where the hero is the agent shaping his own destiny or--if one accepts the metaphor of the world as stage--creating his own play. Formula is eclipsed.

Abel considers the realistic plays of Ibsen as a modern case study of a playwright sensing the essential tragic form, but hampered by the formula of the necessitarian structure thought to be at the center of all tragedy as it is at the center of Greek tragedy. He suggests that while Ibsen's own view of the world was closer to Shakespeare's or Calderon's (whose Life is a Dream could be a subtitle for Metatheatre), Ibsen "devoted his genius . . . to unifying his critical and highly realistic observations of middle-class life in Norway with a dramatic form derived from Sophocles. There was a great perception in this effort of Ibsen's. He must have realized that no form of drama gives such a compelling effect of the real as does the form of tragedy. . . . Why not combine the realist's critical attitude of mind with the tragic poet's feeling for the ultimately real in action, and thus produce the most overpowering illusion of reality ever achieved by any dramatist?"<sup>366</sup> The result,

<sup>365</sup>Pirandello, "Theatre and Literature," p. 109.

<sup>366</sup>Abel, Metatheatre, p. 108.



Abel claims, is that a wrong belief was propagated for the fifty years after Ibsen that with the necessitarian form of Greek tragedy, but without its metaphysics, tragic form was still possible and valid in the modern theatre.<sup>367</sup> It has been observed often enough that Ibsen's later plays are straining to break out of the tight necessitarian structure of a Hedda Gabler, and do suggest that a different dramatic form is at work. The Master Builder, for instance, is a strange tragedy. In a usual reading of the play, the builder, Solness, can be seen as the inevitable victim of his pride, caught in a chain of cause and effect leading to his fall. But viewed another way, in terms of the broader tragic form discussed here, he can be seen as a character who creates his own structure and then ironically but willfully dies as he falls--literally and figuratively--from that structure. Hilda's exclamation at the end of the play makes sense in no other context: "But he mounted right to the top! And I heard harps in the air." The words are like Elizabeth Proctor's "He hath his goodness now." Realistically, both comments are ironic, and beside the point, if Proctor and Solness are seen only as having fulfilled a necessitarian fate of cause and effect (as in the well-made play). The reaction is "What

<sup>367</sup>Abel, Metatheatre, p. 79.

a fool! He could have avoided that."<sup>368</sup> But in the context of tragic form leading to ultimate victory, the statements strike the right tone of epiphany, bringing the plays to a tragic close.

Because of this conflict between the formula of an inevitable Greek-like fate in Ibsen's plays and the freer form that is the real tragedy, we may be left confused. Abel writes, "There is an artificial imposition of fate on his characters, which today makes us feel some of Ibsen's greatest works are clumsy and contrived."<sup>369</sup> The inadequacy of the necessitarian formula has not been formally challenged until recently, but "its inadequacy was felt by the best playwrights of the present century."<sup>370</sup>

In contrast to Ibsen, Abel observes, Chekhov wrote plays that soften the conflict and break down the well-made structure, for in his plays fate appears as distant and delicate, and his characters seem completely aware of themselves as acting out roles.<sup>371</sup> But Chekhov's plays are comedies, however often they may be played as

<sup>368</sup>Teaching both plays in undergraduate classes, I find this the inevitable reaction. After all, the students say, Proctor had only to sign a piece of paper which didn't mean anything, and Solness should have had better sense than to listen to a silly girl like Hilda; he knew he couldn't climb the tower.

<sup>369</sup>Abel, Metatheatre, p. 109.

<sup>370</sup>Abel, Metatheatre, p. 79.

<sup>371</sup>Abel, Metatheatre, p. 109.

tragedies. Many so-dubbed metaplays, including Chekhov's, end happily. "But," Abel writes, "many of them can do what comedy can never do, that is, to instill a grave silence--a speculative sadness--at their close. They can do this without being tragedies, which means, without making us believe that the events presented, responsible for our sadness, happened once and for all."<sup>372</sup> The concept of metatheatre is thus useful, if for no other reason, because it calls attention to the basic form of the play and de-emphasizes the formulas of tragedy and comedy. But talking about comedy is to jump ahead of this discussion; so we proceed to a consideration of comic form, with this observation: as Margaret Fleming may be considered Herne's Ibsen "tragedy," with conflicts in form and formula similar to those Ibsen experienced, so Shore Acres may be considered Herne's Chekhov "comedy," a completed form which held its audience in absolute silence during the last seven minutes of the play, so completely caught up in the epiphanic actions of Uncle Nat (a character become playwright, and created by a playwright to be played by him) that it was reluctant to break the silence with applause.

<sup>372</sup>Abel, Metatheatre, p. 59.

## FORMULA: COMEDY

The discussion of metatheatre--however valid the term--indicates the problem with too careful a distinction in terms like "tragedy" and "comedy." The terms tend to merge in some plays, producing a hybrid. Everyone has heard of "tragicomedy"; who knows exactly what it is? Tragedy and comedy do, of course, appear in the same play. It may even be the case, as Northrop Frye has said, that tragedy in some classic forms is often the part of a larger comic pattern, as in the tragedy of the Cross, where the imminent comic resolution--the resurrection--hovers over the action, or in the Greek tragedies where the concluding satyr play suggests a comic rebirth of the hero.<sup>373</sup> The trilogies of the Greek drama, standing alone without the satyr play, also suggest a larger comic pattern. What is the Oedipus at Colonus if not a comic rebirth and reconciliation within which the tragic Oedipus Rex is only a part? Or what is the ending of the Oresteia if not a comic resolution at the end of a series of tragic happenings? To reverse this pattern--to shift from a comic prospect to a tragic ending--is difficult. King Lear, for instance, seems to be moving to a comic resolution in the reunion of Cordelia and Lear, when the

<sup>373</sup>Frye, Anatomy, p. 215.

action reverses to tragic. Audiences for years were much happier with a comic ending--a traditional wedding--than with the apparently sudden tragedy.

Even though the line is sometimes hard to draw between comedy and tragedy, and the two may appear in the same work, there is nevertheless a clear distinction in the forms. The distinction is not in theme. Susanne Langer has demonstrated that "tragic theme" and "comic theme" are not determinants of form, but more of a "means of dramatic construction."<sup>374</sup> The distinction is made quite clear, however, in terms of the action. The tragic character, as we have shown, works out his destiny--his career--in a pattern determined in advance by a choice he makes. We feel a sadness as we see him complete the rhythm that leads to his death (or to the resolution of his career). We can call it his Fate. But comedy is "essentially contingent, episodic, and ethnic; it expresses the continuous balance of sheer vitality that belongs to society and is exemplified briefly in each individual."<sup>375</sup> The image of comedy is Fortune, not Fate. Langer explains, "Destiny in the guise of Fortune is the fabric of comedy; it is developed by comic action, which is the upset and recovery of the protagonist's equilibrium, his contest

<sup>374</sup>Langer, Feeling, p. 326.

<sup>375</sup>Langer, Feeling, p. 333.

with the world and his triumph by wit, luck, personal power, or even humorous, or ironical, or philosophical acceptance of mischance."<sup>376</sup> That is the essential difference. A play that develops man's destiny with a sense of capricious chance, Fortune, arouses a comic response; a play that evolves his destiny with a sense of fulfilling and completing a pattern of life already set in motion arouses a tragic response. In a long standard textbook, Understanding Drama, Cleanth Brooks and Robert Heilman make the same distinction, in slightly different terms: comedy is the world of compromise; tragedy, the world of absolute commitment to ultimate issues.<sup>377</sup> Langer, again, writes that tragedy exhibits "self-consummation"; comedy, "self-preservation."<sup>378</sup>

These distinctions are clear enough in theory; in actual dramatic practice, the forms become fuzzy. In 1890, Hennequin observed that "no one any longer thinks of writing pure tragedy for the stage, and, on the other hand, the most salable comedies are those which have a few touches in them of genuine pathos."<sup>379</sup> Pathos there may be, as in Herne's comedies, but the form, the celebration

<sup>376</sup>Langer, Feeling, p. 331.

<sup>377</sup>Cleanth Brooks and Robert B. Heilman, Understanding Drama (New York, 1944), pp. 386-387.

<sup>378</sup>Langer, Feeling, p. 351.

<sup>379</sup>Hennequin, Art of Playwrighting, p. 95.

of life which is comedy, remains identifiable. "Comedy is an art form," Susanne Langer writes, "that arises naturally whenever people are gathered to celebrate life. . . . For it expresses the elementary strains and resolutions of animate nature . . .; it is an image of human vitality holding its own in the world amid the surprises of unplanned coincidence."<sup>380</sup> This rhythm of living, of feeling life, moves a comedy along to a sensation of what an exciting matter it is to be alive and to stay alive in a world that often moves to fulfill man's destiny under the whimsical spirit of Fortune. Brice Maxwell, the playwright in Howells' The Story of a Play, creates a play that is "full of the real American humor; it makes its jokes . . . in the face of the most disastrous possibilities."<sup>381</sup>

Maxwell understood that the individual incidents (or jokes) are comic only in the larger view of a temporary triumph over the surrounding world. But it is possible to mistake the jokes or the wit within the play for the comedy itself. In a comedy, "laughs" are poetic elements, part of the total structure. Langer writes, "The joke . . . seems as funny as its occurrence in the total

<sup>380</sup>Langer, Feeling, p. 331.

<sup>381</sup>Howells, Story of a Play, p. 128.

action makes it."<sup>382</sup> For instance, in Man and Superman, there is something mildly amusing in Ann's line, spoken after John Tanner's long discussion of politics: "I am so glad you understand politics, Jack: it will be most useful to you if you go into parliament." In the context of the successive events that have been building up in the play, however, the line is a "laugh." It is a good line, but it is a better event in the play.

Stark Young describes this organic nature of comedy as "a general conception that pervades a whole performance, something that is like a bath of light by which the performance is surrounded and from which it achieves a witty radiation."<sup>383</sup> What strikes the observer is the dramatic illusion of comic life, not an isolated glance at life.

What is the usual action--the succession of events--that creates this comic illusion? Classically, a young man in love faces a sequence of obstacles which he must overcome to achieve the final celebration in the play--marriage. Usually, a major obstacle is an older man who also wants to marry the girl, and, to complicate things, the old man may be the young man's father. Such a description fits Moliere's The Miser, for instance, but it does not fit many other plays (e.g., Moliere's The

<sup>382</sup>Langer, Feeling, p. 347.

<sup>383</sup>Stark Young, "Character Acting," Theatre Arts, IX (December, 1925), p. 818.



Misanthrope). Rather than naming the obstacles, we can say, more inclusively, that the hero encounters a variety of obstacles in his way to the girl. These obstacles, if they are other characters, usually have some kind of a mental bondage, as again in The Miser, where Harpagon is clearly limited by his miserly vision. In Herne's Shore Acres, Martin, the major obstacle to the love story, is limited by his material and paternal self-interest.

The comedy may also reflect a cyclic--almost ritualistic--movement from a normal world to a second world outside of the normal where the resolution is set up--as in the forest scenes in Midsummer Night's Dream--and back again to the normal world where the ends are tied up in a celebration or a feast.<sup>384</sup> This final feast celebrates not the end of a life, as tragedy does, but the beginning of a new social organism. Frye writes, "Tragedy usually makes love and the social structure irreconcilable and contending forces, a conflict which reduces love to passion and social activity to a forbidding and imperative duty. Comedy is much concerned with integrating the family and adjusting the family to society as a whole; tragedy is more concerned with breaking up the family and

<sup>384</sup>Northrop Frye, "The Argument of Comedy," in English Institute Essays, ed. D. A. Robertson, Jr. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1949), p. 68.

opposing it to the rest of society."<sup>385</sup> The resolution in comedy, then, combines an individual release with social reconciliation. The reconciled society thus created includes as many people as possible, especially the characters who have been in opposition. Thus at the end of Much Ado About Nothing, Don John, the villain, is captured and returned to the society, and even though he is not onstage in the final celebration, he is included in the final society when Benedick declares, in the last speech in the play, that he will "devise . . . brave punishments for him [Don John]." In Shore Acres, Martin, the villain, is also a part of the final celebration which is, significantly, Christmas Eve, a celebration of the birth of a new order.

The final scene of a comedy is a triumph, however temporary, over the surrounding world.<sup>386</sup> It may be viewed also as an "epiphany," in Northrop Frye's word, where an enlightenment occurs, where the "undisplaced apocalyptic world and the cyclical world meet."<sup>387</sup> Such scenes usually occur on islands, towers, lighthouses, ladders, and staircases, Frye suggests.<sup>388</sup> (It fits,

<sup>385</sup>Frye, Anatomy, p. 218.

<sup>386</sup>Langer, Feeling, p. 348.

<sup>387</sup>Frye, Anatomy, p. 203.

<sup>388</sup>Frye, Anatomy, p. 203.

perhaps too neatly, to point out that Herne played the last "epiphanic" scene of Shore Acres on a staircase.)

Such, then, is the form of comedy, a sequence of events that leads over all obstacles and mischance to the celebration of a new life, a new society. There is a "happy ending" in the sense that we are watching a birth at the end of a comedy. When, instead of emphasizing this basic form, the comedy contrives a happy ending outside of the organic structure, or when it emphasizes "laughs" for their own sake outside of the structure, the form may be lost in formulas of comedy.

A "moral," too is outside of the form of comedy, which has no moral quality both Langer and Frye agree.<sup>389</sup> We learn from comedy an exhilaration at living, not instruction on how to live. Nor is comedy spiteful, something dishonorable to our human nature. Meredith wrote, "Those who detect irony in comedy do so because they choose to see it in life."<sup>390</sup> In the comedies of Herne, certainly, there is neither spite nor irony. Today, by contrast, we have "black comedy" which reflects not so much a shift in view of what comedy is as a shift in view of what life is. Yet even the form of such so-called

<sup>389</sup>Langer, Feeling, p. 326 and Frye, "Argument of Comedy," p. 62.

<sup>390</sup>George Meredith, An Essay on Comedy and the Uses of the Comic Spirit (New York, 1897), p. 80.

"black comedies" often moves in the essential comic form, to a triumph of a new social order--a birth--even though along the way there may be disconcerting excursions into spite and irony. To use a recent American play as an example, Kopit's Oh Dad, Poor Dad ends with a mildly triumphant hero who does see a new place for himself in the limited social order that emerges at the end of the play.

Proceeding now to a consideration of Herne's most commercially and critically successful comedy, Shore Acres, we will look for a sense of significant comic form rising above the formulas which clutter the play.

### CHAPTER III

#### SHORE ACRES AND SAG HARBOR

In Shore Acres and Sag Harbor, Herne demonstrates his grasp of the essential, organic comic form. When he loses, occasionally, his hold on that form, his hand is guided by the mechanical intrusion of good jokes, melodrama, and sentimentality and by the ponderous demands of stage realism. Since Shore Acres was Herne's greatest success with audiences, and remains his most interesting play with the critics, a detailed scene by scene analysis of the play is more rewarding than a close analysis of Sag Harbor. The forms of the two plays are similar, though Sag Harbor is more loosely developed. The central plots of the plays are quite different, though both plots are old and reliable staples of plotting. First, then, an analysis of Shore Acres before a consideration of the form and formula of Sag Harbor.

The plot of Shore Acres is contrived upon the worn conflict between the domineering father and his defiant daughter who rebels by marrying a man other than her father's choice, and is sent away from the old homestead into a raging storm, only to return, babe in arms and successful husband in tow, to the forgiving father as the

curtain falls. Herne has threaded a subplot of land speculation, which reflects his conversion to Henry George's theories, throughout this central conflict. The resolution of the subplot is a refined version of the ending of what has been called "rube comedy," where the country man triumphs over the crooked speculator who usually has city connections.<sup>1</sup> The two plots are, as we shall see, inseparable. When reduced to bare summary the central plot sounds like the standard excitement of melodrama, yet the critic for the Boston Post found that there was "absolutely nothing sensational in the plot,"<sup>2</sup> and the Boston Times found "little or no plot."<sup>3</sup> Both comments suggest how effectively Herne transformed this calcified skeleton into a living thing.

How little the plot had to do with the play that came across the footlights is indicated in the review of the Boston Evening Transcript: "No outline [of plot] can do justice to the overflowing humanity of the play--to its sweet lifelikeness; to its fearless handling of great passions; to its deep and lovely ethical impression."<sup>4</sup> The form of the play which develops as the simple plot becomes

<sup>1</sup>Felix Sper, From Native Roots: A Panorama of Our Regional Drama (Caldwell, Idaho, 1948), p. 268.

<sup>2</sup>Boston Post, February 21, 1893.

<sup>3</sup>Boston Times, February 26, 1893.

<sup>4</sup>Boston Evening Transcript, February 21, 1893.

drama is a movement of the comic spirit which shows a triumphant man overcoming the obstacles a capricious Fortune puts in his way and finally achieving a new community, a new social order. The spirit which guides this movement is not the young man who overcomes the senex iratus to win the girl, but the humanitarian and tolerant character of old Uncle Nat (Herne's starring role).<sup>5</sup> Nat's triumphant reconciliation of opposing forces is reflected in the subtitles Herne supplied for the individual acts: Act I, "Hayin' Time," a picture of an established rural community order disrupted by modern liberal thought (Darwinism, for instance) and the corroding influence of business speculation; Act II, "The Silver Weddin'," the established family community disrupted by the same forces; Act III, "Havin' an Understandin'," the climax in which Uncle Nat gains control; Act IV, "Me an' the Children," the denouement in which Uncle Nat becomes the benign patriarch of a new society and leads the children's Christmas celebration and the acceptance of the new baby.

#### ACT I: "HAYIN' TIME"

The setting, a reproduction of "Shore Acres Farm," is created for the inevitable proscenium frame through which

<sup>5</sup>In one version of the play, the title was, aptly, Uncle Nat. Herne's manager felt that Shore Acres or Shore Acres Subdivision, which emphasize the topical subplot, would be more likely to attract an audience.

the audience is invited to peek in on and eavesdrop on somebody else's real life. In this case, the proscenium concept is appropriate to the play; it is not simply what Robert Brustein has called an "escapist illusion."<sup>6</sup> We are tired of the proscenium today. The movies can do it all so much more effectively. As early as the 1910 revival of Shore Acres, one critic observed, "Nobody on earth is gratified by such stuff any more. We the 'peepul' turn aside into the picture show instead. The pictures are cold and flat, and they tire the eyes; they please, nevertheless, because they copy the life we are living at the minute."<sup>7</sup>

In 1893, however, Herne's audiences were grateful for the peek at the realistic pictures of his scenery--the real pump and the real farm implements.<sup>8</sup> Although some complained of the "too great prolixity of detail,"<sup>9</sup> Herne's description of his setting shows some sense of selectivity.<sup>10</sup> George Pierce Baker prescribed the remedy for unnecessary clutter in a play: "selection with one's

<sup>6</sup>Robert Brustein, Seasons of Discontent (New York, 1965), p. 280.

<sup>7</sup>Boston Transcript, February 8, 1910.

<sup>8</sup>Boston Post, February 21, 1893.

<sup>9</sup>Boston Commonwealth, February 25, 1893.

<sup>10</sup>Shore Acres and Other Plays (New York, 1928), p. 5. All subsequent references to this standard edition of the play will be cited in my text.



purpose clearly in mind."<sup>11</sup> Herne's purpose is clear, and every detail of his setting becomes functional in the course of the act.

The outdoor scene is the Berry farm--a section of the farmhouse and dooryard at the right, a section of the barn and barnyard at the left, with a road running across the back of the stage. In the distance is Berry Light which becomes the setting for Act III. The setting establishes the Berry home as part of a larger community before the play moves inside in Act II where family life is completely disrupted. Herne's directions also insist on an overhanging cover of trees, gently swaying in the wind at the beginning of the act, creating a sense of movement, of expectancy. The sound effects are birds, buzzing insects, and a distant mowing machine, all suggesting activity--something about to happen. When the curtain rises, Millie, the four-year-old Berry child, is playing in the dooryard; she is another scenic element in this rustic idyll. The purpose in this opening scene is to create a static impression already stirring toward change (projecting its own future, Susanne Langer would say).

Things begin to happen immediately as the mail carrier comes, picks up the outgoing letters, and deposits a newspaper (which we later learn is the Bangor Whig).

<sup>11</sup>George P. Baker, Dramatic Technique (Boston, 1919), p. 89.

Isolation is broken by this intrusion of the outside world. The brief scene between Millie and the mail carrier--a piece of candy and a kiss--sets the tone, too, of the unaffected, childlike ways of these people. For all of the reviewers, the scenes with the children throughout the play were among the most interesting, interesting enough for one reviewer "to immortalize the play all by themselves."<sup>12</sup> Herne's decision to open the play with a child actor is shrewd, for the scene tells the audience exactly what kind of a play he is to see, or at least suggests a basic quality of the play.

The idyll is broken as Helen Berry, seventeen, and Uncle Nat appear in the middle of a conversation. Helen's first line sets up the major conflict in the plot: "Yes, I know, Uncle Nat, perhaps I oughtn't. But Father makes me mad when he talks as he does about Sam" (p. 8). Nat's reply, "Things'll come out all right ef you'll only heve patience," sets up the assurance that runs throughout the play that everything will, under his direction, come out all right.<sup>13</sup> The comic expectation of a happy ending is

<sup>12</sup>Boston Evening Transcript, February 21, 1893.

<sup>13</sup>Herne's use of dialect in the script of the play is difficult to transpose into New England, Down East speech. He was obviously not able to approximate that speech on the printed page. Yet the Bostonians who heard it in the theatre thought they were hearing the real thing. Knowing how Herne coached each actor, it is probable that he could approximate the dialect orally.

always clear in the play, even when things look darkest. Ludwig Lewisohn's description of this expectation fits Herne's practice: "In sentimental comedy the purpose of clouds is to have a silver lining. The silver lining is carefully planted from the start and in the last act irradiates the visible horizon. It is a perfectly open secret; the playwright would fare ill who refused to play the game."<sup>14</sup>

The scene presents the exposition smoothly enough. Helen is a girl of advanced ideas ready to defy Martin, her father. She is not like Ann, her mother, who is submissive to Martin's commands. But, most important, the scene establishes Nat as the spiritual father of Helen, a relationship which will become more important as the play moves on. When Helen says she wishes Nat were her father, his reply is "Thet ain't right, an' you know it" (p. 9). His attitude will change.

The scene is interrupted by the off-stage arrival of Mr. Blake's carriage. Here the skillful handling of the exposition breaks down. Helen tells Nat that Martin wants her to marry Blake, the local shopkeeper. Nat is supposed to be surprised and frightened at the news which he quite reasonably might have known earlier, considering his close relationship with Helen. But Herne is following

<sup>14</sup>Ludwig Lewisohn, The Drama and the Stage (New York, 1922), p. 29.

established practice by introducing the character and his relevance before he appears on stage, a practice he had avoided with Helen and Nat who introduced themselves to the audience. In performance, the expectancy of Blake's arrival and the interest in his relationship with Helen may easily cover this awkwardly planted piece of exposition. But it creaks anyway.

Before Blake enters the scene (we learn later he went into the barn to find Martin), Joel Gates and his "little Mandy" drift into the farmyard from the road. Gates is a problem in the play structure: he is an interesting local color study and an eccentric character part, but is he an organic part of the play? The part was played, in the Boston production, by George Wilson, a well-known character actor. Every reviewer singled out his performance for special praise. For instance, "Mr. Wilson has a character bit in Farmer Gates. His make-up was a work of art--his walk and intonation was [sic] admirable."<sup>15</sup> Herne describes him: "He is small and slight, his face weather-washed, kindly; his keen little eyes seem to be as a child's with a question in them, always asking, 'What is it all about anyhow!--I d'know!' He is never seen without Mandy. Her whole little personality is part of his; the

<sup>15</sup>Boston Post, February 21, 1893. Deviations from accepted usage occur with some frequency in newspaper reviews. Subsequent deviations in quotations from reviews will stand unnoted.



nondescript, faded clothing, the rhythm of movement. The faraway look in the old face is repeated in the apple-blossom beauty of the child" (p. 10).

Gates appears in many of the important scenes of the play. And for a good reason. He is the lowest level of this particular society; he owns only seven acres of land and does odd jobs for others. He is always outside of this society or barely on its fringes. He and Mandy own a very special world of two. Only at the end of the play is Mandy left under the paternal protection of Uncle Nat, and that action is projected for the next day. In this first appearance of Gates, Uncle Nat tries to shake hands with Mandy, but she hides behind her father who says, "Don't never seem t' want t' play with nobody or nothin' but me" (p. 11).

Then occurs a piece of exposition--filling out Gates's background--which pleased Herne when he recalled it in answer to a charge that his realistic play left nothing to the imagination. He cited this passage:

Uncle Nat. She's a-growin' ain't she--growin' jes' like a weed. My--my! How like her mother dooze she look, don't she?

Gates. Yeh. Gits to look more an' more like her every day in the week.

Uncle Nat. I suppose--yeh hain't never heerd nothin' of her--sence--hev yeh, Joel?

Gates. No--nothin' (p. 11).

Herne explains, "Now Joel is a grass widower. His wife

ran away with another man; but nothing occurs in the dialogue concerning her except the above. Does not that leave something for the imagination?"<sup>16</sup> The exposition is subtle enough to prompt one reviewer to refer to Mandy as a "mother-bereft girl."<sup>17</sup> But it is a sample of Herne's understatement. He does not spew out the whole sensational story but merely suggests it, leaving Gates and Mandy rather shadowy drifters in the society of the play, and an essential part of the impression Herne is building up.

Gates also serves a more immediate plot function. He has come to borrow Nat's gun, "ol' Uncle Sam'l," to kill a fox, even though in his far-away manner he almost forgets to ask for it. The gun becomes important later in the play. In this scene the comic attitude toward the gun is established. Even though the gun is always loaded, it is more a toy than a weapon in the play. Joel's fox hunt becomes ridiculous later when his fox turns out to be a skunk. In this earlier scene, Nat and Joel play with the gun; their attitude is "that of two boys gloating over a treasure" (p. 12), and their game is farcical. When Nat tells Joel to aim his gun at someone else, Joel replies, "There ain't nobody else handy," and Nat responds, "I swan

<sup>16</sup>Boston Journal, February 25, 1893.

<sup>17</sup>Boston Commonwealth, February 25, 1893.





thet's too bad" (p. 13). All of the scene is funny, but it stretches too far for the joke--and it stretches beyond the meek character of Joel which has already been established. It is with this sort of scene that the reviewer for the Boston Commonwealth found fault, "an occasional stooping too far to earn a laugh."<sup>18</sup> Susanne Langer writes that laughs in a good play are poetic elements; "the delight we take in it is the delight we take in something created for our perception, not a direct stimulus to our feelings."<sup>19</sup> The effect of this scene relies on no perception, only on the qualified fear that the gun can go off. Yet it is easy enough to see why Herne wanted to keep this scene: it shows the constantly playful, child-like side of Uncle Nat, even though those characteristics are sufficiently established elsewhere.

When Joel leaves, the play creaks again. Another essential piece of exposition has to be established, Nat's pension. Helen, who has been in the background during the last scene, playing with Millie, asks if Sam Warren has done anything about Nat's back pension, a sort of legacy which an audience expects to be given at just the right moment in the play. The question has been prepared for in the previous scene with Joel when Nat explains that Uncle

<sup>18</sup>Boston Commonwealth, February 25, 1893.

<sup>19</sup>Susanne Langer, Feeling and Form (New York, 1953), pp. 341-342.

Sam'l is his gun from his Civil War experience with the Sixth Maine, Company A. Helen has been deliberately left in the background of that scene, and her question has no relation to her action at the moment, especially since she leaves for a stroll immediately after the fact is established that Sam will undoubtedly be successful in getting Nat's pension. Again, Herne seems to lose control of the play. The point must be made, but it is only vaguely connected with the action.

With Helen gone, Nat asks Millie to ride in his wheelbarrow; he will be the horse for her carriage. They leave the stage empty. In the stage directions, Herne gives a motive for this exit: "He starts off as if he might be going to get fodder for the noon meal of the animals, when he notices Millie" (p. 14). It is difficult to see how on the stage the motive would come across as anything other than what it is: a ruse to clear the way for a new scene. In fairness to Herne, it can be said that the innocence of the wheelbarrow scene contrasts effectively with the scheming of Blake and Martin in the next scene. But the movement of the play, its machinery, becomes obvious.

The audience has already heard enough about Blake and Martin to expect some sort of villains. These expectations are only partly fulfilled, for Herne deliberately breaks the stereotypes. Herne observed that the stock villain had a "kind of omnipotent and omniscient power

which was taken for granted on the part of the audience."<sup>20</sup> Blake, the traditional villain who takes a mortgage on the old homestead, has some of the surface trappings associated with the part, but there is a difference.

He is a man of forty years; he has black hair, and his side-whiskers are close cut. The rest of his face is cleanly shaven. He is dressed in a grey business suit, "store made;" the coat is a single-breasted frock, very slightly cut-away, buttoned with one button at the breast. He wears a white laundered shirt, and a rather high standing collar with a black ready-made tie. His hat is a silk one, old, but not battered, brown at the edges of the crown and brim. . . . He carries a buggy whip, an old white one. He has a black silk ribbon watch guard around his neck, and a gold watch. He is portly and well-to-do, but jovial. He is rather good-looking, and has the air of a contented, cheerful business man, shrewd, but not cunning or mean; he is always smiling (p. 15).

Martin, who is linked with Blake throughout the play, also wears a black hat and a black handkerchief around his neck, and he is carrying a jackknife. (Uncle Nat, by the way, wears a "good-guy" white straw hat.)

The visual impression these two characters make when they enter only partly reinforces the impression made by earlier comments of other characters. Herne adds a piece of pantomime to their entrance that tends to cast the impression in a less than sinister light. Traditionally, the villains could be expected to work out their schemes in a clandestine atmosphere. Here, in the center of the

<sup>20</sup>James A. Herne, "Forty Years Behind the Footlights," The Coming Age, II (August, 1899), p. 124.

farmyard, they are joined by Perley, the hired girl, who goes about her normal routine, collecting the mail and the provisions left on the porch. She takes the paper from the mail bag and gives it to Martin, without a word. Blake and Martin are a part of the normal routine of the farm.

We meet them in the middle of a conversation. Blake is saying, "No sirree. I tell yeh, Martin, the day o' sentiment's gone. We're livin' in a practical age. Any man's liable to go to bed poor 'n wake up a millionaire" (p. 16). Martin is convinced that his hesitation to cut up the farm into building lots for summer homes to attract city folks is only a matter of sentiment. Just because he and Nat promised their mother never to sell the farm is not practical reason enough to hesitate, when there is a chance of getting rich. The scene is much too long, as they plan their avenues and driveways and corner lots, but Herne drags the scene out to make his social point: land speculation is a corrupting influence. Herne falters because he is caught up more with a thesis than with the drama in hand: the "problem play" is painfully evident.

The conversation moves from social issues to a family one: Martin thinks he can control whom his daughter will marry. The irony, considering what the audience knows about Helen, is too obvious. To Blake's observation that "girls are beginning to think they've a right to marry who

they please," Martin responds with pride, "Not my girl" (p. 20). The next move is to discuss Sam, who has snared Helen's interest. He is damned for being a "red-hot Swedenborgian" and reading "lunatics" like Spencer and Darwin. He is also damned for being a "home-a-pathic physician," not a country doctor. In particular, he is trying to cure "ol' Mis' Swazy" whom everyone has given up. Herne follows through on this detail, as he does on others, with remarkable subtlety. Later, Sam tells Helen that Miss Swazy is getting better, but in Act II at the dinner we learn, casually, that her place is up for sale.

This scene is the weakest point in Act I. The movement of the play seems to stop while we listen. Herne tried to break the stereotyped villains, but he was unsuccessful: they are still a bore. He tried to explore social issues, but he preached. As a result, the characters are puppets who have no appeal to the emotions--not even to disgust or fear, for they are too mechanical to inspire either. The fault was obvious to contemporary reviewers. The Boston Evening Transcript: "Martin was earnest, forcible and intelligent, but had a touch of the conventionally theatric queerly at odds with the absolute lifelikeness of the others' work."<sup>21</sup> The Boston Times: "Perhaps the one conspicuous inconsistency in the play is

<sup>21</sup>Boston Evening Transcript, February 21, 1893.

Martin. He is . . . sordid, sour, selfish, and disagreeable."<sup>22</sup> The Boston Globe critic speculated that if there were a fifth act, Martin should turn up as "a highway robber or incendiary, if he thought he had anything to gain from it."<sup>23</sup>

After this scene which fumbles with formula, Herne picks up the movement again. Helen comes back from her stroll, her arm around her fourteen-year-old brother, Young Nat. The dialogue is brief and to the point. Young Nat urges Helen to marry Blake because it will be to his advantage in Blake's store where he is employed. His motives, like Martin's, are selfish. Herne handles Young Nat much more skillfully, however, than he does Martin. Young Nat is involved in playful teasing with his sister, especially about the existence of Hell which she refuses to believe in. Yet his selfish motives are clear, especially when Sam Warren comes on, playfully twists his ear, sending Nat off uttering a threat to get even with Sam for treating him like a child (and also ruining any chance of Helen's marrying Blake). The action of this scene is the only planting for Nat's later involvement in the plot; it is so playfully and subtly handled that Young Nat is established not as a villain but as a young man trying to

<sup>22</sup>Boston Times, February 26, 1893.

<sup>23</sup>Boston Globe, February 21, 1893.

assert himself, a characteristic important in the end of the play.

What follows is a conventional love scene between Helen and Sam, marred again by Herne's insistence on bringing in topical problems, in particular that raised by Howells' A Hazard of New Fortunes, financial speculation. The scene ends when Sam reveals his decision to go West. They are interrupted by Martin who brings up Sam's various apostasies, which leads to a fight, broken up by Helen. The scene is beautifully paced. In his stage directions, Herne asks for "a quick staccato, which reaches its height in Helen's cry of terror as the two men clinched. Then there is a pause, and the rest of the scene, until Martin leaves the stage, is completed in tense low tones that are portentous of trouble" (p. 29). The conflict is obvious visually as the provincial Martin enters leading a horse and discovers Sam and Helen reading Howells' novel together. Then Herne carefully paces the rhythm of the scene using mostly short, quick exchanges of dialogue, stichomythy, to build to the dramatic climax, the fight. Two things are especially admirable about the form of this scene. It depends little on exposition, but builds only on the emotional rhythm of the action, creating an intensity that should tell the audience in terms of feeling that the conflict is now irreconcilable. The point has been made discursively in much of the earlier exposition,

but here it is made dramatically. And second, the scene projects the future of the play, its own future; even though Sam is ordered away, he is clearly the future victor in this conflict, for Martin exhibits only "active hate" while Sam's attitude is one of "simple manly poise" (p. 29).

Ann, the mother, enters as Martin leaves, to call the family to dinner, and she apologizes to Sam for not being able to include him in the invitation. She knows her husband too well. Sam replies that he would not enjoy the meal now anyway. (Sam is not included in any of the feasts in the play until the final reconciliation).

Ann, introduced here only briefly, but very important when the play comes closer to family problems, is an interesting character, partly because she is the only Herne character he acknowledged as drawn from life, from his memory of his mother, Ann Temple Herne.<sup>24</sup> She is affectionately drawn throughout, especially as it becomes apparent that Uncle Nat is her spiritual husband, just as he is the spiritual father to her children. Her habit of repeating the end of her sentences (e.g., "I hup Martin hain't seen yeh; I say, hain't seen yeh.") seems preposterous when one reads the script. But in performance Herne evidently molded a character whose speech patterns

<sup>24</sup>Julie A. Herne, "Biographical Note," in Shore Acres and Other Plays, p. ix.



were not only eccentricities but a revelation of her frustrated character, a woman who is so used to being ignored by her husband that she falls into the habit of repetition "as though the person she were addressing had not heard her" (p. 33). Reviewers found touches of inescapable pathos"<sup>25</sup> and "the heart of motherhood pulsing forth in word and act and smile and deed."<sup>26</sup>

When Ann goes back inside, there is a brief, tender farewell scene between Sam and Helen, remarkable for its avoidance of sentiment and its concentration on the approaching catastrophe. The scene ends with a note of what Herne calls in the stage directions "fatality." Helen says, "I don't want to quarrel with Father if I can help it. I'll have to someday I know--but I want to avoid it just as long as I can" (p. 34).

Sam leaves, and the mood is broken by three short scenes that Herne must have inserted to bring the audience attention back to the lively, child-like atmosphere that dominates most of the act: the other two Berry children, Mary and Bob, come home from school arguing about Bob's "bad-boy" desire to go swimming; four farmhands come in kicking a football on their way to wash up for dinner and have a mock fight with Joel Gates who ducks one of them in

<sup>25</sup>Boston Evening Transcript, February 21, 1893.

<sup>26</sup>Boston Commonwealth, February 25, 1893.

the trough (Joel has no reason to appear, except for this comic business); and Uncle Nat returns as he left, a horse pulling Millie in her wheelbarrow-carriage. They play at the water trough, and then she returns to her sand pile for the rest of the act. The mood could have been reestablished without all of this horseplay. Just the scene with Millie and Uncle Nat, already prepared for by their previous exit, would have been enough. The rest, the children and the farm hands, is a digression into local color eccentricities and realism (football, typical New England school children). Herne is giving his audience the little vignettes it liked, but he is also pausing too long in the movement of his play.

The action is resumed when Martin confronts Nat with Blake's land scheme. It is the climax of the act, bringing together several threads that have been clearly established: the land, Nat's position as the de facto head of the family, the marriage of Helen and Sam, leaving the farm for the city, and the breaking of family ties. The conflict between Martin and Nat has been inevitable throughout the act; each clearly represents an opposing view of life. To dramatize this conflict, Herne chooses a subject for their conversation that at once brings them together and shows how far apart they are: their dead mother. Now, this subject is by its nature sentimental; but it need not be treated sentimentally, and Herne avoids



sentimentality admirably. It is as if Uncle Nat had heard Blake's earlier injunction that one cannot be a victim of sentimentality in these practical days.

The mother is buried on a knoll looking out over the sea, in one corner of the farm. If the subdivision were completed her body would have to be moved to a cemetery. With little show of sentiment Uncle Nat concedes, "Mr. Blake mus' be right. So go 'head an' build, an' git rich, an' move up to Boston ef yeh want to. Only, Martin--don't sell thet. Leave me thet an' I'll build on't an' stay an' take keer o' the light, as long's I kin--an' after thet--why--well, after thet--yeh kin put both of us in a cimitery ef yeh hev a mind to" (p. 42). Uncle Nat accepts. He moves with change but still holds onto his promise to his mother that she should be buried in the knoll overlooking the sea where her husband drowned. In this scene Herne gives himself (Uncle Nat) the only set speech in the act, a long description of the mother's reaction to the father's death. Uncle Nat spins out the narrative with specific details but no sentimental commentary, even though the dangers of tombstone sentimentality inherent in the subject are inescapable. The narrative reveals Nat's inner state.

Herne thought he had avoided sentimentality in the scene: "I might have described the bedraggled condition of the mother who had lain out all night in the pelting



rain storm. . . . But to my mind the play is better because there is something left for the intelligent spectator to supply. The brief simple telling of that sad story is more eloquent than any word painting could make it."<sup>27</sup> Herne was given special praise for his acting in this scene. At the time of the 1904 revival with James Galloway as Uncle Nat, the scene again brought comment: Galloway "gave proof of his ability to deal with the heart interest in his speech to Martin regarding their mother's grave, a speech which the actor regards as 'fat,' but which, in the hands of the incompetent becomes mere bathos."<sup>28</sup>

When the Drama League presented scenes from old American plays in 1917, it chose this scene from Shore Acres. One reviewer of that occasion, Heywood Broun, thought the scene was "hardly fair" to Herne, observing that it was "pleasant that the moist, carnal tombstone sentimentality which pervades the scene has lost much vogue in the twenty-five years since 'Shore Acres' was produced."<sup>29</sup> Louis Sherwin in the New York Globe reacted differently: "Another sad blow to the pride of this generation was a bit from 'Shore Acres.' Of course it dripped

<sup>27</sup>Boston Journal, February 25, 1893.

<sup>28</sup>Boston Transcript, September 6, 1904.

<sup>29</sup>New York Tribune, January 23, 1917.

sentimentality, dripped it loudly, volubly, proudly. But when we consider the 'B' Gosh' drama of this season, have we any right to feel superior?"<sup>30</sup>

Fashions change, of course. This scene would be difficult to produce for an audience today, but with an actor who could sense the control Herne wrote into the scene, it could play, especially since it falls at this climactic point in the act where the audience should be feeling not so much for Mother as for the building emotional state of the dramatic situation, as it has developed within the character of Nat throughout the act.

The act ends in a characteristic leveling off. Herne usually avoided the dramatic curtain in the later plays. Ann rushes in, picks up Millie who has fallen asleep in the sand, calls Bob from swimming, and motions Martin into the house for dinner. To Uncle Nat she says, "Come Nathan'l, your dinner'll be stun cold. I say, stun cold" (p. 43). Uncle Nat stands in silent meditation as the curtain falls. Each act ends with Nat alone on the stage, silent.

In Act I, then, all the exposition is laid--the gun, Young Nat's threat to Sam, the land scheme, Helen's independence, and the rest--but more important Herne has taken his audience through a series of incidents that involve it

<sup>30</sup>New York Globe, January 23, 1917.

emotionally in the deep feeling of humanity, the need to know and understand, that is at the moment felt and understood only by the character of Uncle Nat. The child-like innocence of the beginning of the play is going to change. The unstable community must break up and reform. Herne mishandles this movement when he fondles local color eccentricities and social problems, and when he relies on convention for his exposition and exits and entrances. But on the whole, the movement of the act carries the audience into the climactic emotional state of the tombstone scene, then tapers off as Uncle Nat reflects silently upon what has happened.

#### ACT II: "THE SILVER WEDDIN'"

The setting for Act II is the Berry farmhouse kitchen, the center of life in the New England home. Pictures of this setting have been reproduced in anthologies as an illustration of typical realistic décor, for there is another pump with running water, a real stove with a real fire going, a boiling pot, lots of crockery. Each of these items becomes functional during the act, but that function is not always dramatic. At times, the bustle of activity resembles a cooking school not a play. But the over-all impression of the scene which emerges from both Herne's stage directions and the pictures of the setting is one of stability and security, the community room of an



affectionate, though slightly archaic society. The impression is exploded by the end of the act.

Until the arrival of the guests, ten pages into the script, there is no action except the preparation of the dinner. The audience is expected to watch the cooking of "cranberry sass," mashed potatoes, and a turkey. To keep some human dramatic element in the preparations, Herne has inserted a series of vignettes: the children playing with the anniversary presents; Millie making doll bread; Tim, an Irish lad, sparking Perley, the hired girl; arguments over the right degree of tartness in cranberries and the position of a stove damper. The vignettes are clever, often funny, but the impression Herne is trying to communicate is established effectively long before the scene is over. Too much fondness for realistic detail again gets in the way of his drama.

One point essential to the future development of the drama is clearly established during this scene: Uncle Nat has tentative control over the workings of the house, as he seems to have tentative control over the farmyard at the end of Act I. He acts as if he is in charge of the kitchen, even though the women maneuver around his control. Crisis situations, however, are his to manage. He removes the turkey from the oven, and he must see that Millie is cleaned up ("Ef I didn't tend to her, I'd like to know who would"). Martin is significantly absent from the scene, a

fact reinforced by an ironic comment which ties off this scene and introduces the next. As the guests arrive Captain Ben says, "Hello, Nathan'l, Many happy returns of the day." Nat replies, "Don't get things mixed, Cap'n. This ain't my fun'ral" (p. 55). And, of course, it is not his, even though the celebration will become the funeral for family life as it has been known in this room.

The arrival of the guests is also too long, tiresome, and quaint. But the reviewers and the audience were on the whole delighted. The Boston Commonwealth called them "bits of pungently and deliciously quaint work."<sup>31</sup> The Boston Transcript reported, "The group . . . at the anniversary feast are little wonders of delightful make-up and suggestive action . . . inimitable picture of the irascible Squire and his fussy wife . . . the gnarled old skipper and his rosy, wholesome helpmate."<sup>32</sup>

Finally, when the guests have been ushered into the off-stage sitting room to await the call to dinner, the play starts to move again. The audience has been entertained by these charming vignettes, but like "The Dance of the Hours" in La Gioconda, the interlude merely passes time with only a vague connection to the action of the drama.

<sup>31</sup>Boston Commonwealth, February 25, 1893.

<sup>32</sup>Boston Evening Transcript, February 21, 1893.

Blake and Martin enter. Helen is alone on stage. Martin repeats his disapproval of Sam and goes off to welcome his guests. Blake remains with Helen. Their conversation develops the emotional states skillfully. Even though Blake wears the traditional villain-black suit, his character in this scene begins to emerge as a simple, and rather pathetic, shopkeeper, who is unable to see beyond the biased confines of his shopkeeper world. He opens the conversation by going directly, and tactlessly, to the point: Sam tried to borrow a hundred dollars from him, but Blake offered a thousand dollars if Sam would leave Helen alone and never come back. Sam's answer was that "he'd see me in Hell first" (p. 59). Blake's motives are interesting. Understanding only the language of money, he is so completely wrapped up in his desire for Helen that he debases himself in every way possible and forces her to hurt him. Helen's only reply is "H'm!" Then Blake continues to debase himself. He admires Helen for standing up to her father, even though that means defeat for him. He promises her the only gift he can understand, "half of every dollar I make for the next twenty years." He asks her if he's too old for her, showing he has no vanity. He asks if he is too orthodox for her and grants that she can stay home from meeting and read novels if she wants to. He will even "read them books with you" (p. 60). Blake finally declares "I'm goin' to have you Helen, or die

a-tryin'," but Helen gives him a hard look, and he adds, "Nothin' underhand though--nothin' underhand" (p. 61). Blake is obviously no stage villain holding the mortgage on the farm to win the farmer's daughter. He is pathetic. All of the reviewers praised the role: "Mr. Hudson, Josiah Blake, looks and acts the typical Yankee trader to perfection. It is capital."<sup>33</sup>

From a lack of understanding with Blake, Helen can be expected to go to the understanding Sam, where she belongs. This exit is quickly accomplished when Nat comes in and sends her off to the barn, making the excuse to Blake that her pet speckled pullet fell in the rain barrel. For the benefit of the audience, Nat explains to Helen in a stage whisper (Blake is on the other side of the stage) that Sam has the hundred dollars. Here, Herne falls back on one of the old conventions of exposition. He must establish that Sam has the money for the later intrigue of the act, and he does it in the easy way--a stage whisper--rather than through action. Herne had used this convention often enough in the early melodramas, but it is out of place here. Even Hennequin, that author of a very conventional manual of playwrighting, wrote in 1890, "The stage whisper, except as a broadly comic effect, is out of date. Aparts and asides are now delivered in an ordinary tone of

<sup>33</sup>Boston Times, February 26, 1893.

voice."<sup>34</sup> But in 1913, one critic observed that the "time-honored convention, the conversation entirely audible to the spectators but unheard by other characters, still flourishes."<sup>35</sup> Herne, too, had not quite escaped the time-honored convention.

The guests come in for the feast, which becomes much more than a stage spectacle. It is a happy community celebration of the twenty-five year survival of a family order, attended by a cross-section of the community at large. The six guests include representatives of the sea, the farm, and the professions. Everyone behaves in his characteristic role: the visitors exhibit their quaintness; Nat humbly takes "the part that went over the fence last" (p. 65); Martin thinks of the meal in terms of cost.

Then Joel Gates and Mandy drift in to return Nat's gun. They too are asked to join the feast, but Joel replies, "No, I'm too s'fled. Ef I'd 'a' knowed you was hevin turkey--I mean company, I'd 'a' cleaned myself up a bit" (p. 67). He is coaxed to stay, but he will not eat at the table. He and Mandy sit down to one side, where Mandy, who never speaks in the play, shows here her first "childish joy" as Joel feeds her. They complete the

<sup>34</sup>Alfred Hennequin, Art of Playwriting (Boston, 1890), p. 154.

<sup>35</sup>Charlton Andrews, The Drama To-day (Philadelphia, 1913), p. 53.

community gathering, even while they remain outside of it. Everyone is gathered except Sam Warren and Young Nat.

The talk at the table moves to the prospect of the land boom, and each character shows his enthusiastic involvement in it. Even Gates joins in with an offer to sell his seven acres for ten or fifteen thousand dollars because "it'd make a great buildin' site fer Vanderbilt 'r Rockenfeeder 'r any o' them far-seein' fellers" (p. 70). The mood is broken abruptly when Martin reveals, "ponderously," that a surveyor has been on his property and that he does intend to sell. For the first time in the play, Ann shows spirit. She says "proudly and defiantly," "You won't move me up to Bangor, not ef you git as rich as Methuselum" (p. 71). Martin immediately links Ann and Nat; both have tried to browbeat him. Their joint opposition is the first hint in the play of a love triangle--the aged one of two brothers in love with the same woman. Herne used it earlier in Hearts of Oak and was to use it again in Sag Harbor.

When the argument reaches the point that Martin shouts, "I'm durned ef I don't sell the hull thing, humstead, graveyard an' every dum--" (p. 72), Young Nat rushes in announcing that a hundred dollars has been taken from the safe in Blake's store. Now, it is strange that Young Nat has not been included in the family celebration. Even though Herne had to keep him out for plot reasons

that are cleared up later, that reason is hardly enough. The actual reason is that Young Nat is, as Helen said in Act I, selfish, not thinking of himself as part of the family unit and the values it stands for. He is at this point in the play more of an outsider than Gates. Young Nat tells the gathering what persons had been in the store before he discovered that the money was missing, and he draws out the name of Sam Warren, at which Blake shouts, "He stole it" (p. 72). Helen, who knows only that Sam has the money, but not where he got it, defends Sam. Martin moves to strike her, but Uncle Nat grabs Martin's arm. Martin rushes to the corner to get the gun Gates has just returned, vowing to shoot Sam. Uncle Nat "quietly, but with authority . . . takes the gun and puts it back in the corner" (p. 74). Helen "springs towards Martin . . . with hands clenched. Uncle Nat catches her. . . . The tension is broken, and Helen bursts into tears, her head resting on Uncle Nat's breast" (p. 74). The guests leave quietly, and Perley furtively gathers up the remains of the feast and retreats to the woodhouse to eat her dinner.

There is a lull, but Herne brings up the tension briefly as Martin prepares to leave. Martin threatens Helen in a speech that ends with an emotional outburst summing up his own fear of the threat which Sam and change are to him: "You're not of age yet, my lady. I'll show Sam Warren that ef my grandfathers was monkeys, they

wa'n't thieves" (p. 75). Young Nat blocks Martin's way for a moment, a suggestion that he already regrets the furor he has caused. Then a mechanical despondency falls on the scene. Helen absentmindedly takes a cup of tea. Ann stands dazed, her back to the audience. And Nat sinks into a chair.

Herne shows complete control of the rhythm of dramatic emotion in this scene. What appears to be potential melodrama becomes instead a movement of hatred, passion, disorder, and stunned resignation. The passions that come over to the audience arise out of the melodramatic situation as it is transformed into drama.

Uncle Nat observes to Ann that "our turkey" came to an untimely end. And it is their turkey, for the celebration turned out to be more an emblem of the union of Ann and Nat than of Ann and Martin. Ann reflects the completely demolished society as she leaves, "I'll never look a neighbor in the face again" (p. 75).

Nat clears up the suspense about Sam's possible theft when he tells Helen that he gave the money to Sam, borrowing it from a fund he and Martin had been building to buy a tombstone for Mother's grave. The revelation at this point almost wrecks the emotional movement of the act, even though the revelation is needed to satisfy the audience's doubts. Herne has used a well-worn trick to build audience suspense--keep back the essential information.





Nat's reluctance to acknowledge the loan earlier is, however, in keeping with his character, but the revelation still creaks.

The rest of the act is a quiet discovery and renunciation. At Nat's suggestion, Helen decides she must leave with Sam, for "this'll never be home to me anymore" (p. 77). Nat arranges for Captain Ben to take Sam and Helen secretly on the Liddy Ann, his cat-boat, when he sails that evening. Nat not only arranges the elopement, he gives Helen his mother's wedding ring, for Sam to use at the earliest opportunity. He tells her to think of him as she sails past the lighthouse where he will be on duty that night: "Jes' as yeh git to the light, you look over there an' sez you to Sam, sez you--there's ol' Uncle Nat's eye--sez you--he's a-winkin' an' blinkin' an' a-thinkin' of us" (p. 79). And then his final speech in reply to Helen's wish that he come out West for a visit: "[His face taking on a look of longing, with something of renunciation.] I said--p'rhaps--In thet there palace o' yourn yeh used to talk s' much about when yeh was little. Remember when yeh was little how yeh used to say thet when yeh growed up, yeh'd marry a prince an' live in a gol' palace, an' I was to come an' see yeh, an' yeh was to dress me all up in silks, an' satins, an' di'monds, an' velvets--" (p. 80).

This fairy-tale story aptly expresses Nat's inner

state, the sense of a father's loss, without sentimentality, as he stands alone in the dead kitchen which had been the scene of so much life at the beginning of the act.

ACT III, SCENE 1: "HAVIN' AN UNDERSTANDIN'"

The end of Act II is the emotional climax of the play. What should remain is the working out of a new order-- which does in fact happen in Act IV. But Herne wrote Act III, with the guidance of the old melodrama and stage spectacle which he knew so well. William Archer, as noted earlier, felt the act simply didn't belong in the play. And, indeed, it serves little purpose other than to establish one important piece of exposition and to assert in action Uncle Nat's effective opposition of Martin, which is already clear.

The scene is the interior of Berry Lighthouse. There are the usual realistic trimmings--cans, oars, boathooks, and the rest. The only functional part of the set is a boathook and the stairway leading up to the light. There is a tremendous storm outside. Uncle Nat is sweeping the floor when Martin comes in with the not surprising news that Helen is gone. The conflict, carried over from Act II, is re-established immediately. Martin asks, "I'm her father, ain't I?" Nat replies, "Yeh didn't act 's ef yeh was today" (p. 82). Martin gives up all claim to her when he wishes the Liddy Ann would sink in the storm and she

and Sam would drown, especially since he suspects that she had to get married to the free-thinking Sam--a reaction which nails him down to his stereotype of the father who sends his erring daughter out into the storm. That accusation is too much for Nat. He springs at Martin's throat. Just then the light dims and goes out because, as Nat guesses, Tim forgot to trim the lamp. Nat tries to go up the stairs to light the lamp, but Martin blocks his way, insisting that he hopes the Liddy Ann will wreck against the rocks in the darkness. When Martin refuses to give in, Nat reveals his most personal secret: he could have married Ann but characteristically gave her up to Martin, as he had given in to Martin all of his life. Nat concludes: "Her child is out ther--my child by rights'. . . . I give yeh the mother, but I'm damned if I'm a-goin' to let yeh murder the child" (p. 86). The triangle, two brothers in love with the same woman, has been lingering in the background of the play. Now it becomes specific. And it is tied to Nat's position as true father of the family.

The two men fight. Martin is defeated and "blindly gropes his way out into the storm" (p. 87). But the fight has been too much for Uncle Nat. He does not have the strength to climb up the stairs to light the beacon, and the scene ends with his desperate cry, "God help me! I hain't got the strength" (p. 87). This curtain line, like the others in the play, leaves Nat on stage alone, but

with a difference. It is a melodramatic expediency to prolong suspense. It resolves nothing that went on in the scene. But Herne needed it so he could indulge in the spectacle of shifting scenes to the storm outside this lighthouse.

ACT III, SCENE 11: "THE 'LIDDY ANN' IN A SOU'EASTER"

EXTERIOR of Berry Lighthouse.

(Note: The storm noises are well worked up before the scene opens. The stage is completely dark, as is the front of the theatre.)

Scene: An expanse of wild, storm-tossed waves, with the lighthouse, a dark, shadowy bulk, rising from the rocky coast on the left. The rain is pouring in torrents, the thunder roars, the lightening flashes. The boom of a ship's gun is heard above the din of the storm, and in the darkness, the "Liddy Ann," sloop-rigged and under reefed jib, makes her way slowly through the heavy seas, from right to left. She is off her course and perilously near the rocks. At intervals her gun booms and she sends up distress signals. The figures of Captain Ben, Dave Burgess, Gabe Kilpatrick, and Bill Hodgekins, as well as Sam and Helen, can be dimly discerned on board. The shouts of Captain Ben giving orders, and the replies of the crew are drowned by the noise of the storm. For a few moments the "Liddy Ann" tosses helplessly in the darkness. Then a tiny light appears in the lowest window of the lighthouse. For a second it wavers, then slowly rises from window to window, as Uncle Nat climbs the stairs to the tower. In another moment the light in the tower blazes forth, showing the "Liddy Ann" her course. A shout of relief goes up from those on the boat, and as the "Liddy Ann" makes her way safely past the rocks

THE CURTAIN FALLS

This is the entire scene. It is obvious that nothing dramatic is accomplished that would not have been done if Nat had climbed the stairs at the end of Scene 1. What is

accomplished is melodramatic suspense and spectacle. Exactly how Herne staged the scene is unclear. But such seascapes were not uncommon on the nineteenth century stage. Wagner's The Flying Dutchman ends with the Dutchman's ship sinking beneath the waves, in the distance. Today, that spectacle is staged with projections, but in the older productions, a real miniature ship went down.

For the most part, the audience loved such spectacle. The Boston Times described the scene: "Here the scene changes and we have an exterior view of the lighthouse. The 'Liddy Ann' is being tossed about by the waves, but the light appears just in time to save her from going to pieces on the rocks. This is one of the most realistic scenes of the kind ever presented in Boston, and that is saying a great deal."<sup>36</sup> The Boston Post reported, "The change from the interior to the exterior of the light is very cleverly handled and elicited loud applause."<sup>37</sup> But even in the nineties such scenes were not applauded by everyone. The Boston Budget was most critical: "This is the one serious blemish of the play; and the fault was the more apparent Monday evening, when the schooner turned out to be a cat-boat with sail full set in a heavy wind, and

<sup>36</sup>Boston Times, February 26, 1893.

<sup>37</sup>Boston Post, February 21, 1893.

her port and starboard lights on the wrong sides."<sup>38</sup> This comment is particularly interesting because it finds fault not with the concept of such a scene but with its inept realism. The Boston Globe too found the scenes melodramatic, but "it may be suspected that they were introduced as a concession to the box office."<sup>39</sup> Interestingly, one of Herne's severest critics, William Winter, found this scene to be the "one vital dramatic ingredient" in the play.<sup>40</sup>

The point need not be labored. Herne could do good melodrama for his audiences, and here he has conceded to do so, even though he did use the scene to also restate the conflict in the play. But the scene does not belong in the movement of Shore Acres. One critic wrote that it "breaks in on the quiet and even key of the play."<sup>41</sup> And when that happens, the dramatic form is forgotten.

#### ACT IV: "ME AN' THE CHILDREN"

The movement of Act IV is quiet and thoughtful, leading to what Northrop Frye might call an "epiphany." There are occasional boisterous interruptions in this

<sup>38</sup>Boston Budget, February 26, 1893.

<sup>39</sup>Boston Globe, February 21, 1893.

<sup>40</sup>William Winter, Life of David Belasco (New York, 1918), p. 200.

<sup>41</sup>San Francisco Chronicle, February 23, 1897.





movement, concessions to the audience's love of action. The setting is again the farmhouse kitchen of Act II, fifteen months later on Christmas eve. The movement of time in the play is from summer (Act I), to fall (Acts II and III), to the dead of winter (Act IV). The movement of the action is from the workings of a living society through its decay into the sleeping deadness at the beginning of Act IV. But as Christmas is a festival marking the celebration of a new order, so Act IV develops as a celebration that projects a new order for this society.

When the curtain rises, Ann is mending stockings, Martin is sitting dejectedly holding the blueprint map of his farm which has been laid off in lots, and Young Nat is reading. Perley and Uncle Nat are playfully dressing the children, Bob, Mary, and Millie, for bed. The first line in the act is Young Nat's as he looks up at the playing children and remarks, cynically, "I tell yeh there ain't no Santy Claus! It's y'r father and mother" (p. 90). Uncle Nat reassures the children that Santa Claus does exist and advises Young Nat that even if he doesn't believe, he should not undermine the beliefs of others. The annual hope which the myth of Santa Claus brings into the dead of winter is transformed during the act from myth to the values of selfless human giving.

The children hang up their stockings and invite Young Nat to join them and hang up his. He repeats his heresy,

"There ain't no Santy Claus." Millie threatens him with the fate of non-believers. "You won't go to Heaven ef you say thet" (p. 92). The children go up the stairs to bed. Millie lingers to say goodnight to Martin who momentarily breaks his depression to kiss her, but lapses back into his isolation, failing to respond to her wishes for a Merry Christmas.

There follows a brief, tense scene, foreshadowing the failure of the land scheme, in which Ann demonstrates her new control of her husband. The tension is broken when Nat and the children run back down the stairs, still playing games. Finally, they go to bed. There is a short comic incident between Ann and Young Nat, which continues to develop during the act. Ann takes his book, a dime thriller in which "The Black Ranger's got the girl in his power an' Walter Danforth's on his trail" (p. 96), and becomes absorbed in it, while Young Nat sits thrumming on the table.

Next, Uncle Nat has another set speech, a skillful one in which he works from rambling observations on the snow storm and Christmas to the land development scheme. The speech initiates the first reconciliation in the act when Nat shows Martin how proud he is of the project. As usual, Herne gives Nat action, tracing the avenues on Martin's map, rather than direct statement, to create the emotion of the scene. Martin's reply is hardly one of

reconciliation, "Ef you hain't got nothin' better t' do than to set there a-devilin' me, I'd advise you to go to bed" (p. 98). But, as we find out in the next speech, this is the first time Martin has spoken to Nat since the scene in the lighthouse, fifteen months earlier. Martin, however, remains an improbably grim Scrooge during the rest of the scene: "Merry Christmas--Humph! I'd like to know what I've got to be merry about" (p. 98). The problem with the character of Martin is the same as before: he is too mean-spirited to be believable. He does, of course, make a perfect foil for Uncle Nat, but when Herne created the foils, he lost all sense of balance, in favor of his character, Nat.

Continuing the reconciliation, Nat asks Martin to help him fill the children's stockings. Martin's reply is pathetic, spoken "half-softening," "I hain't got nothin' to put in 'em" (p. 99). Nat asks Ann to help him: "Come, Ma, let's you and me play Santy Claus" (p. 99), but Ann is so absorbed in the excitements of The Black Ranger that she doesn't hear him. Young Nat finally helps with the presents, exclaiming triumphantly, "I told yeh 'twas yer father and mother all the time" (p. 99). Uncle Nat's reply is significant: "It ain't yer father and mother this time--it's yer Uncle Nat, by George!" [They both laugh.] (p. 100).

Martin softens when he observes that Nat might have



bought a badly-needed new overcoat to replace his army coat, instead of spending the money on such foolishness. This comment serves a practical function, in addition to showing the softening of Martin, by planting once again Nat's connection with the army and the possible pension. Next, Ann joins the distribution of presents, after she ruins Young Nat's story by telling him the fate of The Black Ranger.

The muted, forced family celebration has been sufficiently established to move on to a visitor from the outside, Blake, who adds to the impression that something is missing in this celebration. He is lonesome, especially at Christmas, for he has no family. Ann's thoughtless suggestion, "You ought t' got married long ago," brings from him a sigh and "I never saw but one girl wuth hevin' and she wouldn't hev me" (p. 102). The image of Helen, so obviously missing in this celebration, is planted once again, assuring the audience that she will turn up shortly, if expectations are to be fulfilled. The land plot is brought up again as Blake tells Martin, at one side of the stage, that the Land Company has failed and that he and all the others in the community stand to be ruined. At just this point, the other plot reappears as Sam and Helen pass by the window at the back of the set and Uncle Nat goes out to meet them. Blake and Martin continue to talk, the conversation becoming more desperate and depressing.

Herne is skillful here in juxtaposing the ruination in one plot against the hope of reconciliation in the other.

Blake who functions, with Martin, in both plots must be on the scene, even though the probability of his dropping in with ruinous news on Christmas eve is not in character.

He did have another reason for coming, but that is, unfortunately, kept a secret until the right moment later in the act.

Nat comes in with Helen's baby, teasing Martin that he found it on the doorstep. Martin's reply is characteristic: "There's too many babies here now" (p. 105). When he learns, a moment later, that the baby is Helen's he still suspects that Sam has never married her. His stereotype is complete, for here is the picture of the abandoned daughter coming in from the snow storm, the fruit of her folly in her arms, to ask forgiveness. The picture is quickly dissolved, and it is Martin who must go out to meet Helen and ask forgiveness. This turnabout on stereotyped characters and situations is characteristic of Herne.

Faced with the necessity to make a quick and improbable reversal in the stereotype of Martin, Herne breaks another rule. The reconciliation of father and daughter is an obligatory scene. The audience has been waiting for it, but Herne does not oblige. He moves the meeting off-stage, avoiding both melodrama and sentimentality. When



Martin returns with Sam and Helen, he is a changed man, even apologizing for his behavior to Sam. The change in character is too quick in any case, but Herne makes it more probable by avoiding the actual change on stage. And the audience should not be bothered by a change that it has expected. It was inevitable in the play. When reviewers noted that Martin was inconsistent and "too forced and metallic,"<sup>42</sup> they were reacting to the quickness and the inevitability of the change.

Blake, too, is drawn to the baby. When Martin at first rejected the possibility of any more babies, Blake had quickly offered to take it (p. 105). Now, he to reconciles himself with Sam and Helen, and he takes the baby, saying that he also can "learn" to handle babies, "same's the rest of yeh" (p. 112). He is learning what is missing in his life, and he begs Helen "wistfully" for permission to see the baby whenever he likes. Blake's conversion is completely believable, if overdone, because it is well prepared for by his lonesome reflections on family in the early part of the act.

Blake also ties up one plot thread that has been hanging loose since Act II. The money Sam supposedly stole was later found under some old papers in the back of the safe. The revelation leads to another. Young Nat,

<sup>42</sup>Boston Budget, February 26, 1893.



the cynical outsider in this family, admits that he hid it there to get even with Sam for twisting his ear: "I was sorry the minute I done it and I'd 'a' told long ago only I was afraid of a lickin'" (p. 110). The reason why Young Nat blocked Martin's exit in Act II finally becomes clear. Now Ann threatens him with mild punishment, but he won't take it. He thinks he is a man (he is wearing long pants instead of knickerbockers for the first time in the play) and he will not stay after tomorrow, Christmas: "I'll go out West an' be a cowboy 'r somethin'--you see if I don't" (p. 110). As final punishment, Ann asks him to hand over his Black Ranger book. From the top of the stairs, he throws it, almost hitting Perley: "Take yer ol' book! I don't want it" (p. 111). Ann becomes hysterical and asks Martin to stop him. But it is Uncle Nat who settles it all, advising, "You set him to milkin' ol' Brindle to-morry--she'll knock all the cowboy out of him" (p. 111). All laugh. This resolution of Young Nat's function in the play is essential to Herne's movement. He does not simply tie up the plot thread, but he shows the constant force for change which exists and must be accommodated in a living society. Earlier Martin could cope with Helen's desire for change only by opposing it, saying that the old values are right. Uncle Nat is more understanding of the conflict between the generations, not insisting on his own values, but suggesting time to let the young think it out.

Who is still missing in this celebration? Whom does the audience expect to see? Joel Gates and Mandy, and, of course, they drift in. Gates' motive this time is to ask the Berrys to keep Mandy a short time during the next day, for he has an emergency odd job to do in a home which has the measles. And, for the first time in the play, Mandy cannot go with him. Nat gives Mandy a doll from among the presents, and Ann says, "She musn't be lunsome to-morry-- she must comeover and spend this Christmas with us" (p. 113). The drifters, too, find a home, however temporary, in this new order. Gates is in a more cheerful mood than at any other time in the play, but much of his cheerfulness takes the form of jokes that add little to the action. For instance, when he arrives, he mistakenly assumes that Ann, who is holding the baby, is the mother: "I hadn't heard any rumours afloat 'bout your hevin' --" (p. 111). When he is told that the baby is Helen's, he responds, "I'll tell yeh, Nathan'l, thet West is a growin' country an' no mistake" (p. 113).

Martin has yet to reveal to the rest of the family that he is ruined by the land scheme. When he does, there is general depression. He needs \$1500 to pay off Blake's mortgage, and Blake cannot give him time because he has taken on more than he can handle and must assign the mortgage. Now Fortune finally smiles. It has been capricious enough in the course of the play, most disastrously when

for no clear reason the city folk decided they would rather build at Lemoine than at Shore Acres. Blake suddenly remembers that aged messenger of good Fortune, a forgotten letter, which quickly reveals that Nat's back pension of \$1768.92 has finally been approved. Although the arrival of the letter is coincidental, it is not implausible; at this point in the comedy, the audience is waiting for some messenger to come in and save the day. The action simply fulfills those expectations, without raising any serious questions of probability. The notion that the pension will come through has been planted often enough to suit Herne's realistic demands, but this final intervention of Fortune has nothing to do with realism. It is the spirit of comedy.

Nat humbly refuses to touch the pension, but finally decides to give it to Ann if Martin will deed the farm over to her. It is, he says, his first real wedding present to Ann. And here the other plot, always in the background--two brothers in love with the same woman--comes closer to resolution. Nat and Ann will rule the new order. Broken and greatly touched, Martin says, "I'd know as I've got a right to say either yes or no. I'll do whatever you and Mother wants I should. I hain't got a word to say" (p. 118).

The play is obviously over, but Herne needs an action to bring it to a close. He has two choices, and he uses

both. The first is a rousing finale, comic, with everyone onstage. Since Uncle Sam'l, the gun, was instrumental in winning the pension, Uncle Nat takes her down with praise: "Well, ol' gal, yeh've got yer deserts at last. Yeh not only saved the Union, but, by Gosh, yeh've saved this hull family" (p. 118). Then Nat does a mock manual of arms.

As Uncle Nat starts to present arms, the gun goes off suddenly. It must be loaded so as to make a great smoke and not too much noise. There is a movement of general excitement and panic. Helen's first thought is for her baby, and she rushes over to Ann and takes it in her arms. Gates picks up Mandy, heels in the air, and head down, and rushes to the door, right, as if to save her anyway. He stands frantically pawing the door in the attempt to find the latch and escape with Mandy out of harm's way, giving frightened little gasps as he does so. As the smoke clears away, the others all gather around Uncle Nat who explains that the explosion was an accident. They are all excitedly talking and laughing, and completely oblivious of Gates, who, as the panic dies down, comes to his senses and turns his attention to Mandy. She is completely enveloped in her wraps and he has some difficulty in getting her right side up. When he finally discovers her feet, he sets her on the ground, frees her head from its wrappings, smooths her hair . . . kisses her and croons over her (pp. 118-119).

The broad farce of the scene is typical of an 1890's ending. It was at this point that McVickers insisted the curtain be dropped in the try-out performance in 1892, in Chicago.

But Herne's play has not been moving toward farce, even though it can incorporate this broad comic scene of celebration into its movement. The play has been, rather,

a celebration of the idealistic human spirit which endures change. There is one more scene after everyone leaves. The last line in the play is Martin's: "She [Ann] ought to 'a' had you. 'Twan't jes' right somehow" (p. 120). Nat is left alone on stage, the patriarch of a new society. Herne's stage directions for this scene include what Uncle Nat is supposed to be thinking during the scene. But more to the point is what the audience saw and felt. One chronicler recalled: "As Uncle Nat Berry, he stood alone in the farmhouse kitchen. All the family had gone to bed, but Uncle Nat waited to do the last 'chores.' He looked at the fire in the cook stove and set the dampers for the night; he wound the clock; he kicked a rug against the crack under the door so that the cold wouldn't come in. He made everything warm and safe. After that, he took his candle, lit it, and slowly climbed the stairs. Then the curtain fell."<sup>43</sup> Lewis Strang, a chronicler of the actors in the period, wrote, "With an ineffable smile, unlike that of any other actor on earth, the kind old man puttered about, and at last . . . felt his way to the stairs and slowly climbed to his chamber, the curtain falling as his bent form disappeared at the head of the stairs."<sup>44</sup>

<sup>43</sup>Helen Ormsbee, Backstage with Actors (New York, 1938), p. 171.

<sup>44</sup>Lewis Strang, Famous Actors of the Day (Boston, 1899), pp. 33-34.

Montrose Moses remembered the "flexibility of his facial expression which depicted the full beauty of his character" in this scene.<sup>45</sup> Moses compared the scene with Maeterlinck's conception of the static drama where little action suggests a tremendous interaction of forces and feelings. The scene is static, quiet, uneventful, but it is a culmination of all the force and feeling in the play, a final illumination that makes a statement dramatically of the idealism Faulkner expressed many years later in the Nobel Prize Address, "I believe that man will not merely endure: he will prevail. He is immortal not because he alone among creatures has an inexhaustible voice but because he has a soul, a spirit capable of compassion and sacrifice and endurance."

Herne was the idealist, the American romantic, who believes in the perfectibility of man. He said, "I believe that every human being has a certain amount of divinity--that is, God--within him; just as much God as he is capable of holding. And he gives out just as much of the divinity as he is capable of expressing. And I believe that if he were not bound down by unjust social laws, that if he were free, the divinity would grow and develop and propagate its species."<sup>46</sup> He believed that "there can be

<sup>45</sup>Montrose Moses, The American Dramatist (Boston, 1925), p. 215.

<sup>46</sup>Moses, American Dramatist, p. 227.

no true art without soul."<sup>47</sup> Even while he confessed himself a believer in the teachings of evolution--"I know that nothing is stable"<sup>48</sup>--he tried to express in his dramatic form the only kind of stability he could find in a world of flux and change: the inexhaustible human spirit.

In his acting of Uncle Nat, Herne expressed this belief. Although there are no "quotes," no epigrammatic lines in the play to state the belief, the play itself is the statement. The actor, as Stark Young wrote, is the medium for the expression of "quality, idea, emotion, a dramatic moment."<sup>49</sup> In Uncle Nat, Herne created a medium for such expression. His daughter recalled, "It had been Herne's often expressed wish to play one last great part before he died, and he had written Uncle Nat with that idea in mind. Into the character he had put all of himself, his thoughts, his feelings, all that life had taught him, until it had become a living, vibrant thing."<sup>50</sup> Herne fulfilled his wish. One critic wrote, "Nathaniel Berry lives under his touch, displaying--with a fidelity that so

<sup>47</sup>Chicago Inter-Ocean, May 17, 1897.

<sup>48</sup>Herne, "Old Stock Days in the Theatre," The Arena, VI (September, 1892), pp. 401-416.

<sup>49</sup>Stark Young, "Character Acting," Theatre Arts, IX (December, 1925), p. 808.

<sup>50</sup>Julie Herne, "Biographical Note," p. xxiii.

clearly approached nature that one never thought of the art of acting--the kindly humor, the gentle pathos, the innate strength that made Uncle Nat so loveable a member of the human family."<sup>51</sup> Another wrote, "Both truth and joy are to be found in . . . 'Shore Acres' which we might make the mistake of thinking of as too homely and commonplace. The joy comes from the thoroughgoing kindliness of the author's conception of human character, and his right attitude toward life. The old lighthouse keeper becomes a personal friend of the auditor, it is good to have known him. . . . [It is] such a lovingly faithful transcript of the human scene that a blasé Broadway audience will sit silent and intense as the final curtain descends. We are merely saying good-by to that same well-beloved old lighthouse man, before he retires for the night."<sup>52</sup> The highest praise, perhaps, came from Herne's friend, Hamlin Garland, who said the character of Uncle Nat "expressed the man as I know him."<sup>53</sup>

Finally, Herne has written a real comedy, marred to be sure by the formulas that Herne could not quite shake off, but a real comedy nonetheless. Let Susanne Langer's

<sup>51</sup>Strang, Famous Actors, p. 35.

<sup>52</sup>Richard Burton, The New American Drama (New York, 1913), p. 64.

<sup>53</sup>Hamlin Garland, et. al., "James A. Herne," Arena, XXVI (September, 1901), p. 283.



recent definition stand as a final comment on Shore Acres. "Real comedy sets up in the audience a sense of general exhilaration, because it presents the very image of 'livingness' and the perception of it is exciting. Whatever the story may be, it takes the form of a temporary triumph over the surrounding world, complicated, and thus stretched out, but an involved succession of coincidences. This illusion of life, the stage-life, has a rhythm of feeling which is not transmitted to us in separate successive stimulations, but rather by our perception of its entire Gestalt--a whole world moving into its own future."<sup>54</sup>

### Sag Harbor

The comic quality that illumines Shore Acres is clouded over in Sag Harbor, even though that play has been called "a second Shore Acres."<sup>55</sup> On the surface, the play, Herne's last, seems to be even farther from the formulas of his day, for it is a calm, almost uneventful idyll made up of a series of random scenes. On the surface, too, it seems to have the same strain of idealism found in Shore Acres, for it is a description of the simple passions of innocent people. But the play fails as a whole--as a Gestalt; it somehow does not quite come together into a

<sup>54</sup>Langer, Feeling, p. 348.

<sup>55</sup>Boston Traveler, October 25, 1899.

total effect. The events and ideas do not find a clear form for expression. The fault lies partly in the character Herne created for himself, Captain Dan, who may have the beliefs that Uncle Nat expressed but has not been created as an expression of those beliefs in the form of the play. The fault lies, too, in the careful realism and prolixity of detail--qualities that made it unique in 1899, but seem tedious today. And finally, there is fault in the heavy melodramatic plot at the center of the play.

A scene by scene analysis is not necessary to explain these faults, but a summary of the plot is a necessary prelude to further discussion. This is a summary of the plot as one reviewer saw it develop on the stage; it is typical of other summaries:

Two men and a woman--an old situation indeed, as the author concedes; but there is only one other, and beyond that there is no drama. In this development of the familiar theme two brothers are in love with the same woman: Ben Turner and Frank, the younger brother, ask Martha Reese's hand in marriage. An orphan, cared for from infancy by the older brother, Ben, she decides gratitude and duty require her to marry her benefactor, though she thinks she loves the younger brother, Frank.

Two years pass. The disappointed lover envies his brother the prize he has won, returns to the old home and promptly makes mischief; a conversation is overheard by the husband and he learns that the marriage choice was a sacrifice. There is the crux of the play, and the unraveling of the tangle supplies the only real "situations" of the piece. Finally the husband and wife are

reunited and the younger brother turns to another woman.<sup>56</sup>

The plot is, as Herne admitted in his subtitle for the play, "An Old Story." In a speech at the Boston opening, however, he added that he had tried to tell the old story in a new way.<sup>57</sup>

In Shore Acres, Herne had used the standard plot of two brothers in love with the same woman as a subtle background to his main plot, giving it prominence only at the end of the play, and even then it is used only to express dramatically the conflict in the main plot between the inhuman Martin and the idealistic Nat. But in Sag Harbor, the triangle is the plot, and Herne is unable to rise above the conventionality which that plot imposes on his play. Martha is too obviously in love with Frank to make her sacrifice in marrying Ben appear anything other than absurd. The first time she comes on stage, she is talking of Frank, not Ben. She carries Frank's picture in her locket. She has even been involved in another triangle over Frank: she and Jane Cauldwell have been childhood sweethearts of Frank, but Martha was the most favored. Captain Dan recalls an incident when Frank carried Martha safely over a creek but dropped Janie in; "I always thought

<sup>56</sup>Chicago Evening Post, March 21, 1900.

<sup>57</sup>Boston Traveler, October 25, 1899.

he done that on purpose."<sup>58</sup>

Martha is tied to Ben by a sense of duty that is also unbelievable dramatically because Ben is not presented sympathetically early in the play. He is, Captain Dan says, "the dog in the manger," who will neither marry Martha himself nor let anyone else marry her (p. 143). Martha chooses Ben in a scene of such distress that is obvious, to the audience at least, that she loves Frank. Her rationalization that she loves Frank as a boy and Ben as a man makes no sense. Add to all of this Ben's nobility as he offers to step aside and let Martha marry Frank, and the whole situation becomes improbable. Conventionally, yes, she would put duty above love, but dramatically, her choice is sheer stubbornness. Few reviewers, though, found anything wrong with this contrivance; they expected and accepted the conventional sacrifice for duty. But the reviewer for The Boston Evening Transcript found it "the quintessence of madness. So much so that it puts you immediately out of touch with all three characters, to the point of your becoming absolutely indifferent as to what may happen to them. The thing is pure melodrama, and as the hinge of the play, infects the whole plot."<sup>59</sup> The

<sup>58</sup>In Shore Acres and Other Plays (New York, 1928). All subsequent references to this standard edition of the play will be cited in my text.

<sup>59</sup>Boston Evening Transcript, October 25, 1899.

comment is not quite fair, for much of the later interest in the play develops as Martha learns to live with her decision, but the decision itself certainly creaks in a sentimental way.

Equally melodramatic is the handling of the Act III revival of the triangle, two years later. When Martha tells Frank that she feels she must stay with Ben whatever her true feelings, Ben overhears the conversation and interprets it to mean that she wants to be with Frank. His decision to go away to the Klondike and leave them together is too sacrificial to be believable. But what saves the scene from being complete melodrama is the focus Herne keeps on Martha, who protests that Ben has failed her in this crucial moment. The brothers threaten to murder each other, but Captain Dan puts the focus where it should be: "Just now, you're killin' her--the woman who loves you both" (p. 224).

The Act IV resolution of the triangle is also a little hard to believe. Frank has been nasty and moody throughout the play, gaining very little sympathy. Martha had told him, in Act III, "You're morbid, I tell you, and you're making life very hard for yourself--and for me. And you're worrying Ben" (p. 221). When Frank finally gives up all claim to Martha, he turns to Jane, who has been waiting around, conveniently, for him all these years. One reviewer wrote that the reconciliation at the end was

logical except for one particular: "The one particular is the parcelling off of Frank. The idea is right enough, but his change in favor of Jane, even though she does all the wooing, seems a bit sudden."<sup>60</sup> It is not actually all that sudden, for Frank has been paired off with Jane in a long comic scene in Act III, even though his thoughts are on Martha. For at least one reviewer, the change was not only sudden but out of character and an undeserved good fortune: "After three or four attempts to betray his brother's wife he hardly merits encouragement from the only other 'possible' person in the drama."<sup>61</sup>

Herne's "old story" becomes the center of the play, and it is a difficult center to build a vital drama around, for it invites too many clichés of stage convention and plot development. The handling of exposition and plants is contrived in keeping with the central plot. For instance, the most prominent thread in the play is concerned with the problems arising from marriage. Those problems are planted at the beginning when the story of Annie Truesdell is told in an off-hand way--just a bit of village gossip.

Freeman. Did yeh hear that Annie Truesdell's married?

Cap'n Dan. No-o-o?

<sup>60</sup>Boston Journal, October 25, 1899.

<sup>61</sup>Chicago Evening Post, March 21, 1900.

Freeman. Yes, married yisterday.

Cap'n Dan. Who'd she marry?

Freeman. That New York pants drummer. The fellah that had that mammoth pants sale here last winter.

Cap'n Dan. Yes yes!

Freeman. She's goin' to live with his folks in New York (p. 130).

Then Captain Dan and Elizabeth tease each other about their fifteen-year courtship, a piece of information dropped with no preparation:

Cap'n Dan. Say, 'Lizbeth, you and I have been courtin' in this innocuous desuetude sort of way nigh on to fifteen year.

Elizabeth. I've enjoyed it, haven't you?

Cap'n Dan. Yes yes! But we don't seem to get any closer together.

Elizabeth. We've got so's one chair does for both Sunday evenings.

Cap'n Dan. You know blame well what I mean. . . . I'm not getting any younger--an' you're--

Elizabeth. Don't finish it. I know exactly what you are going to say.

Cap'n Dan. What now?

Elizabeth. You were going to say, I'm getting to be an old maid.

Cap'n Dan. I wa'n't neither. I was goin' to say you've got your full growth (p. 131).

Then Freeman, a widower of one year, appears with one of several girl friends, Frances Towd. Freeman believes all women want to marry him: "There's so many of 'em wants me!

She's [Frances] offered me seventy-five dollars and a set o' double harnesses for a half-interest in the business" (p. 136). When Freeman leaves, he drops a plant, telling Dan that Ben must be told what they already know. The plant turns out to be about marriage too--Ben should marry Martha, his ward, because she loves him. All of these earlier discussions of marriage certainly do set up the audience for the important scene when Ben considers marriage, but there is an excess of planting.

The Klondike gold-rush, later a possible exile for either Frank or Ben, is planted just as carefully. It is introduced first as gossip--butter costs two dollars a pound there (p. 197). Then Captain Dan, for no reason, asks if Frank has the gold fever yet (p. 203). The conversation at the Act III dinner turns to the Klondike, and Ben declares he would go if it were not for his wife, Martha, and the baby (p. 211). There is certainly no surprise later when Ben decides to resolve the triangle by going to the Klondike.

Perhaps the most awkward plant in the play occurs when Hosea, the local bartender, interrupts the dinner with some comic business but manages to drop the fact that there is a show in town, a bit of information which sets up Frank's next speech: "My gracious, I forgot there was a show tonight. Will you go, Miss Cauldwell?" (p. 214).

Not all the exposition and planting is so mechanically



handled. The climax of Act II, a wild celebration of Ben's engagement to Martha, depends on the fact that these simple people are unaccustomed to champagne.

Ben. Hold on, boys, there isn't going to be another stroke of work done here today-- George, run over to the Nassau House and get me a bottle of champagne.

Cap'n Dan. Say--git two of 'em--one for me-- cha'ge it.

George. Champagne's always charged!. Quarts or pints?

Ben. Quarts!

George. Kee-rect!

Elizabeth. Why, George Salter, where are you going in such a hurry?

George. 'Scuse me, Miss Turner, can't stop. I've got to get two quarts of champagne.

Elizabeth. What in time are you going to do with that stuff?

When the champagne is served, their innocence is established through action as well as words. No one knows how to pour it. The taste disappoints them. The slow build-up of childish abandon during the scene is very effective, leading finally to an attack of double vision for Elizabeth and an unsteady acceptance of Dan's proposal, an acceptance that would have been improbable under any other circumstance.

Conventional plot devices accommodate the melodrama which Herne employs in the play. The picture in Martha's locket leads to a mistaken identity: Ben thinks the

picture is of him when in fact it is of his brother who looks like a younger Ben. When Martha conveniently and conventionally loses the locket, and Captain Dan finds it, the truth is of course revealed to Ben. The convention of the overheard conversation is also used when Ben and Captain Dan return unexpectedly and eavesdrop on the love-quarrel of Frank and Martha. In both instances, Ben discovers crucial information through hackneyed devices.

Somehow, the familiarity of the devices of discovery and the abundance of conventional exposition in the play did not bother most members of the audience: one reviewer wrote, "It contains no incident that can be termed improbable."<sup>62</sup> That is obviously inaccurate, but it reflects the mood of the audience. Most reviewers, in fact, found the play practically plotless, for Herne had buried improbability beneath a heavy veil of realism. The reviewer for The Boston Post decided that realism was the only theme of the play.<sup>63</sup> For another reviewer, there were "living, moving beings who live a story--not puppets who merely counterfeit one."<sup>64</sup> He praised the play as the summit of naturalism, that is realistic reproduction of daily life. One authentic resident of Sag Harbor, the

<sup>62</sup>Chicago Evening Post, March 21, 1900.

<sup>63</sup>Boston Post, October 25, 1899.

<sup>64</sup>Chicago Evening Post, March 21, 1900.

Long Island village, is reported to have said after seeing the play, "By gosh, sir, it was us and no mistake."<sup>65</sup>

The most immediate source of realism is the setting, but Herne does not go to the excesses of Shore Acres in this play. The setting is "a minor consideration" in the total effect.<sup>66</sup> The movement in settings is similar to that in Shore Acres, from an exterior scene into a family room. But the movement here is not as organic. The first act of Shore Acres could not take place anywhere except in the farmyard. The first two acts of Sag Harbor could take place almost anywhere, before we move into the house two years later. Herne chose the shipyard and the shop, most likely, for the scenic possibilities and for a sea-coast atmosphere, but the setting serves no function in determining the events of the act. It is merely a backdrop. In Act I, Herne adds an obvious lighting effect, a gradual sunset and twilight, that is functional, suggesting the gloom that builds during the act.

Like the setting, much of the realistic business is not essential to the play. The songs, for one, seem to serve only as interesting interludes. Almost every member of the cast is given a chance to sing. In Act I, Freeman begins "The Poor Workhouse Boy," which Captain Dan takes

<sup>65</sup>Mark Sullivan, Our Times: I. The Turn of the Century (New York, 1926), p. 223.

<sup>66</sup>Boston Journal, October 25, 1899.

up because it reminds him of the orphan, Martha Reese (p. 139). Captain Dan ends Act II with a merry song, showing his delight in being engaged to Elizabeth (p. 193). Even Frank loves singing (p. 207). Although the songs usually fit the characters and the situations--to some degree--and may help to create the atmosphere which the drama itself has not developed, they are largely extraneous, adding little other than a kind of folksy local color to the proceedings. The most obvious extraneous song is the finale, "All Through the Night," which Martha sings for no reason at all--except that it makes a good curtain, expressing the sentiment that Love now watches over them all.

There is an abundance of pointless business in the play. The live baby gets special attention on stage, when its function could be served just as well offstage. Unlike the children in Shore Acres who are made an integral part of the action, Martha's baby is a scene-stealer when more important action is going on. One critic observed that the live baby distracted the audience.<sup>67</sup> For instance, the baby is onstage when Ben, Frank, and Martha meet as planned on Easter morning to settle their problem. The baby in the background serves no purpose, for its existence as a complicating factor in the problem has been well established.

<sup>67</sup>Margaret Mayorga, A Short History of the American Drama (New York, 1932), p. 180.

Most of the business connected with Freeman, a comedian's part, is not necessary, even though it is funny. The dinner in Act III finally disperses not because of tensions within the plot but because of Freeman's absurd jealousy of Jane and his petty conceits about women. Captain Dan tells him, "Next Saturday night, you'd better stay to hum, you long-legged, red-haired gawk. You've sp'iled everythin'" (p. 215). Compared to the dinner scene in Shore Acres, where family and community tensions disrupt the dinner, this dinner and its conclusion are clearly undramatic.

Characters, too, are added for no apparent dramatic purpose, even though reviewers thought they were "gems"<sup>68</sup> and "superb" sketches.<sup>69</sup> Herne includes a passing Easter parade of village folks on their way to church:

People are seen passing the window on their way to church. The people must be simple, typical, native people, none of them characters in the play, dressed for Sunday, and must be carefully rehearsed to be in conversation, serious and light, all varying in walk, talk, and expression (p. 229).

The scene is a pointless spectacle of character types. More specifically tied to the play, but still unnecessary, are old Mrs. Russell, a widow, and William Turner, the father of Ben and Frank. Mrs. Russell has one useful

<sup>68</sup>Chicago Journal, March 20, 1900.

<sup>69</sup>Boston Evening Transcript, October 25, 1899.

function in the play: she helps to create the mood of change and endurance in the opening scenes of the play with a long discussion of her husband and the whaling industry that was once the life of Sag Harbor. She sums up her cycle of life, "Yes, I love Sag Harbor. I was born here--I married Cap'n John here, and I guess I'll be buried here now. I'm proud of the Harbor, but somehow it isn't the same--that is, to me" (p. 142). How much the old heroic life she knew has degenerated is illustrated by Captain Dan's story, told in counterpoint to hers, of his recent adventure driving three whales ashore. Mrs. Russell makes him admit that they were "just everyday, 'round-here whales," not the great sperm whales of her memory (p. 141). Mrs. Russell is also used for comic purposes--e.g., a foil for the lady-killer Freeman at the dinner (p. 209)--or she just gets in the way--e.g., when she chats with William Turner before the dinner (p. 200).

Old Mr. Turner too is quaint and comic and unnecessary. His comic caricature is built on his crotchety refusal to go out of his way to serve the customers of his warehouse. For instance:

Turner. You send over and get y'r truck, or I'll be danged if I don't chuck it into the bay.

George. I'll drive over with you now, Uncle Billy.

Turner. I'll be danged if yeh do. I ain't goin' over there now.

George. Well, when'll yeh be there?

Turner. That's my business. When a man gets to be as old's I be, he don't want to keep a-runnin' over to that dock every five minutes in the day, for you nor nobody else (p. 162).

Turner's crotchet is the source of farce whenever he is on the stage. At only one point is his character connected directly with the action of the play, a five-line exchange with Frank, in which Turner shows his preference for the older brother, Ben (p. 171). Both Turner and Mrs. Russell are added attractions that could be dropped.

Freeman Whitmarsh's girl friends are equally superfluous, even though they are funny. Frances Towd does man's work, vows she will wear bloomers, and preaches women's rights: "Women are going into everything nowadays. Architects, doctors, lawyers, barbers--they vote out West" (p. 136). Frances also has a vulgarly comic head cold and sniffles. Miss Bailey, a tall masculine woman, is a scientific manicurist, who also lectures "on 'Degeneration.' Free to women Tuesday night and men Thursday night" (p. 248). Both of these caricatures belong handily with Freeman, himself a caricature of a man so completely caught in the false image of himself that he causes all sort of petty troubles in the play. (It is he, for instance, who starts the rumor that Martha is in love with Ben.) As Herne draws Freeman, he is reminiscent of one of Bergson's definition of the comic: "An individual is comic who

automatically goes his own way without troubling himself about getting in touch with his fellow-beings."<sup>70</sup>

Interesting topical allusions, like interesting characters, are in the play for their own sake, not for dramatic purposes. Herne was up with the times in his use of the land speculation theme in Shore Acres, but he also tried to make it an intricate part of the play. In Sag Harbor, the topics are incidental: Frances Towd affirms women's rights; Captain Dan and Elizabeth discuss a new confection, roasted peanuts, which is running competition with old favorites like caramels (p. 188); the whaling industry is discussed with a detail that recalls Melville in his more tedious technical moments (p. 142); the church has become a business (p. 213); and so on. Literary allusions, too, are not an integral part of the play--as they are for the most part in Shore Acres. Elizabeth reads to Dan at night; her current choice, Puddin' Head Wilson. A Whitcomb Riley poem is recited:

When God made Jim, I'll bet you  
He didn't do anything else that day  
But just set around and feel good (p. 177).

This literary excursion is pointless.

After the recitation of the poem, Freeman and Cap'n Dan indulge in a humorous exchange which is, unfortunately, characteristic of many of the laughs in the play.

<sup>70</sup>Henri Bergson, Laughter (New York, 1912), p. 134.



Cap'n Dan. Did yeh ever see him?

Freeman. Who?

Cap'n Dan. Riley's Jim.

Freeman. Not to know him. Have you?

Cap'n Dan. No, not 'at I remember.

Humorous exchanges like this are inserted into--not built into--the play even at the more serious moments. Most of these lines are designed to get an audience response not for the play but for themselves. For instance, the exposition early establishes that Elizabeth is afraid of contact with men, even though she enjoys, in a rather perverse way, being the object of Cap'n Dan's ardent pursuit. After the point has been made by action and dialogue, Dan explains,

Cap'n Dan. We'd have been married too, long ago,  
if it hadn't 'a' been for the book o'  
Genesis.

Ben. What's the book of Genesis got to do with  
it?

Cap'n Dan. Scared her. All them begats (p. 143).

This scene was considered "unaccustomed frankness" by one reviewer.<sup>71</sup> Another reviewer found similar risqué jokes disconcerting: "In 'Sag Harbor' there are some remarks meant to be frank examples of real conversations that add nothing to the play and detract a deal. When Marble [Cap'n Dan] says that Frank's aunt [Elizabeth] will not

<sup>71</sup>Boston Journal, October 25, 1899.

allow him to return home and wear a mustache 'because it is sloppy at the table' he sounds a false note; when Mrs. Russell sententiously declares that she had but one baby and 'had to go to sea to get that' nothing is added to the refinement of the tale, and her remark that 'Rome wasn't built in a day' when Marble complains that he has no baby is not exactly improving."<sup>72</sup>

Some of the jokes in the play are developed on comic misunderstanding:

Freeman. [Referring to the boat.] Got the old girl hauled out, I see.

Elizabeth. [Haughtily.] Got what old girl hauled out, Freeman Whitmarsh?

Freeman. The "Kacy."

Elizabeth. Oh! I beg your pardon (p. 129).

The incident recalls Gates mistaken assumption that Ann, not Helen, was pregnant, which intrudes in Shore Acres. Herne also inserts visual, farcical jokes. Frank rolls up Jane's music roll for her. The jealous Freeman, who thinks he is Jane's escort, unrolls it and ceremoniously rolls it up again (p. 216). Captain Dan sits on wet paint (p. 187). His valise keeps popping open (p. 248).

It all adds up to what the Boston Transcript called "too much comic relief."<sup>73</sup> There is, in fact, too much of

<sup>72</sup>Chicago Evening Post, March 21, 1900.

<sup>73</sup>Boston Transcript, December 9, 1913.

everything in the play--too many caricatures, too many incidental jokes, too much realism. As the reviewer for the Boston Post wrote, the play "needs some changes in the way of condensation and, let it be hoped, in the way of elimination."<sup>74</sup>

The possibility of condensation is particularly strong in Herne's character part, Captain Dan. As suggested above, he is involved in much of the extraneous humor of the play, and he certainly exists as a local color oddity. One of his peculiarities is an old-maidish fussiness. He is, Elizabeth says, an "old fuss-budget" (p. 197). He does the housework, and he likes to gossip. He wears Elizabeth's tie because he likes it--"there's so much red into it" (p. 227)--and he likes to douse himself with cologne. There is a pathetic kind of truth when he tries to assuage Elizabeth's fear of marriage: "You wouldn't be livin' alone with no man--I'd be your husband" (p. 133). Uncle Nat shows some of these same characteristics--he puts on an apron and controls the dinner preparations--but his fussiness is not evident except when it gives a little humor to the unnecessary scene of the dinner preparations.

Captain Dan's nose is always in other people's affairs. He listens to Freeman's gossip about Martha and

<sup>74</sup>Boston Post, October 25, 1899.

Ben, and promptly tells Ben that Martha loves him, thus setting the triangle plot in motion. When the plot is being worked out quite conventionally in the last act by the three characters involved, he steps in and tells a long allegory of "Browns" and "Smiths" who had the same problem as Frank, Martha, and Ben. Their reaction to his intrusion is exactly what one can expect from the audience at this climactic point: "They are all a little taken aback at the interruption. Frank, with a bored look, sits on the bench at the piano. Ben turns away impatiently. Martha stares wonderingly" (p. 235). The long story, of course, gives Herne the set speech he and his audiences liked, at the expense of the dramatic movement. The Boston Transcript, for instance, found it effective; "At no time did the audience sit more quietly."<sup>75</sup> But the speech is "dragged in by the heels."<sup>76</sup>

Captain Dan has nothing organic to do with the central plot, and that is a major weakness. He becomes a curious abstraction whose humanitarian idealism is not worked out dramatically. He cannot be the controlling comic spirit no matter how mechanically he is forced to fit that role. As one reviewer said, he is not a "picture of noble, self-sacrificing manhood" as Uncle Nat and

<sup>75</sup>Boston Transcript, December 9, 1913.

<sup>76</sup>Chicago Evening Post, March 21, 1900.

Griffith Davenport are.<sup>77</sup> He becomes a sort of stage manager for the plot, setting it in motion and resolving it--but he does it outside of the plot itself, like a puppet master. He may be "modern" in the sense that he seems to be aware of the theatricality of his character and his play, but he cannot be said to direct, or write, the play he is in, no matter how much he wants to.

It goes its own way. The characters of the triangle become central, and their situation denies the possibility of comedy. They do overcome all obstacles, but the obstacles are not so much those of Fortune or chance as the inevitable result of Martha's decision to marry Ben. The triangle follows its own dramatic movement until it is completed and Martha becomes, in a sense, triumphant when she reaps the anguish and eventual understanding implicit in her decision. The plot is at the least serious, with tragic overtones, certainly not comic. Yet one might well find it in a well-made play. Even though the action moves to its inevitable close, the playwright keeps the resolution in suspension, in the well-made tradition, by constant reversals--now Martha seems to lean toward Frank, now toward Ben; Frank wants her, Ben gives her up. Dutifully she remains with her choice, her husband, overcoming the obstacle of Frank's persistence, and Frank is, obviously,

<sup>77</sup>Boston Post, October 25, 1899.

no simple comic obstacle--like Martin's "stubborn father" or Blake's "rich suitor." He is a passionate force determined to pull her away from Ben.

This serious plot--what one reviewer called "the crimson thread of tragedy"<sup>78</sup>--is at odds with the comic atmosphere of the play, and it is the most damaging weakness. Herne clearly intended the comic to be in control, transforming the "old story" melodrama, and even though he was unsuccessful, the comic form is obviously trying to find expression in the play.

When Herne claimed no originality, only "originality of method,"<sup>79</sup> he was echoing his belief that "it is the simple things in life that are to me the most dramatic."<sup>80</sup> He tried to show life as a series of episodes, loosely linked, that by their very structure express a comic attitude, a simple statement about change and flux and human endurance. The method recalls Chekhov who also insisted his plays were comedies, even when their plot lines become serious.

Herne's idea of presenting an unsensational flow of life in Sag Harbor is evident in the structure of events, already discussed to some extent earlier. Each scene

<sup>78</sup>Chicago Journal, March 20, 1900.

<sup>79</sup>Chicago Journal, March 20, 1900.

<sup>80</sup>Flynn Wayne, "Herne and His New Play, 'Sag Harbor,'" National Magazine, II (1899), p. 394.

moves almost without cause into the next, and the movement pauses, as life pauses, to pick up insignificant human vagaries. One reviewer wrote, accurately, "It is really more a series of pictures than one connected story."<sup>81</sup>

Two examples will, perhaps, demonstrate this movement more fully. Act I begins with Elizabeth and Captain Dan playing Cat's Cradle. The game is interrupted by technical talk about the overhauling of a boat and then by gossip--Annie Truesdell's marriage. Dan and Elizabeth have a long scene of coquettish courtship, spiked with anti-romantic chatter about Dan's new teeth and his bad habit of chewing tobacco. They are interrupted by the comic interlude of Freeman and Frances Towd. Then Ben and Captain Dan reminisce about Martha as a baby and about her shiftless family. Her father was a "good riddance" when he died of cholera, and the novel-reading mother died of grief. Ben thinks the story is pathetic, but Dan finds it funny. Then Mrs. Russell enters and talks about the good old whaling days and the marks of progress around Sag Harbor. When she leaves, Dan tells Ben that he and Freeman believe Martha loves him. Martha enters and joins in talk about her childhood with Frank and Jane. They are interrupted by the absurd Freeman, who tells Martha to remember that he will be ready for marriage as soon as his year of

<sup>81</sup>Anaconda [Montana] Standard, July 13, 1901.

mourning is up. Then, finally, Ben proposes to Martha, who asks for one night to think it over. The plot complicates quickly when Dan finds Martha's lost locket and tells Ben the truth, that Martha loves Frank. And just then Frank comes in, and the brothers meet. Dan blames Freeman for the impending trouble, and the curtain falls. In outline, the movement of the act is from desultory scenes into a quickening pace as the triangle plot takes on prominence.

As another example, in Act III, before the dinner, there are three separate conversation areas on the stage. Jane is a moving focus to lead the audience from one unrelated conversation to another. She talks first to Dan and Martha about the joys of children, then moves to the piano to flirt with Frank, while the others talk in the background. Her conversation with Frank becomes inaudible when Captain Dan, now with another group by the fireplace, asks Freeman if he is keeping company with Jane, and the focus shifts to that group. This scene moves smoothly, naturally, without much point other than to capture the variety and aimlessness of social conversation.

These are not isolated examples of the movement of the play. Except when the serious plot dominates the situation, there is a constant shifting of individual picturesque scenes of homely, unsensational life. Even at the point when the triangle is quickly resolved after Dan's narrative, in a scant five lines, the talk turns lightly



to the practical and natural pleasure of eating breakfast (p. 239).

Mostly, the talk is about marriages, deaths and births, and growing up, the constant ups and downs of human happiness. As Elizabeth says, "Everybody's happy tonight, anyway, if they never are again" (p. 218). The play ends with the celebration of Easter and a promise of the continuing cycle of life, as Dan finds out that he is to become a father, thus completing a cycle of hope that began in his opening line in the play, during the Cat's Cradle game, "Yep--that's the only cradle we're ever likely to need, I guess" (p. 128). The audience is made to feel, as one reviewer said, "that the situation has returned to a normal and comfortable state of happiness."<sup>82</sup> It is not difficult to see that Herne was trying to create a simple picture of the flow of ordinary lives, a comic picture that ends, always, with a new order of society and reasserts the endurance and the triumph of man over obstacles. The attempt was, the Boston Traveler observed, "something unlike any precursors. Like its author the play is sui generis."<sup>83</sup>

As suggested earlier, the loose comic form is almost Chekhov-like, if one accepts the description of Chekhov's

<sup>82</sup>Boston Transcript, December 9, 1913.

<sup>83</sup>Boston Traveler, October 25, 1899.

plays as having no protagonist, no plot in the sense that a hero wills something, no unified action, and no dramatic economy of dialogue.<sup>84</sup> Herne's play is an imaginative "composition."<sup>85</sup> At times, it admits an awareness of being a play, a work of the imagination, not a picture of life. Most aware of this theatricality is Jane Cauldwell who is "a departure from stage ingenues"<sup>86</sup> and the most interesting character in the play. Jane knows that the serious part of the play is preposterous and cannot be taken as real. "How is it going to end?" she asks lightly (p. 185). She can say, with a smile, of the whole thing, "It's a tragedy, isn't it?" (p. 241). She even wants "to play a part in this domestic drama--[with a little laugh.] 'Two Loves and a Life'" (p. 242). Her detached awareness of the "play" she is in suggests the attitude the audience is expected to take, but as the reviews indicate, the audience didn't respond quite that way. It is the same attitude Captain Dan takes when his story settles the triangle. He asks how good his performance was, and he is pleased when Elizabeth replies that it made her cry (p. 238).

<sup>84</sup>Alan Thompson, The Anatomy of Drama (Berkeley, 1942), p. 333.

<sup>85</sup>Chicago Journal, March 20, 1900.

<sup>86</sup>Anaconda Standard, July 31, 1901.

But the theatrical attitude and the comic form are not strong enough to encompass the serio-tragic plot of the triangle, comfortably. The obstacles presented in that plot are not comic obstacles, caprices of Fortune, but potentially tragic obstacles, clearly at odds with the comic form Herne is trying to create. Enough of that form, however, shows through so that audiences then, and readers now, can appreciate how unorthodox a play he attempted, and how nearly he missed success.

## CHAPTER IV

### MARGARET FLEMING AND DRIFTING APART

Arthur Hobson Quinn finds tragedy in Margaret Fleming and Drifting Apart.<sup>1</sup> And he gives Margaret Fleming the rank of Herne's best play.<sup>2</sup> To rank one of Herne's plays as "best" is misleading because in each of his plays, Herne tried to accomplish something a little different. An attempt to compare Shore Acres and Margaret Fleming, for instance, is frustrating if one compares his realism, or his freedom from clichés, or his characterization. Both plays are realistic, both avoid clichés only part of the time, and both have at least one character--Uncle Nat and Margaret--who is alive and enduring. What one can compare, of course, is the essential form of the two plays, the emotional rhythm that expresses an idea or a spiritual state dramatically; yet even the forms are not easily compared, for Shore Acres is essentially a comedy, and Margaret Fleming is essentially a tragedy, while both contain elements of the complementary genre. What makes

<sup>1</sup>Arthur Hobson Quinn, A History of the American Drama from the Civil War to the Present Day, rev. ed. (New York, 1936), p. 161.

<sup>2</sup>Arthur Hobson Quinn, Representative American Plays, 5th ed. (New York, 1953), p. 515.

more sense, then, in studying Herne's plays is an analysis of how well they maintain the artistic unity of the basic form and how well it can embrace whatever happens into the script. In Shore Acres, as we have seen, the comic form is dominant. In the later comedy, Sag Harbor, by contrast, Herne seemed unable to control the thread of tragedy which runs through the comedy.

Both Margaret Fleming and Drifting Apart are made of potentially tragic materials, but both also have strong social messages which must be worked into the form of the play. The question for analysis is how successful was Herne in finding a form for the materials that could control the "problem play" messages, as well as his old standbys of local color, realistic detail, and melodramatic conventions. George Pierce Baker wrote, "A dramatist will do well, then, to know clearly before he begins to write whether he wishes his story to be melodrama, tragedy, farce, or comedy of character or intrigue. Unless he does and in consequence selects his illustrative material so that he may give it artistic unity, he is likely to produce a play so mixed in genre as to be confusing."<sup>3</sup>

A detailed analysis of Margaret Fleming, first, will demonstrate to what extent Herne appears to have a clear unifying purpose in mind in the composition of the play,

<sup>3</sup>George Pierce Baker, Dramatic Technique (Boston, 1919), p. 112.

and then an examination of the earlier Drifting Apart will consider parallel problems. Both plays present initial textual problems. In Drifting Apart, only an earlier version of the play, not the final script, exists. In Margaret Fleming, we have only summaries of the early versions and a final script which Mrs. Herne recreated from memory about 1914.

The early version of Margaret Fleming is of value to this study because it suggests, by comparison, how Herne came closer to a unified form as he directed and revised the play. Of the several summaries of the action of the early version--first played at Lynn, Massachusetts in 1890 and later in Chickering Hall, Boston, and in New York in 1891--two are particularly revealing because they come from reviewers of disparate tastes and sympathies. Hamlin Garland reviewed the Lynn production for the Boston Transcript, and Edward Dithmar reviewed the New York production for the New York Times. Their accounts are similar, but their attitudes are quite different, Dithmar reflecting the usual New York critics' patronizing attitude to realism--best exemplified by their leader William Winter--and Garland reflecting the growing interest in realism among the Boston literati. Dithmar describes the opening scenes:

The first scene of Act I is the office of Philip Fleming, a gray-haired young man who drinks too much brandy. Philip has a young wife, a year-old baby, and a nice home to keep them in. He enters his office, removes his hat and overcoat,

sits at his desk and reads his letters. A visitor is announced, one Joseph Fletcher, a vendor of soap, cough medicine, and cement for broken china. He was formerly an employee of Fleming, and the object of his call seems to be, principally, to get a drink of rum for nothing. A second caller is Dr. Larkin, Fleming's family physician, whose mission is more serious. Before he has a chance to impart it Fleming has a scene with the telephone. He talks with his wife about the baby's birthday and dinner, and also with the baby, who is understood to remark by telephone, "Ah goo."

Then Dr. Larkin is permitted to come to the point. He has been called to attend a poor woman, Lena Schmidt, in childbirth. She has been employed by Fleming. She has suffered greatly--the physician enters into particulars on that head. She has been delirious, and has unwittingly spoken the name of her betrayer. Fleming gets pale and nervous. The physician scowls and lectures, and threatens. Fleming is compelled to promise he will visit the girl before she dies. Therefore he telephones to his wife that he cannot be home to the birthday dinner, takes a large drink of brandy, puts on his overcoat, takes his umbrella, because it is raining now, and goes out.

In the second scene the home of Fleming is revealed. The baby has just had her bed-time bath, a custom to be condemned, by the way, because one tub bath a day is enough for a year-old child, and that in the morning. Mr. Herne should reconsider this highly dramatic point. Too much praise, however, could not be given to the pictorial accuracy of this scene. The display of linen, particularly of those articles of infant apparel known to women of all ages as "diddies," is most impressive. Well, the child is put in its crib, and the German nurse tells a story of misery to the child's mother, Margaret Fleming. Her sister has gone astray, and is dying. The nurse vows vengeance on the betrayer when she learns his name. Mrs. Fleming gives her a "night off," so that she may go to her sister.

Then Margaret stands by the bedroom door and sings softly to the baby, who is restless. While she is singing Philip enters, wet, pale, agitated.

His wife is worried by his ill looks, and prescribes hot lemonade, a mustard footbath, and extra blankets. A conversation between husband and wife here indicates the course she will pursue when she learns of her husband's perfidy. He is embarrassed in business, and has called a meeting of his creditors. Yet he has put \$1000 in a savings bank for the baby, and produces also a paid-up insurance policy on his life in the infant's favor. He has, moreover, settled his house upon his wife. These benevolent actions the wife rebukes somewhat sternly. The house must go to pay his debts.<sup>4</sup>

By contrast, Garland tells this last scene briefly, catching the movement of the emotional content without dawdling over bothersome realistic details:

The next scene shows Margaret happy in her motherhood, with her baby--a most intimate and beautiful home picture. She has for nurse Maria, a German woman of middle age. It is developed that Maria is the elder sister of the mill girl whom Fleming has ruined, and that she has come to town in search of her. Maria is a strong piece of character writing, humorous, but with a sort of volcanic energy of hate. She loves Margaret very deeply. Philip returns late, gloomy, ashamed, sullen, but Margaret drives away his dejection, and baby makes him forget his crime.<sup>5</sup>

Act II opens with a domestic scene which Dithmar dismisses with "Philip is left, lying on the floor, playing with baby, who has a canton-flannel elephant and a woolly dog, while Margaret, having instructed the new cook about

<sup>4</sup>Edward A. Dithmar, "James A. Herne's Margaret Fleming," New York Times, December 10, 1891, reprinted in The American Theatre as Seen by Its Critics 1752-1934, ed. Montrose J. Moses and John Mason Brown (New York, 1934), pp. 142-143.

<sup>5</sup>Hamlin Garland, "Mr. Herne's New Play," Boston Evening Transcript, July 8, 1890.



the 12 o'clock dinner, goes out."<sup>6</sup> Garland ignores the details and captures the quick succession of emotional states in the scene, which are essential to the impact of the nursing scene which follows it:

Fleming has fully recovered his usual careless humor. Dr. Larkin calls; he is treating Margaret for weakness of the eyes. He advises Margaret to get Philip away for awhile, and, catching Philip alone, tells him to get Margaret away. She is threatened with blindness, a fatality attendant on childbirth in her mother's family. But Margaret has promised Maria to go to see her sister and also to conceal the poor girl's history from her husband. The doctor is very savage with Fleming, tells him his wife's eyesight is periled, cautions him about letting any information of Lena's history reach her--<sup>7</sup> the shock might drive her blind, even insane.

Then follows the controversial third act (the second part of Act II in the New York production<sup>8</sup>). Dithmar's summary is again concerned more with details than with dramatic movement:

When she reaches the cottage where Lena Schmidt has found shelter the girl is dead. Her puny infant is starving. The girl's sister has found a letter, written by Lena to Philip Fleming, which tells the whole story. She shows it to Margaret in a burst of anger, and threatens to take Philip's life. The meddling physician is there to try to protect Margaret, and to tell her that she is in danger of blindness which is hereditary in her family, as certain maladies are hereditary in the families

<sup>6</sup>Dithmar, p. 144.

<sup>7</sup>Garland, "Mr. Herne's New Play."

<sup>8</sup>The act-scene division varied with the productions of Margaret Fleming. I follow the divisions in the revised, published version.

of Ibsen's characters. But Margaret can take care of herself. She quiets the German woman by the influence of her calmness, and sends a note to Philip demanding his presence at the cottage. Then she is left alone with the newborn infant, who is wailing piteously from hunger. Margaret is agitated, naturally; she is angry beyond words; all the hope has gone out of her life. Dr. Larkin would have told her not to try to nurse Lena's child at that moment. She ought to have known better herself. But it is after all Mr. Herne's fault. All realists encounter an impenetrable brick wall of fact sooner or later when writing for the stage. Poets have the poet's license. Well, Philip staggers into the room just as Margaret has decided what to do with the child, and the sagacious prompter rings down the curtain just in time.<sup>9</sup>

Garland, by contrast, again ignores the details and suggests the movement of the scene as he saw it:

The third act takes place in Mrs. Burton's cottage, where Dr. Larkin is horrified to meet Margaret. He implores her to go home, but she refuses, and inquires about the unfortunate girl and is told she has just died. In an impassioned scene Maria thrusts the terrible truth upon Margaret and threatens Fleming's life. Margaret sends Dr. Larkin away and sends a note to Philip. As she waits in agony too great for tears, the light goes out of her eyes. She hears the wail of the new-born starving baby; its pitiful cries move her motherhood to its depths, she takes the poor wail to her breast, and as Fleming, too awed and appalled to speak, stands watching her, the curtain falls.<sup>10</sup>

Up to this point the early version reported by Dithmar and Garland is similar in its basic movement, though different in minor details, to the revised version published

<sup>9</sup>Dithmar, p. 145.

<sup>10</sup>Garland, "Mr. Herne's New Play."

by Quinn in his anthology. After the cottage scene, the early version skips four years time and moves to three other settings. Garland's summary of the early version follows:

The intensity of interest finds welcome relief in the next act in the change of scene, four years later, to Boston Common where Joe Fletcher has a peddler's stand. He has with him Margaret's child Lucy, five years old, whom he believes to be his wife's sister's child. Fleming comes in broken and dejected, and in conversation with Joe tells the story of his wife's disappearance, of his own failure in business, and of his own remorse and hopelessness. In speaking about the child Joe becomes convinced that she is Margaret's child, and takes Fleming home to let him see for himself. The scene changes to a store on Hanover street, where Maria is again living with Joe. Here Lucy is waiting on customers. Miss Edwards, a worker in the mission school, comes in to get Lucy for a vacation in the country. After she goes out, Margaret, feeling her way with a cane, enters, inquiring for Miss Edwards. Lucy knows her as a visitor to the mission schools, which Margaret had been in the habit of visiting, hoping to hear of her child. While talking with the child she hears and knows Maria's voice, and the hope that this little waif is her child leads her to demand the name of the mother. Maria sullenly insists it is her sister's child. Margaret is going away in despair, Lucy clinging to her dress, when Maria breaks down, pleads to have Margaret take the child and herself away with her. Margaret consents and takes the child, Maria promising to follow. But when Joe and Fleming return, the hate she feels for Fleming makes her pitiless and she tells him she has sold the child. Fleming goes out, and while Maria is gloating over her subtle revenge, the curtain falls.

The last act takes place in the office of inspector of police, a scene which Mr. Herne has studied carefully from life. Margaret and the child (which she knows is hers), Philip, Joe and Maria are brought in. After a little

preliminary examination the inspector leaves them alone "to arrange matters." . . . The wronged wife faces the shamed and broken man with a patience, kindness and yet firmness that holds the spectator literally enthralled. . . . With her pale face and sightless eyes turned upon her husband, Margaret tells him she cannot go back to him. "The wife-heart has gone out of me. Only the mother-heart remains." He accepts the judgement and they clasp hands. The inspector comes in and seeing them standing thus, rubs his hands jovially. "Ah! you've come to an understanding, I see." "Yes," replies Philip, "we understand each other." "Better than we ever did before," adds the voice of Margaret. The inspector bows them out, returns to his desk, rings a bell. "Send Davis in," and the play is ended; life is going on just the same with the inspector and his world.<sup>11</sup>

In summary, these acts may seem long and tedious, and in fact the plot sounds like the complications of Drifting Apart which we consider later in this chapter, but the play itself was spiked with enough action and melodrama, as this summary shows, to keep up the interest in the play after the climactic nursing scene. These interest-getting devices we have noticed before in Herne's work--the interesting variety in setting, an outdoor scene on the Common for color and an indoor scene in the police station to give Herne the chance for a study from life; the effects of lower class environments; the quaintness of Joe's peddler stand; the spectacle of the aging Philip and the blind Margaret; the melodramatic recognition scene as Margaret discovers the child; and a last act in which the

<sup>11</sup>Garland, "Mr. Herne's New Play."

threads are carefully untangled. Quinn suggests that there was comedy as well in these scenes, and it is certainly likely, considering what we know about Joe Fletcher and Maria.<sup>12</sup> Most of these added attractions disappeared in the new fourth act which follows the cottage scene and ends the play in the revised version.

Before we turn to that revised version, there is still one other relevant item in the earlier version, a variant ending. In Roadside Meetings (1931), Garland recalled that the play ended like this:

After having refused reconciliation with her husband, Philip Fleming, Margaret was left standing in tragic isolation on the stage, and as the lights were turned out one by one, her figure gradually disappeared in deepening shadow, and when the heavy, soft curtains, dropping together noiselessly, shut in the poignant action of the drama, no one moved or spoke. The return to the actual world in which we lived was made silently.<sup>13</sup>

This ending was apparently used in the Chickering Hall production in May, 1891, and again in the New York production Dithmar saw in December, 1891.<sup>14</sup> The variation is, perhaps, minor, but it shows Herne using the silent curtain for an exact opposite effect from the end of Shore Acres. Uncle Nat's silent triumph is a triumph for the

<sup>12</sup>Quinn, History, p. 144.

<sup>13</sup>Hamlin Garland, Roadside Meetings (New York, 1931), p. 77.

<sup>14</sup>Quinn, History, p. 141.

whole family, for Man, as he closes up the house. Margaret's silent triumph is personal--"tragic isolation" Garland called it--and it certainly brings little change in the world of police justice which surrounds her at the moment. Nor is there much relief in sight for her physical defeat--the blindness--or much hope for a new happy life with her restored child.

Either way--Margaret alone, or the police inspector returning to his routine--the ending of the play was too bleak for contemporary tastes, and Herne was persuaded to write a new last act for the 1892 Chicago performance. That version, Quinn insists, is the one printed in his anthology.<sup>15</sup> These various endings of the play are not textual matters of interest only to the historian tracing the various productions of Margaret Fleming; they raise the question of what is the logical (and emotionally viable) ending for the play after the cottage scene, for in all versions the first part of the play stays essentially the same. Mrs. Herne has been accused of "tempering" the

<sup>15</sup> Arthur Hobson Quinn, "Ibsen and Herne--Theory and Facts," American Literature, XIX (May, 1947), p. 174. That Herne actually wrote this revised last act is disputed, but Quinn establishes the fact on the evidence of a letter from Julie Herne. Others feel that Mrs. Herne wrote the last act. William Winter, in his usual distaste for Herne, decided that she wrote the whole play.

original.<sup>16</sup> But she feels the revised version "is more unified and preserves the tone more securely."<sup>17</sup> An examination of that version should clarify the matter.

The revised version opens with a few tidy additions by Mrs. Herne.<sup>18</sup> The opening dialogue with Bobby, the office boy, establishes Philip as a kind-hearted boss, interested in the boy's future. The mill manager, Foster, enters next, worried about business problems which Philip dismisses with "Nothing's going to happen."<sup>19</sup> Then Williams, the foreman, comes in to discuss a broken supply belt for which Philip quickly makes a replacement order. These three brief scenes are essential to establish the public image of Philip--a first impression--as an easy-going and essentially good-hearted man before the meeting with Joe Fletcher in the next scene which exposes his past, hidden life of too much liquor and too many girls. Philip tells Joe about his successful marriage and his attempts at reform, admitting, "I've got more than I deserve, I guess" (p. 524). Joe acts as a foil to Philip, for he too

<sup>16</sup>Dorothy S. Bucks and Arthur H. Nethercot, "Ibsen and Herne's Margaret Fleming," American Literature, XVII (January, 1946), p. 318.

<sup>17</sup>Quinn, History, p. 146.

<sup>18</sup>Quinn, "Ibsen and Herne," p. 173.

<sup>19</sup>Margaret Fleming in Arthur Hobson Quinn, Representative American Plays, 5th ed. (New York, 1953), p. 522. Hereafter, references to this standard edition of the play will be cited in my text.

has been married to a good woman but his wife left him, a situation which brings from Philip, "If my wife left me, I'd kill myself" (p. 524), thus setting up the course of action he takes in Act IV. There is extraneous humor, as one would expect from Herne (who played Joe in Boston), particularly a set speech involving an Irishman, a priest, and whiskey, which serves little purpose except to get a laugh, but the figure of Joe does act as an effective foil to the newly assumed responsibility which Philip has accepted, especially when Dr. Larkin, the conscience of the play, enters and calls Joe "a sad example of what liquor and immorality will bring a man to. He has indulged his appetites until he has no real moral nature left" (p. 524). This judgement also applies to Philip, it quickly develops, for Dr. Larkin has just come from Lena's bedside. The revelation is interrupted by the phone call from Margaret which seemed to bother Dithmar. But the phone call is rhythmically right, making the image of Philip's new life a part of the stage action as the threats of his past are revealed. The doctor preaches to Philip about "what brutes such men as you are" (p. 525). In a reading of the play, this moral condemnation of the double standard of sexual morality may seem overstated, but in the context of the movement of the act which has been building sympathy for the young husband, Philip's reply, "Oh, come now, doctor, aren't you a little severe?" (p. 525) is likely



to express the audience reaction to the scene. Certainly, Dithmar's review indicated that reaction. The doctor, the conscience, unreasonably forces Philip to agree that he is bound, ethically, to visit the girl, and lie to her, to say that he loves her so she won't "lie there and die like a dog" (p. 526). Philip's reply is reasonable enough--he has never told her he loved her, which it turns out in her Act III letter is the truth. The doctor leaves, and the scene ends with a brief exchange with Foster, which shows Philip making a quick business decision and humanely concerning himself about Williams, the foreman, who is getting too old for the job. Philip goes out into the rain.

The movement of the scene is swift--pausing only for Joe Fletcher's jokes--in detailing the inner state of Philip. That state is mostly a moral void, filled only by one thing: his sincere and deep devotion to his wife, a devotion which is threatened in the course of the scene by Philip's past which he had hoped was gone. The "problem" of adultery and the double standard are stated discursively by Dr. Larkin; the audience responds to the problem emotionally through the effect it has on Philip's state of mind. It is likely, however, that in 1890 some members of the audience might take Dr. Larkin's high moral tone as their point of view, but in the movement of the entire scene, his preaching is clearly a dramatic catalyst, not a lesson. Thus, when Quinn and others emphasize the

"problem play" aspects of Margaret Fleming,<sup>20</sup> they are on the wrong track, even though 1890 audiences were simply not ready to see beneath the problem into the drama. A characteristic attitude is Hennequin's: "Adultery may, indeed, be hinted at in American plays, as it may even form an important element in the plot, but it must not be seriously discussed or even presented as a problem. In fact, the subject must not be presented as a question at all, but as a sin."<sup>21</sup> If auditors could think only in terms of sin, they were blinded to the inner drama. "No really 'nice' persons were supposed to talk about it," wrote one reviewer at the 1907 revival.<sup>22</sup>

If that is how his audiences could be expected to respond, Herne was not willing to make concessions to them. In a lecture in St. Paul's Universalist Church, he conceded that people had made the theatre what it is, but a "true artist . . . has never descended to their level."<sup>23</sup> He felt that the theatre should have a moral influence as a factor in society, but he insisted that the theatre makes its moral message clear in different terms which the

<sup>20</sup>Arthur Hobson Quinn, The Literature of the American People (New York, 1951), p. 805, and Jordan Miller, American Dramatic Literature (New York, 1961), p. 80.

<sup>21</sup>Alfred Hennequin, "Characteristics of the American Drama," Arena, I (1890), p. 708.

<sup>22</sup>Chicago Tribune, January 27, 1907.

<sup>23</sup>Chicago Inter-Ocean, May 17, 1897.

church and church members should learn to accept. McVicker in a little book, The Press, the Pulpit and the Stage, made much the same point: "The audience in the theatre, unlike the congregation in the church, is always moved."<sup>24</sup> In this scene the audience is "moved" by Philip's collision with a moral problem, not by Dr. Larkin's preaching about it. (It is not accidental that Herne chose a doctor, not a member of the clergy, for his emblem of strict moral conscience in the play. The doctor, the scientist, carries more authority in the Flemings' world.)

Susanne Langer has said that "art does not affect the viability of life so much as its quality. . . . In this way it is akin to religion, which, also, at least in its pristine, vigorous, spontaneous phase, defines and develops human feelings."<sup>25</sup> The quality of life, human feelings, is Herne's concern in Margaret Fleming, as elsewhere. His concern, Alan Downer writes, is with "humanity," the basis of a refined "inner realism," the final stage in the development of realism.<sup>26</sup> Surface realism is remarkably integrated into the inner movement of this opening scene.

<sup>24</sup>James H. McVicker, The Press, the Pulpit and the Stage (Chicago, 1883), p. 71. Presented first as a lecture at Central Music Hall, November 28, 1882.

<sup>25</sup>Susanne Langer, Feeling and Form (New York, 1953), p. 402.

<sup>26</sup>Alan S. Downer, American Drama (New York, 1960), p. 7.

The office routine is important only as Philip reacts to it. The one false note in the scene is the intrusion of the quaint Joe Fletcher.

Scene two of Act I develops the image of the happy home life Philip has projected in the telephone conversation in scene one. In this scene Dithmar found too many details of babies and domestic life. Actually, the scene is not long, and Margaret's happy motherhood is played in counterpoint to Maria's distress over Lena's unhappy motherhood, a counterpoint which eliminates sentimentality. Contrast this scene with the fondling of the baby at the beginning of Act IV of Sag Harbor, and the dramatic control is clear. Martha's baby is pointless spectacle; Margaret's is a dramatic emblem of her motherhood. The scene opens with that emphasis, for Margaret is buttoning her blouse: "No--no--no! You little beggar. You've had your supper" (p. 527), a normal action foreshadowing the later abnormal nursing of another "beggar."

The disturbing element in the opening part of this scene is not the abundance of realistic detail but Lena's sister Maria, Joe Fletcher's abandoned wife, who quite by coincidence turns up as nursemaid in this happy home. The coincidence is unbelievable, but quickly forgotten once she begins to compare Lena's and Margaret's happiness, for the emotional--not the conventional--movement of the scene takes center stage. Her bitterness and threatened revenge

("But, by Gott, I vill find dot man oudt, und I vill choke it from his throat") is a strong contrast to Margaret's kindness and sympathy for the fallen woman. What is established immediately is Margaret's forgiving, humane attitude, even though no "nice" woman is supposed to think about such things, much less condone a girl who goes astray. Maria makes that point, ironically, when she begs Margaret not to tell Philip because "he is a fine gentleman, und if he knowed about her--he might not like to have me by his vife und child" (p. 528). She does not know he is the father. Thus, the two strongest motives in Margaret's character--her mother-love and her humane desire to know and understand the plight of others--are established in this first impression, and established quickly beneath the surface action of the problem play plot.

Maria leaves. Margaret turns down the lights and sings a mournful lullaby: "Blow, Blossom go--into the world below--I am the west wind wild and strong--blossoms must go when they hear my song. Go little blossom, go--into the world below. Rain, rain, rain is here. Blossoms must learn to weep" (p. 528). Unlike too many other of Herne's songs, this one is an integral part of the movement of the scene, not only suggesting the sad cycle of innocence and experience but introducing the blossoms motif which is associated with Margaret throughout the play.

When Philip enters, pale, weary, listless, he asks,

"Why are you in the dark, Margaret?" (p. 528) The irony may be heavy-handed, but it sets the tone for this domestic scene which concludes the act. Margaret mothers him as she has mothered her baby. She tries to understand the motives that forced him to miss the baby's birthday dinner. When he reveals his plans to deed the house to her to save it from approaching financial problems in the business, she is immediately selfless and, thinking she understands his motives, refuses his offer. When she tells that Joe Fletcher had visited her that morning, she is mildly amused by the fracas that resulted when Joe faced Maria. She does not condemn either party. The act ends as Philip accepts her ministrations, "All right--'boss.'" And she intuitively sums up his spiritual state: "You know, Philip, dear, you gave me the strangest feeling when you stood there--the rain dripping from you--you didn't look a bit like yourself. You gave me a dreadful fright. Just like a spirit! A lost spirit. Now, wasn't that silly of me?" (p. 531)

There is an intense emotional content in this scene, depending in part on the dramatic irony growing out of Margaret's innocence, but depending in larger part on the characters' inner states, so obviously in conflict, but expressed in only the most quiet of actions. Howells observed, "This quiet is the one true touch in it; and it is so true that it imparts a color of veracity to the whole,

which the spectator has to look at twice to find a reflected light. . . . Strong emotions may be expressed without the least noise."<sup>27</sup> Another critic has written, "He [Herne] had abandoned 'action' for a drama of inwardness, concentrating upon the psychological conflict."<sup>28</sup> The forces that are closing in on Margaret are all the more menacing because they are hidden, and they are not merely social forces but personal forces that must affect her valuation of her life, lived until now in such innocence that she is kind to fallen women and mildly amused by the marital problems of others. Her collision with these forces is inevitable, but what the audience is interested in is not the forces themselves but the way Margaret, as a personality, will react when the collision comes--the future into which this drama is moving. She has already shown an intelligent perception and a superior control that are potentially heroic.

In Act II, she moves closer to the inevitable conflict, by her own choice. The act opens as Dr. Larkin introduces one new force against which she must contend: "You say you have no pain in the eyes?" (p. 531) and she admits to an occasional dimness but refuses to wear

<sup>27</sup>William Dean Howells, "Editor's Study," Harper's Magazine, LXXXIII (August, 1891), p. 477.

<sup>28</sup>Herbert Edwards, "Howells and Herne," American Literature, XXII (1951), p. 438.

glasses. There follows some overworked irony as the doctor and Margaret discuss Philip.

Doctor. You take good care of him, don't you?

Margaret. I've got to . . . he's all I have,  
and men like Philip are not picked  
up everyday, now, I tell you.

Doctor. No, men like Philip Fleming are certainly not to be found easily.

But the doctor is quickly cut short as Philip enters with a rose he has picked for Margaret--the first rose of the season. He puts it on her breast, even though she regrets that the flower has been plucked. The flower motif may seem obvious in the telling, but in the rapidity of stage action, it is a subtle touch.

The next scene between Philip and the Doctor is tedious because the doctor is tedious. When the doctor gives a full explanation of Margaret's illness, glaucoma, with the medical details, and then insists righteously that Philip must protect Margaret from any strain, the doctor is an undramatic bore. Philip had declared that he wanted to tell his wife "this whole miserable story" (p. 532), and the doctor is even more tedious when he insists Margaret must be kept in ignorance; his own moral code--the "right" thing--does not work in this situation, and he must encourage Philip to live a lie, even though that deceit will lead to a greater shock for Margaret.

There follows a brief comic scene with Philip, Joe,



and Maria. Maria throws Joe out, bodily, and Philip goes after him. The scene might be seen as a comic restatement of the marital troubles of Philip and Margaret, but it has no place in the movement of the act. Its only function is to get Philip off the stage so Maria can extract the promise that Margaret will visit the dying Lena, who, strangely, wants to see Margaret. Margaret chooses to go in spite of the earlier warnings that she should not strain herself.

Before she leaves, two brief exchanges of dialogue jar the serenity of the scene. One is about Philip's cigar smoking. In two earlier instances, Dr. Larkin has refused Philip's cigars because he cannot take a gift from a man he can no longer respect. Philip's reaction is indifference. Now Margaret is upset by Philip's cigar smoking because he must not smoke while he is taking the medicine which Dr. Larkin has given him. Philip at first says he will give up the medicine not the cigars, but Margaret prevails, and he gives up the cigars. The second exchange is about baby's eyes, which Philip thinks are becoming more like Margaret's, an observation which elicits a protest from Margaret. The scene ends as Margaret leaves to visit Lena. Her final reminder is "Don't forget your medicine, and please don't smoke when my back is turned" (p. 536), reinstating the emblem of Philip's guilt, the cigars, in juxtaposition to her own secure happiness. Both blindness and Philip's guilt converge on her in the

climactic third act.

Act III is short and powerful, concentrating completely on Margaret's discovery of the real world that has been hidden beneath the illusion of security which has blinded her in her own living room. Herne avoids strong visual contrast between that bright world and the dark world in which Lena is dying. Mrs. Burton's sun-lit cottage where Lena has found refuge is no hovel but a "neat, plainly-furnished sitting room" (p. 536).

The movement of the act is unified, reaching first a melodramatic climax, then an emotional climax, with none of the usual Herne digressions into problems or realism or comic relief. It opens with an empty stillness, soon broken by the wail of the new-born infant, a wail which is finally solaced at the end of the act when Margaret nurses the child. A brief exchange between Mrs. Burton and Dr. Larkin establishes the necessary exposition: Lena is dead; before she died, she scribbled a note; her child needs mother's milk.

Margaret enters and ignores the doctor's pleas to go home, for she is sure that she can be of some help to Maria, at least. The doctor lies to her, saying that there is contagion in the house, and she prepares to leave, thinking of the safety of her own child. But Maria prevents her in a burst of near-insanity, showing the death-bed letter Lena has written to Philip. This is the

melodramatic climax of the act, but the effect on Margaret is not melodramatic. She wants only to read the letter, but finds that she cannot make it out. As the doctor had predicted, the emotional stress is affecting her nervous system and her sight. The fact is shown dramatically by her action, nothing is said. Maria reads the letter aloud and then continues her melodramatic tirade, threatening to rush out and kill Philip with a pistol. Margaret calmly stops Maria. Herne's control of this first climax in the act is remarkable, for he gives all of the melodrama--including the convention of the death-bed letter--to Maria, while he keeps the interest on Margaret's inner state, never expressed in words until after she has disarmed Maria. Then follows a quiet two-line passage. The doctor, "overcome by the situation," but understanding little of what is really happening to Margaret, says in desperation, "For God's sake, Mrs. Fleming, let me take you out of this hell." Margaret's reply is alive with her own perception: "Ah, doctor, you cannot take this hell out of my breast" (p. 539).

Then she makes her choice. Without hesitation, she sends a note to Philip demanding him to come, in spite of the doctor's protests. In one last attempt to stop her from carrying out her choice, the doctor tells her what the audience already knows: if she continues under this stress, she will go blind, and may even endanger her life.

But she has made her choice and orders the doctor away.

Margaret. Then, let me be the doctor now, and  
I order you to leave this house at  
once.

Doctor. You are determined to do this thing?

Margaret. [With finality.] Yes.

After she dismisses the reasonable doctor's advice, she impatiently grants Maria's plea for forgiveness, made on her knees, and sends her away. Neither reason or melodrama have any part in the tragic role she has chosen to play. Nor does the social or moral problem of adultery. Before Philip returns, Herne carefully moves his action away from the "problem" to a universal theme--life-giving motherhood--which makes all else seem minor in the emotional climax of the act.

Mrs. Burton brings in the crying infant, and leaves again to find something to feed it. In the bright sunlight of the room, Margaret's sight begins to fail, but she seems to find an inner vision.

Margaret. Bring a lamp--it's getting dark here.  
[She is still in the same attitude by the table. There is a silence, then the child's wail arouses her. She half turns her head in its direction--and tries to quiet it. Hush--child--hush-- Then she reaches out her hand as if to pat it.] There--there--poor little thing. Don't fret--it's no use to fret, child--be quiet now--there--there, now. [She turns and slowly gropes her way to the sofa, sits on the edge of it, and feels for the child and gently pats it. She murmurs softly.] Hush--baby--go to sleep.

[There is a silence while a soft flood of sunshine plays about her. A pitying half smile flits across her face. She utters a faint sign and again drifts away into that inner consciousness where she evidently finds peace. Again the child is restless--it arouses her and, hopeless of comforting it, she takes it in her arms. After a moment, she rises to her feet and stumbles toward the table. She knocks against the low chair. At the same moment, Philip Fleming dashes breathlessly into the room through the door right. He pauses in horror as Margaret raises her head, her eyes wide open, staring into his--her face calm and remote. She hushes the child softly, and sits in the low chair. Philip stands in dumb amazement watching her. The child begins to fret her again. She seems hopeless of comforting it. Then scarcely conscious of what she is doing, suddenly with an impatient, swift movement she unbuttons her dress to give nourishment to the child, when the picture fades away into darkness.]

The effect is what Gassner has called "the quality of tragic enlightenment," not linked to psychology or social situation.<sup>29</sup> It is not restricted merely to what Quinn found in this scene: "The strength of that dramatic action in which, with few or no words spoken, the relations of human beings are developed or revealed with the fatal swiftness which is the essential quality of great dramatic moments."<sup>30</sup> Nor is it easy to believe what Howard Taubman

<sup>29</sup>John Gassner, The Theatre in Our Times (New York, 1954), p. 70.

<sup>30</sup>Quinn, History, p. 144.

called touches of sentimentality and melodrama in this scene.<sup>31</sup> As we observed earlier the emotion in melodrama is, after all, only of a lower order than that in tragedy; good tragedy always has tinges of melodrama, tinges not taints. If the audience is aware that Margaret is acting out the tragic role she has chosen for herself in action which best expresses dramatically how that choice has led inevitably to her new awareness, the rest is beside the main point. The scene has the quality of tragedy in Margaret's perception of what is happening to her. It is as the contemporary reviewer in The Nation suggested, "a climax as tragic as any that ever was put on the stage"<sup>32</sup>--and if one need qualify--at least in 1890. The entire act has a unity of movement which makes the climax seem inevitable in terms of Margaret's character, from the opening wail of the infant to the closing action. One reviewer wrote of "the great third act--it is an act truly great, not alone in its dramatic situation but in the simplicity and directness with which it is built up."<sup>33</sup>

And Mrs. Herne from all reports captured that movement in her acting, showing an understanding of exactly

<sup>31</sup>Howard Taubman, The Making of the American Theatre (New York, 1965), p. 113.

<sup>32</sup>L. McKinley Garrison, "Herne's Margaret Fleming," Nation, CII (May 14, 1891), p. 399.

<sup>33</sup>Chicago Tribune, January 30, 1907.

what was to be expressed. One contemporary critic certainly responded to the tragic impact of Margaret's realization, not to melodrama or sentimentality:

"The acting of Margaret Fleming in this scene, as interpreted by Mrs. Herne, has seldom been approached on any stage. I was never so profoundly moved by a dramatic representation as I was the first time I witnessed this awful scene. It was tragedy in the supreme sense of the term. The auditors forgot all save the beautiful wife whose joy and love and devotion, as witnessed in the preceding scene, had won all hearts, and now is overwhelmed by a grief far worse than death--a grief which pierces the soul and banishes all light of pleasure from life, while upon the heels of this awful discovery comes, as is so frequently the case in this strange life of ours, another calamity only second in terrible severity. Margaret suddenly becomes totally blind."<sup>34</sup>

If one accepts the interpretation that this scene is a tragic climax in which Margaret perceives and accepts the consequences of her choice, that she has in fact realized a new dimension in her personality and no longer believes the illusion of the false personality of the devoted wife in a perfect home, then the dramatic problem--the problem in form--is how to bring the play to close, to a sense of completeness. The problem is intensified because the tragic movement may seem to end with Act III, but form requires a levelling off, a chance to feel the effect of the tragic personality.

By now, it should be obvious that the original Acts

<sup>34</sup>B. O. Flower, "Mr. Herne's Contribution to Dramatic Literature," The Coming Age, II (October, 1899), p. 398.

IV and V are not the right ending, piling more misfortune and suffering upon Margaret and Philip, and dragging the comic Joe and the melodramatic Maria back into the action. It is all pathos and melodramatic intrigue which clearly do not develop the tragic, personal triumph of Margaret at the end of Act III, but merely drag out her defeat. That the original acts are superfluous was clear to at least some of the original audience.<sup>35</sup> The present ending is more appropriate, for it shows the new, stronger Margaret and it brings a note of humane understanding--even though it too contains some superfluous material.

The act opens seven days later with the two characters Margaret dismissed in Act III, Maria and Dr. Larkin. They establish the time interval and little else. When Margaret enters from her flowers in the garden, there is a brief scene with the doctor which has more point. It develops around the care of roses--Margaret's flower--when bugs eat out "the heart of every rose." Once that has happened, Margaret says, there is no use in doing anything about this crop of flowers, but one must be prepared to start all over again next year. The doctor replies that the world needs strong women like Margaret. Her reply is personal: "What does the world know or care about women like me?" (p. 541) The use of the roses as an emblem for

<sup>35</sup>Garrison, "Herne's Margaret Fleming," p. 399.



Margaret's own condition may seem a little clumsy, but it has been prepared for, and it quite smoothly takes the place of more obvious moralizing.

Foster arrives to say that Philip is outside and leaves after some pertinent but dispensable discussion of his always-cheerful mother. Margaret asks the doctor to send Philip in, thus neatly avoiding an onstage confrontation between the doctor and the erring husband which would bring back too much emphasis on the moral issue. Philip asks forgiveness, but Margaret says that "there is nothing to forgive" (p. 542), for she is past the stage of melodramatically forgiving--as she has already demonstrated with Maria.

A tentative reconciliation seems possible until Philip calls her his "wife." "The wife-heart has gone out of me," she replies and begins a preachment on the double standard of sexual morality which is the weakest point in the act and has nothing at all to do with the movement of emotional states. But it was difficult to avoid bringing back the "problem play" which certainly interested contemporary audiences. Margaret ascends the pulpit:

Margaret. It is not a question of forgetting or forgiving-- Can't you understand?  
Philip? Suppose--I--had been unfaithful to you?

Philip. [With a cry of repugnance.] Oh, Margaret!

Margaret. There! You see! You are a man, and you have your ideals of--the--sanctity--of--the thing you love. Well, I am a woman--and perhaps--I, too, have the same ideals. I don't know. But, I, too, cry "pollution."

Philip. I did not know. I never realized before, the iniquity--of my--behavior. Oh, if I only had my life to live over again. Men, as a rule, do not consider others when urged on their desires. How you must hate me (p. 543).

This sensational "problem" even promoted the play. One advertisement reads, "A forcible discussion of the Woman Question. What woman could blame her?"<sup>36</sup>

This sensation passes as the problem play is disposed of, and the drama comes back on the stage. Philip asks a return of the "old Margaret." She replies with tragic conviction, "Ah, Philip, the old Margaret is dead. The truth killed her" (p. 543). The new Margaret takes him back into the home to assume the responsibility of raising both of the children. Philip is perplexed when he learns that Margaret has brought his bastard into the home, but she replies, "You must teach him never to be ashamed of her [Lena], to love her memory--motherhood is a divine thing--remember that, Philip, no matter when, or how" (p. 544). This is the new Margaret putting into words what her action at the end of Act III has already demonstrated. Philip tells her of his attempted suicide, and Margaret

<sup>36</sup>Chicago Tribune, July 8, 1892.

replies, "That was a cruel thing to do" (p. 544). When he again hopes he can win her back, she says, "I don't know. That would be a wonderful thing. Ah, dreams! Philip! Dreams! And we must get to work." She moves to the table working with her flowers while he "steps buoyantly into the garden" to see the two children, among Margaret's blossoms.

Except for the preaching, the revised last act is a satisfactory completion of the action of the play--no joyous reunion, no final embrace, only a tentative agreement, on which a life might be built in new terms. There is even a slight hope, suggested by Dr. Larkin earlier in the act, that an operation might cure Margaret's blindness. But the joy, the triumph that illuminates Margaret's face as she looks out into the darkness as the curtain falls, is not the hope that she will be cured nor that her old family life will be restored. It is a triumphant recognition of her new and strong character.

Each act has ended with Margaret and Philip alone on the stage, each time in more estranged circumstances, and in this last ending they are still apart on completely different terms than at the beginning. Margaret's attempt to make meaning out of what has happened to her may bring them together. Whether they come together again, though, is unimportant as far as the play is concerned, for what has happened is enough, as one critic has said, to make

the handling of "the 'unforgivable sin' of unfaithfulness as worked out by Philip and Margaret Fleming completely plausible."<sup>37</sup> Margaret makes it plausible, for the play has been an emotional movement in her character (a character, incidentally, which Quinn ranks with Isabel Archer<sup>38</sup>) as she becomes not just a wife but a woman who is an active agent in choosing her own personality, coming to, if you will, a kind of "epiphany" of illumination. At a lower level of illumination it may be what Moses thought it to be: "a close tragedy of a woman's struggle to estimate at its full worth the animal instinct in man."<sup>39</sup> But it is also her own estimate Margaret is taking. If the play has reminded some observers of the work of Ibsen, the comparison is valid if the observers mean the kind of inner tragedy Ibsen wrote, in which a Nora or a Hedda moves to a final realization of herself, not as a placard for women's rights, but as a woman.

It is not necessary to say that Margaret Fleming is Herne's "best" play, but one can say it is a successful tragedy within the limits of realism and it is, as Howells

<sup>37</sup>Jordan Miller, American Dramatic Literature (New York, 1961), p. 80.

<sup>38</sup>Quinn, History, p. 141.

<sup>39</sup>Montrose Moses, The American Dramatist (Boston, 1911), pp. 101-102.

thought, "American to its fingernails,"<sup>40</sup> concentrating on a family situation but moving beyond that into a tragic triumph of personality.

### Drifting Apart

William Archer suggested that Herne was "vaguely struggling towards a new form in his early plays," even though they were "of rather old-fashioned type."<sup>41</sup>

Drifting Apart, which Herne wrote just before Margaret Fleming, contains enough evidence of that struggle to be of more than passing interest to the student of drama.<sup>42</sup> Professor Quinn finds the play of interest mostly for historical reasons: a progress toward greater realism and the early use of the dream scene in American drama.<sup>43</sup> But this limited view fails to consider the form of the play.

Herne has attempted, unsuccessfully, a potentially tragic play within a comic framework. The play within the play, the dream sequence of Acts III and IV, fails as

<sup>40</sup>Howells "Editor's Study," Harper's Magazine, LXXXIII (August, 1891), p. 478.

<sup>41</sup>William Archer, "The American Stage," Pall Mall Magazine, XX (1899), p. 32.

<sup>42</sup>The earlier melodramas, Hearts of Oak, The Minute Men, and Within an Inch of His Life, show only a very vague sense of form, as we see in Chapter VI.

<sup>43</sup>Arthur Hobson Quinn, "Introduction" to The Early Plays of James A. Herne (Princeton, 1940), p. ix.

tragedy because it creates no completely realized tragic personality. The play as a whole, the comic frame, fails because it is not strong enough to move the audience back into a comic expectation after the near tragedy of the dream scene. The drama is also handicapped by a greater reliance on clichés than the later plays, in both the comic and serious portions, although the effect of the clichés is strikingly different in the two portions.

A critical discussion of Drifting Apart is complicated by textual problems. The only existing version is an early one titled Mary the Fishermen's Child, and it is from all accounts inferior to the play Herne produced. Quinn states, "It is hardly fair to judge Herne by this preliminary draft."<sup>44</sup> How much the revision differs from the original is evident in the following excerpts, the first from the standard early version, the second reproduced by Garland, evidently from the manuscript, in an article in The Arena. The scene occurs at the beginning of Act II.

Discovered: Margaret discovered in rocker knitting; Mary at table cutting out baby clothes; Jack at glass by washstand shaving; clean white shirt on bed in recess, stockings ready L.

Jack. [Washing his face and neck thoroughly in water and singing all the time, and drying himself on the towel. Sings "Oh! There was a jolly miller once, lived

<sup>44</sup>Quinn, "Introduction," p. ix.

happy on the river Dee" ] There, that's over. Now, Mary, where's my clean shirt?

Mary. There, Jack, on mother's bed, and your collar and handkerchief all ready.

Jack. Oh, Lord--Lord--what a little wife you are--eh mother! ain't she just the blindest little wife in the world? [Goes off]

Margaret. That she is, Jack, and you see that you prove the best of husbands to her.

Jack. [Outside] Oh! Never fear me--say, mother, don't you forget to hang up the stockings. Will ye?

Mary. Oh Jack! What nonsense!

Jack. [Outside] No nonsense about it; Christmas is Christmas! It comes but once a year--I'm goin' to have the stockings hung up--and I'm going to have lots of holly--and mince pie and goose and a regular New England jollification, there now: [Coming out] So, for fear you might forget it, I'll just hang them up myself. [Comes out with stockings, one long black one, one long gray one, and one man's blue woolen sock] Say, Mary hain't you got no better stocking than this?

Mary. Why, Jack, what ever are you going to do?

Jack. Hang up the stockings I tell you--[She tries to get them; he puts them behind his back] Now, it's no use little woman, ain't agoin' to give Santa Claus any excuse. Ha! Ha! Ha! So mother you just give me some pins.

. . . . .

Mary. Jack, did you ever think that perhaps next Christmas there might be another stocking, a tiny one, Jack, to hang in the chimney corner?

Jack. Why, Mary child, there's tears in your eyes. [Goes to wipe eyes with the work]

she has, sees it's a baby's dress ] Why, bless my soul, what's this?

Mary. Do you remember Bella and John in Our Mutual Friend--that I read to you?

Jack. Yes, perfectly.

Mary. Well, there are sails Jack--sails for the little ship that's coming across the unknown sea--to you and me, Jack.<sup>45</sup>

Following is the same scene as Garland reproduced it:

Jack. Say, Mary! D'you know, I can shave myself better'n any barber that ever honed a razor?

Mary. I always told you you could, Jack, if you'd only try.

Jack. Feel my face now--ain't it as smooth as any baby's?

Mary. [Feeling his face] Yes, Jack, as smooth as any old baby's.

Jack. Oh! say, look here now, thet ain't fair: a feller don't know nothin' till he's forty, does he, mother? Old baby's! I ain't too old to love you, Mary, that's one thing. I've loved you ever since you was knee-high to a grasshopper. I rocked you in y'r cradle--I'm blessed if I didn't make the cradle you was rocked in, didn't I, mother?

Margaret. Yes, Jack, an' d'ye remember what yeh made it out of?

Jack. A herrin' box.

Mary. I married the man I love, Jack.

Jack. Honest?

<sup>45</sup>In The Early Plays of James A. Herne, pp. 116-117. Hereafter, references to this standard edition of the play will be cited in my text.



Mary. Honest?

Jack. [Kissing her] Then what'n thunder you want to talk about a feller gettin' old for? Where's my clean shirt? Say, mother, don't you forget t' hang up the stockin's.

Mary. Oh! Jack, what nonsense.

Jack. No nonsense about it. Christmas is Christmas. It only comes once a year an' I'm goin' to have the stockin's hung up. So for fear you'd forgit 'em I'll hang 'em myself.

Mary. Please, Jack, give me those stockings.

Jack. Now it ain't no use, little woman. Them stockin's is a-goin' up. Mother, you give me three pins.

Mary. Don't you give him any pins, mother. Suppose the neighbors should come in and see those stockings hangin' up.

Jack. Let 'em come in. I don't care a continental cuss. Why, Mary, everybody wears stockin's nowadays, everybody that can afford to. I want the neighbors to see 'em, then they'll know we've got stockin's. [Holding up the three stockings] Got one apiece anyhow.

Mother. Oh, Jack, Jack! you'll never be anything but a great overgrown boy, if you live to be a hundred.

Mary. Jack!

Jack. Hey?

Mary. Did you never think that perhaps next Christmas there might be another stocking, just a tiny one, to hang in the chimney corner?

Jack. Why, Mary, there's tears in your eyes. [Goes to wipe her eyes with the work she has in her hands; it is a baby's dress] Bless my soul! What's this, Mary?

Mary. Do you remember Bella and John in "Our Mutual Friend" that I read to you?

Jack. Yes. Warn't they glorious?

Mary. Well, these are sails, Jack, sails for the little ship that's coming across the water for you and me.<sup>46</sup>

These two excerpts have been reproduced here at length as their own commentary on Herne's revisions. There are two significant differences in these versions. First, the language of the early version tends to be stiff and unnatural, while the language of the later version is easy and natural as one would expect from Herne after reading Shore Acres or Sag Harbor or Margaret Fleming. Second, the early version barely suggests possibilities for the actors to develop a characterization, while the revision supplies sufficient details and dialogue to suggest what Mr. and Mrs. Herne (Jack and Mary) were able to express of the simple, happy home life. Howells wrote,

We ourselves think that no more delicate effect could be achieved than that it makes in the homliest scenes of the play; and if we speak of that passage in which the man talks out to the two women in the kitchen from the little room adjoining, where he is putting on his best clothes for Christmas, and whimsically scolds them for not being able to find his things, and intersperses his complaints with bits of gossip and philosophy and drolling, it is without the least hope of persuading artificial people of the value of such an episode, but with full

<sup>46</sup>Hamlin Garland, "Mr. and Mrs. James A. Herne," Arena, IV (October, 1891), pp. 545-546.

confidence that no genuine person can witness it without feeling its charm.<sup>47</sup>

The revised version--which impressed Garland enough to lead him to seek a meeting with Herne--opened with Act II of the earlier version, omitting the pointless Act I with its unnecessary exposition, humor, and spectacle.<sup>48</sup> The play evidently went through a third revision in which Garland was involved: "Under that influence of my optimism, he took heart and began to revise 'Drifting Apart' for the third time. It was stated at one time that I was working with him, but as a matter of fact I never suggested a line in any of his plays, though he read them to me scene by scene. In this case, I followed his revisions day by day, encouraging him to cut out the very lines which his theatric advisers considered most vital."<sup>49</sup>

In the early version, prepared before Herne met Garland, however, there is ample local color realism, side by side with the conventions one might expect. The settings are quaint local pictures. Jack's cabin in Act II "represents an old ship's cabin; no plaster or whitewash, all oak timber with heads of wooden pegs, iron bolts, nuts, etc., . . . ship's locker against L. side of cabin,

<sup>47</sup>William Dean Howells, "Editor's Study," Harper's Magazine, LXXXI (June, 1890), p. 154.

<sup>48</sup>Hamlin Garland, "Roadside Meetings of a Literary Nomad," Bookman, LXX (November, 1929), p. 251.

<sup>49</sup>Garland, Roadside Meetings, p. 71.

washstand with pitcher of water, bowl, soap, . . . roller towel at stand, clothes rack, pegs, with Southwestern coat . . . old fashioned leaf table at window . . . clock and ornaments on mantel, kettle steaming and singing on hob, cricket chirping on hearth" (p. 115). In this setting, Garland particularly liked "a sewing machine posing as a flower stand, a characteristic touch of fidelity to humble life such as I had never seen on the stage."<sup>50</sup> The characters, too, are simple and quaint local color portraits. Mary paints herself as a "Daisy in the field" (p. 107) and "a child of nature" (p. 106).

The local color atmosphere of the play is strangely at odds with the conventions which surround it. The plot is a conventional temperance plot. Mary, the good wife, soon to be a mother, has reformed Jack, who drank too much before he was married. Like Philip under Margaret Fleming's influence, he is trying to be a good husband, but, also like Philip, his past habits catch up with him. He comes home drunk and sprawls in a stupor on the ship's locker, the emblem of his past, wild life. Mary shrieks and faints. Jack's mother prays. The next two acts, the dream sequence, show the effects of drinking on family life. Because Jack has abandoned Mary, she has been forced to live with a wealthy man to support herself and

<sup>50</sup>Garland, "Roadside Meetings of a Literary Nomad," p. 251.

her child, passing as his wife. She says, "I sold the mother to save the child" (p. 129). Eventually, of course, she does intend to marry the man, Percy. Jack turns up at a fancy ball and disgraces her. They move to a tenement house where the child dies of cold and starvation, and Mary quickly follows because "she is waiting for me--she wants her mother" (p. 133). The dream ends, and Act V opens with Jack struggling awake from his nightmare, remorsefully vowing never to drink again, as he is accepted into Mary's forgiving arms.

The standard drink drama is much in evidence. Jack's love of what he calls "a social glass" is established early in Act I before the marriage; then in Act II, Mary brings it up again, with no motive for her action. Even on her deathbed, in the dream scene, she begs, "Don't drink Jack! Be brave--be my old, old Jack once more" (p. 134). Herbert Edwards and Julie Herne state that there is "no explicit preaching" in the play,<sup>51</sup> but Mary, like Margaret, does at least point out the evils of the problem, adding popular moral appeal that belongs in melodrama. M. Willson Disher, a scholar of the popular melodrama, wrote, "Drink dramas, now [1939] a favourite butt for present mirth, made public drunkenness so rare, if not

<sup>51</sup>Herbert Edwards and Julie A. Herne, James A. Herne (Orono, Maine, 1964), p. 41.

extinct, that the modern mind has no knowledge of it."<sup>52</sup> The claim may be extravagant, but thesis melodramas have been acknowledged as conditioners of public attitudes. The dramatization of Uncle Tom's Cabin, for an instance, has been credited with awakening public interest in the problem of slavery.<sup>53</sup> Herne knew the tradition from his earliest professional acting job--in Uncle Tom's Cabin.

Unlike the problem play content of Margaret Fleming, however, the problem of drink in Drifting Apart takes over too completely, and the real drama of two people whose relationship is destroyed by the problem becomes subordinate to the formula of the problem play.

The emotional form of this drama of human relationships is further handicapped by the formulas of conventional melodrama. There are soliloquies (p. 108), which Herne later abandoned, saying, "To have the characters 'think aloud' is an easy way out of it."<sup>54</sup> Asides are used for the conventional purpose of thinking aloud and for humorous remarks. A laugh is promoted, for instance, when Silas says of an old actor, "He was a powerful musicianer, I've seen him play the trombone and Macbeth

<sup>52</sup>M. Willson Disher, "Melodrama and the Modern Mind," Theatre World, XXX (April, 1939), p. 152.

<sup>53</sup>McVicker, The Press, the Pulpit and the Stage, p. 70.

<sup>54</sup>Herne, "Old Stock Days in the Theatre," The Arena, VI (September, 1892), p. 410.

the same night. He's dead," and Percy replies, aside, "He ought to be" (p. 111). There is also the conventional climactic curtain in each act. Act I ends with an ominous thunderstorm breaking in on the celebration of Jack and Mary's engagement. As lightning strikes Jack's ship at anchor in the harbor, the superstitious fisher folk all kneel and sing "Rock of Ages." Act II ends with Jack falling drunk and Mary shrieking. Act III ends with the disgrace of Mary: "As for you madam--I--pity you--but--leave--my house--go." Act IV ends with the remorseful Jack picking up Mary's body. It is the quietest curtain. Act V ends with a general celebration--and the singing of a temperance song. The quiet, levelling actions that Herne used as curtains in the later plays are not evident here, except to some extent in Act IV.

Just as conventionally old fashioned as the climactic curtain is the abundance of song and spectacle in the play. As we have seen, Herne usually put songs in the plays, but in the later plays the songs are likely to become part of the domestic dramatic action (e.g., the lullaby in Margaret Fleming). In Drifting Apart, there are, among others, a rousing welcome song for Jack in Act I, Silas's "The Girl I Left Behind Me," and a waltz song complete with chorus and dancers in the Act III ball. None of these has anything to do with the drama; they are entertainment. Some of the background music, however, was apparently

effective, especially in the serious fourth act. Garland described it as "a wailing little melody" which "came to embody for me all the pathos and defeat which lay in the failure of the play."<sup>55</sup>

Spectacle in the play includes a ship coming into port and a generous snowstorm drifting into the doorway of Jack's cabin. The spectacle of a baby dying on stage with a vision of angels coming to her and the spectacle of a drunk coming home were, of course, nothing new to an audience that was expected to respond with familiarity when Hester includes Uncle Tom's Cabin and Ten Nights in a Bar-room among the plays she has seen (p. 110).

The drama must also carry the burden of a comic subplot centering around the stage ambitions of Silas and Hester. In his essay, "Old Stock Days in the Theatre," Herne stated that the low comedians were never left out of the bill, even if the drama has to be stretched to make room for their routines.<sup>56</sup> Most of the business and dialogue of Hester and Silas has nothing to do with the main action. Hester indulges in comic misunderstandings and malapropisms:

Hester. Oh, Mr. Seward! You're in love, hain't you--ha! Ha! Ha!

<sup>55</sup>Hamlin Garland, "On the Road with James A. Herne," The Century, LXXXVIII (August, 1914), p. 575.

<sup>56</sup>Herne, "Old Stock Days," p. 411.



Percy. As a natural consequence--with a rich-only-to-please himself in the world young fellow, on the one side, and the sweetest, prettiest girl in the world on the other.

Hester. [With a low curtsey] Oh! Mist-e-r-Seward--

Percy. Good gracious, Miss Barton, I didn't mean you.

Hester. Why, you said a rich young fellow on one side and the sweetest, prettiest girl in the world on the other, didn't ye?

Percy. Yes--I confess I--

Hester. Well! Hain't you on the one side and hain't I on tother?

Percy. Yes--there's no denying that--but--I--I--

Hester. There, there--don't stammer, it always puts me in perspiration to hear anyone stammer--ha! ha! ha! I forgive ye--it's only another image scattered.

Percy. Idol shattered!

Hester. Oh! Yes--Idol shattered. I knew it was some kind of image--(p. 109)

There is a large supply of puns in the play. Hester describes a popular theatre which has "special provisions for families from the country desiring to eat lunch in the theatre," to which Percy replies, "Why! Of course, they could not eat lunch without provisions--see?" (p. 109) There are bad jokes about mispronunciation, "yatch" for "yacht," for instance.

Hester and Silas also have comic business, for example in Act III:

Enter . . . Hester, handsomely attired in what is supposed to be a stage dress, with a very long train, which is carried by Silas. He is in full evening dress, with very tight pantaloons. As Hester sees Mary, she makes a rush towards her. Silas, not starting quickly enough, almost falls, and the train comes off in his hands. Picture. Hester's dress is made so that it is complete even without the train, she does not know that it is off, but goes directly to Mary. Silas stands dismayed, looks at Hester, then at dress, tries to speak, his tongue cleaves to roof of his mouth. Keeps this business up just a moment. He must not over do this,--points to Hester, then to himself in despair. A happy thought strikes him, he hastily folds up the train, just then servant maid enters, down staircase, and crosses. He sees her, taps her on shoulder and presents her with train. She accepts, curtseys very low, he kisses her, she is pleased; curtseys again, he bows, she exits (p. 123).

Later in the act, as might be expected, Silas's tight pants split.

In Act I, Hester has a piece of comic business when she plays the flirtatious interview with Percy, which is a comic replay of the serious interview between Mary and Percy in the preceding scene. In this sort of comic contrast lies the possible justification for the existence of Hester and Silas: their subplot leads to a successful union, while the main plot leads to separation. But it is not justification enough. Herne later said that Hester and Silas were the weakest element in his play.<sup>57</sup>

Silas and Hester also serve a topical function in the play which has little to do with the main plot. They are

<sup>57</sup>Quinn, History, p. 138.

a burlesque of stage-struck youngsters, and provide Herne with an opportunity to make mildly satirical comments about the popular theatre of his day. They are engaged for a one-night stand with "Lampey's Dramatic Constellation," a touring company. The playbill reads: "Town Hall, Gloucester, extraordinary attraction. Engagement at enormous expense of the young, beautiful and talented comedienne, Miss Hester Barton, assisted by the incomparable musician and pharmacoepist, Mr. Silas Cummings, who will appear for one night only, Thursday, December 25, in conjunction with Lampey's Dramatic Constellation in a monster programme. . . . N. B. weather permitting band chariot, drawn by six snow white Arabian steeds will parade the principal streets at nine A. M. and one P. M." (p. 119) The chariot turns out to be "Aleck Pearce's ice cart with flags over it," and the horses become Arabian with a coat of whitewash.

Later, in the dream, Hester and Silas are successful members of Lampey's company:

Hester. You must know my dear that I'm Lampey's stock star now, and such a favorite. I have a carriage to and from--stop at all the best hotels.

Silas. She don't know that I have to peddle appetite pills and corn salve on the Q.T. to pay the bills.

Hester. And I have an understudy--and Silas, he's Juvenile Tragedy and leads the orchestra.

Silas. **[Aside]** Orchestra! Clarionette and one fiddle.

Hester. You ought to see Silas play "Alonzo the Brave." Oh! my, but he is splendid and then at the end, in the great scene where he takes the poison, he crawls of L. H., in dying agony and plays the slow music to let the curtain down; he's great--Lampey says he's a better actor than Booth.

Silas. I guess I am, but Booth gets more pay (p. 124).

Even though the humor is obvious, Herne was appealing to an audience that was tired of that sort of theatre and ready for the more serious drama he offered in Act IV and two years later in Margaret Fleming. Ironically, the play was such a poor box office success that Herne was forced to play in popular-priced houses on the road, which featured melodramas and farces and "rowdy audiences . . . accustomed to 'tank plays' (melodramas which featured a tank of water into which the villain threw the hero or heroine)."<sup>58</sup>

Finding all of this in the play--conventional local color, conventional plot, conventional spectacle, conventional problem, conventional humor--one may wonder how Archer could find Herne "vaguely struggling towards a new form." There are, in fact, two forms struggling for expression beneath these conventions. Least successful is the comic frame of Acts I, II, and V, a domestic comedy of

<sup>58</sup>Edwards, James A. Herne, p. 42.

rural life, a kind of play Herne developed more subtly in Shore Acres and Sag Harbor. The obstacles which stand in the way of these comic characters are caprices of Fortune not of Fate or Destiny. It is chance more than choice that makes Jack a drunkard. Mary says, early in Act I, "All our people here drink more or less. They seem to inherit it from their cradles. It is as natural for fishermen to drink as it is for the fish they risk their necks to catch" (p. 108). When Jack comes home drunk, Mary readily forgives him, as if she had expected it to happen sometime in the normal social world of the village. In the most famous of the drink dramas, The Drunkard by W. H. Smith, the protagonist, Edward, like Jack, drinks too much in a social situation. Even though Edward knows he has had enough, he cannot refuse the invitation for one more glass, until by the end of the scene in the bar in Act II, he does not realize what he is doing: "Walk, yes, I can walk--what's the matter with my head?"<sup>59</sup> The drunkards in the nineteenth century temperance plays are not weak characters as much as victims of circumstances. The message is to avoid the temptation of the first drink, for after that the man has no control over himself.

The movement of the drink drama is essentially comic,

<sup>59</sup>W. H. Smith, The Drunkard or the Fallen Saved in Richard Moody, Dramas from the American Theatre 1762-1909 (New York, 1966), p. 292.

toward a celebration of a triumph over circumstances and of a new secure home life. The Drunkard is subtitled The Fallen Saved; the audience knew Edward would eventually be rescued from his tempter, and the play ends with the singing of "Home Sweet Home." In Drifting Apart, too, there is no doubt in the comic framework of the first two acts that Jack will be saved, and the expected triumph in Act V of his new condition is celebrated by the entire cast, singing "Turn Your Glasses Upside Down."

This standard comic movement, however, is interrupted by Herne's play within the play, the dream scene of Acts III and IV, which ends not with the salvation of the hero but with the death of his devoted wife and neglected child--clearly not the appropriate ending for the action started in Acts I and II. Even in The Drunkard where Edward becomes a bum loafing around the Broadway bars while his wife (another Mary) and child are starving in a cold tenement garret, there is hope that Edward can be brought back by the intervention of the noble rustic, William, who arrives just in time to save Mary from disaster.

In Drifting Apart, there is no William waiting in the wings to save the day. Mary and Jack are on their own. Although Jack has already been reformed by Mary's love, they have been unable to overcome their disgrace, and Jack can find no work to bring bread to the starving family. The child is so hungry that Mary finally tells Jack to "go,

beg, steal, murder, but bring food to my starving child" (p. 132). After he leaves, once more to search for bread, the child dreams of death coming for her in a gold and silver ship. In a short time both child and mother are dead and Jack is left in grief-stricken distraction. It is no wonder that popular audiences did not respond favorably to the play, for even after the sop of the happy ending in the fifth act, where the play within the play is finally revealed to be Jack's nightmare, the audience was left with the impact of the serious ending, incompatible with the comic ending. Herne had tricked them emotionally by first leading them into the standard comic form, where they could watch suffering in the comforting knowledge that everything would come out right, and then by making them feel dramatically and emotionally the pain of suffering and death in Act IV. To reinstate the comic framework in Act V only compounded the deceit.

The fault is not that the audience would not accept the serious play within the play but that it could not accept a play that promised comedy but gave near tragedy. Herbert Edwards and Julie Herne state that the logical ending is not the happy one which Herne was "forced" to use.<sup>60</sup> But the happy ending is the right, the logical, conclusion to the comic movement of the drink drama of

<sup>60</sup>Edwards, James A. Herne, p. 41.

Acts I and II, even though it is wrong for the dream sequence. Mrs. Herne was closer to the truth when she observed that "audiences resented the discovery that their emotions had been harrowed by what was after all unreality, while the tragedy was too keen for it to be appreciated for its own sake."<sup>61</sup>

Another problem with the dream sequence is the confusion in psychological point of view, a problem which would not, probably, bother Herne's audience in 1888. Jack is the dreamer, yet he mixes elements into his dream which he is not likely to know about, even though the audience has seen these elements foreshadowed in Acts I and II. For instance, it is clearly established that Percy wants to wed Mary, but Jack is never made aware of this fact in the action. Also, Percy tells Mary in Act I, "Have you no fears that this pernicious habit may grow upon him and one day wreck his life and yours--yes--even that of the unborn babe of which you just spoke" (p. 108). The statement is a summary of the dream play, yet Jack is never dramatically aware of the potential disaster, while Mary is. Quinn states, "Any competent dreamer will recognize the confusion of motivation in the third act, especially in the relations of Mary and Percy, as quite in

<sup>61</sup>Quinn, History, p. 138.



keeping with a dream in Jack's mind."<sup>62</sup> What actually happens in the dream is plausibly a working out of the fears that are in Mary's mind, as established in Acts I and II.

Who, then, is the tragic protagonist of the dream sequence? Mary or Jack? Garland thought it was the wife's tragedy: "We understand it all by the sufferings of the wife, with whom we alternately hope and despair."<sup>63</sup> Mrs. Herne, who acted Mary, also felt "the spirit" of the fourth act in her part.<sup>64</sup> A case can be made for Mary as a tragic figure who triumphs in the realization of the strength of her personality. Certainly, those who saw Mrs. Herne in the part experienced that sort of tragic realization, even though it is barely hinted in the script. Mary is in control of herself during the death of child, no hysterical wailing (like the tears that accompany the death of Little Eva in Uncle Tom's Cabin), only the patience and fears of a loving mother accepting the inevitable. She does not blame Jack or liquor, but, like Margaret Fleming, becomes a figure in a universal dream of motherhood.

<sup>62</sup>Quinn, "Introduction," p. ix.

<sup>63</sup>Garland, "Mr. and Mrs. James A. Herne," p. 544.

<sup>64</sup>Edwards, James A. Herne, p. 41.

Little Margaret. No, mama, it went away, and the sea got still again, and pretty soon I looked up and I saw such a beautiful ship, all gold and silver, coming right to us, and it came and took you and papa and gran'ma and me and dolly, and sailed away to the most beautiful land. It seemed like the fairy land you used to read to me about, and ah! mama, look! [Raising up in bed; Mary holds her] The ship--call papa--quick.

Mary. There is no ship darling, you are dreaming still.

Little Margaret. No mama, there--don't you see? Look! the angels sailing over it, they're callin us mama. Come! [She gets up in bed. Mary holds her and tries to calm her]

Mary. There, there, my child, lie down. [Almost frantic, she realizes that death has come, but dares not give way]

Little Margaret. Don't you hear mama? They are calling you too. Come mama, or the beautiful ship will be gone. Quick! [Makes a step] Ah mama, [Crying] give me your hand, it's all dark now; I can't see the ship, it's all dark. Where are you, mama?

Mary. [Holding her in her arms] Here darling, here.

Little Margaret. Kiss me, mama. I wish papa would come, will he know that the ship took you and me? There it is again, I'm coming, I--goodbye papa, come mama, come! see! I--[She dies. Mary lays her down, closes her eyes, takes her hand and hides her own head in the bed clothes. The door bursts open. Jack enters, followed by Hester and Silas, he is laden with food]

Jack. See! Mary! food! food! at last.

Mary. Too late, Jack, she's dead.

Hester. Mary--see--we've found you at last.

Mary. Oh! Hester--she's gone--my beautiful baby, my little Margaret's gone--see--isn't she beautiful? See the smile upon her lips--she is waiting for me--she wants her mother. Yes--baby--I'll come to you--Jack--I love you Jack--I forgive and love you--but I cannot stay--I must go with baby--don't blame me--and don't mourn, it was to be (p. 133).

Melodrama and sentiment, of course, drip from the child's speeches, but in Mary there is a touch of dignity. Howells was impressed by the "flashes of power" in Mrs. Herne's performance, but he also felt that "the death of the starving child, affecting as it was at the time, was a forced note, with that falsetto ring which the death of children on the stage always has."<sup>65</sup>

The protagonist in the dream, however, is not Mary but Jack. He is potentially a more tragic figure than the victimized Mary, for he comes to realize what his actions have led to. At the end of the ballroom scene, Jack accepts, completely, the separation from his wife: "I do not come to ask you to share my lot--I have none to offer. The hospital and when strong enough, the sea is my only refuge now--I will not take from you the life within your grasp" (p. 129). In the death scene, he does realize the new strength of her personality, his new role as devoted

<sup>65</sup>Howells, "Editor's Study," Harper's Magazine, LXXXI (June, 1890), p. 154.

husband, but his final realization is blurred by his mental condition, a state of shock (somewhat like the suicidal ravings of Willy Loman, although Willy is less melodramatic).

Both characters, then, have a trace of the tragic potential; yet the dream play casts neither clearly as a tragic protagonist, and neither is able to rise above the melodramatic surroundings they find themselves in. Even though Quinn, Garland and others felt the dream sequence to be tragedy, and Howells felt "a sort of dumb passion that powerfully moves,"<sup>66</sup> the characters are not cast in a position where they can make a personal choice and come to realize the inevitable working out of that choice. They can move an audience to tears, but they cannot effect their own personalities with tragic--rather than pathetic--dignity.

That the characters are cast in this dream melodrama, however, is a minor accomplishment for Herne the playwright. When he takes a lurid melodramatic plot and tries to move it to a higher level he creates, perhaps unwittingly, almost a burlesque of the popular melodrama. Garland, for instance, dismissed the dream sequence as "conventional."<sup>67</sup> An incident like Jack's account of his five-year

<sup>66</sup>Howells, "Editor's Study," Harper's Magazine, LXXXI (June, 1890), p. 154.

<sup>67</sup>Garland, "Roadside Meetings of a Literary Nomad," p. 251.

wandering--a ship wreck, "living death" on board a Chinese pirate, escape and return home only to find Mary gone, and finally finding her living in Percy's mansion--is a staple of melodrama which Herne used in Hearts of Oak. Boucicault also used a similar plot in Hunted Down or The Two Lives of Mary Leigh.<sup>68</sup> Even Hester is aware of the melodrama as the guests discover the ragged Jack at the ball; she says, "Now for the fifth act" (p. 130). Seen as melodrama, rather than as tragedy, the dream sequence is more appropriate to the play which surrounds it, for the melodramatic plot can be encompassed by the comic frame, as it is successfully in Shore Acres and with less success in Sag Harbor.

But Herne went too far in the conclusion of his melodramatic play within the play, especially for his audiences who mistook melodrama for tragedy and could not understand that the dream scene is distorted into unreality by the kind of theatrical gimmickry that Herne avoided in the simple, homely comic framework of his play. They were conditioned to take it all seriously and were bound to be confused. Even at the end of Act IV when Jack's wandering mind begins to move back to the real world of the cottage, preparing for the opening of Act V, they were likely to see only the conventional melodramatic grief, not the slow

<sup>68</sup>The plot is summarized in John Creahan, The Life of Laura Keane (Philadelphia, 1897), p. 49.

struggle Jack is making to recover from his drunken dream.

The transition is quite smooth:

Jack. [Who has not moved, stares wildly around and sees Mary's body and goes to her] Why Mary girl, what is the matter with you, child? Oh I see--well--well--I'll not go out tonight. . . . Come let's fill the stockin's, perhaps in a year there may be another stockin' hangin' here. Ha! ha! ha! . . . Why, what place is this. I won't stay here, come Mary, let's go. [He lifts her and supports her in his arms; her dead body is limp, but he is strong] Let's go home, back to the old home in Gloucester--[Kisses her] Poor child--I have so loved--so wronged you. But I'll make amends--I'll drink no more, come. Mother, be sure you put plenty of onions in the stuffin'--Mother--see--here's Mary--she's not well, poor girl--quick, food. She's starvin', I tell you--come Mary, we'll go home--home--home--[Moving towards the door with dead body of Mary]

Picture and Curtain

Act V

The scene is the same as Act II, Jack's cabin. Jack is asleep as he had fallen at the end of Act II. Mary is sewing.

Jack. [In his sleep] No--no--you shall not tear her away from me--I tell you she is not dead--let her go--[Furiously] I tell you let her go--I--do you hear? [Springs up] Let her go. [Mary has stopped work at his first ravings and comes down] Let her go--I'll brain the first man who--[He sees Mary, then Margaret, then mother] Mary, mother--[with a wild cry] A dream! Thank God! A dream!

The transition is visually smooth, even though it is unlikely that Mary, so immediately forgiving in the following dialogue, would have let him lie there all night. Acts III

and IV, then, are not tragic, even though the potential is there. In the total form of the play, the dream makes more sense as a melodramatic play within the comic frame, which closes not with the deathbed scene but with the comic reunion and celebration of the short fifth act.

Both Margaret Fleming and Drifting Apart develop from the premise of the problem play. Both create strong and humane women characters who try to understand and to live with their husbands' problem. Margaret Fleming moves beyond the problem into domestic tragedy, from which Margaret emerges as a triumphant personality. Drifting Apart is essentially a comedy, interrupted by a bleak melodrama in which the potentially tragic Mary and Jack are unable to realize themselves.

## CHAPTER V

### GRIFFITH DAVENPORT

Of Herne's Griffith Davenport Quinn wrote, "That it was not a popular success remains among the unsolved mysteries of the stage."<sup>1</sup> While this chapter does not attempt to solve that problem in theatrical history, it will suggest why the play could not become a meaningful expression to Herne's audience--and why, for the same reasons, it remains today the most interesting, even if not the most artistically successful, of Herne's plays. Griffith Davenport is not memorable as a popular realistic history play nor as melodrama, although it is a good example of these genres; it is memorable as a character study developed in a series of episodes which illuminate the humane and tragic personalities of Davenport and, to a lesser extent, of his wife Katherine.

As with all of Herne's plays, except Shore Acres and Hearts of Oak, there are textual problems.<sup>2</sup> The unique manuscript was destroyed in a fire at Herne Oaks, and only

<sup>1</sup>Arthur Hobson Quinn, A History of the American Drama from the Civil War to the Present Day, rev. ed. (New York, 1936), p. 156.

<sup>2</sup>Herbert Edwards and Julie Herne, James A. Herne (Orono, Maine, 1964), p. 170, n. 78.



Acts III and IV have been found. The synopsis of Acts I, II, and V published by Professor Quinn were supplied by Julie Herne who played Emma West in the production. Since all of the evidence is not in, it is risky and perhaps too easy to speculate critically about the play, but there is enough evidence to support claims that the play is one of the better plays produced in nineteenth century America. Those critics who saw it were almost unanimous in their praise. Strang said that up to the last act, which he felt was anti-climactic, it was "not only the strongest and most artistic drama written by an American playwright during the past decade [1890], but . . . it is the greatest American play ever produced."<sup>3</sup> Richard Burton found it "perhaps the most thoughtful and consistent treatment of the Civil War theme written in the country."<sup>4</sup> Montrose Moses considered it "one of the greatest of our war plays."<sup>5</sup> Brander Matthews remembered it clearly "after the lapse of a quarter of a century."<sup>6</sup>

Such external evidence attests to the artistic

<sup>3</sup>Lewis Strang, Famous Actors of the Day (Boston, 1899), p. 19.

<sup>4</sup>Richard Burton, The New American Drama (New York, 1913), p. 63.

<sup>5</sup>Montrose Moses, The American Dramatist (Boston, 1925), p. 219.

<sup>6</sup>Brander Matthews, "Makers of American Drama," The Mentor, XI (March, 1923), p. 8.

success of the play with Herne's contemporaries. An examination of the internal evidence which is available in the remnant of the play suggests that their claims, while excessive, were valid.

Critics were impressed by the successful handling of familiar elements--the historical realism and the thesis. As historical record, however, the play is of limited interest, even though Herne to capture the authenticity of southern attitudes drew upon his own youthful recollections of the war and extensive notes, made during a tour of the South with Shore Acres. One contemporary observed that the conditions in the play seemed "remote" because "we of the present generation are too close in time to the slavery struggle to get its perspective--too far from it in thought and ideals to realize it at once with clearness."<sup>7</sup> The play also includes a discussion of politics and "an honest attempt to set forth on the stage the causes that led to that tremendous conflict,"<sup>8</sup> as well as a detailed discussion of military maneuvers in the Shenandoah valley to such an extent that Richard Moody observed, "The enormous complexity of the military problems was at the center of the play."<sup>9</sup>

<sup>7</sup>Marco Tiempo, "James A. Herne in Griffith Davenport," Arena, XXII (September, 1899), p. 381.

<sup>8</sup>Strang, Famous Actors, p. 20.

<sup>9</sup>Richard Moody, America Takes the Stage (Bloomington, Indiana, 1955), p. 166.

All of this is presented with realistic fidelity to the decor the atmosphere of the Old South. The four solidly built settings in the play include the exterior of the Davenport mansion and a Georgian drawing room which Herne and his wife furnished with carefully chosen antiques. "Every night before the curtain rose, Katherine Herne was on the set, attending to the little touches that gave the scene its charming atmosphere."<sup>10</sup> To assure accurate reproduction of the southern dialect approximated in the manuscript (Quinn eliminates it in the published version of Act IV), Herne made a pronunciation table based on the dialect he observed in the South. Realistic details of southern life are found in almost every scene--escaping slaves, southern courtesy, carriages, southern belles, horses. The opening scene of Act III illustrates the natural ease with which Herne spins out these details.

Interior of Davenport's study. . . . Sue discovered lying on sofa, head to left, deeply interested in a paper-covered "Dream Book."  
Judy enters from French window, carrying parrot on perch. Crosses and exits into dining-room.

Judy. Yo' kin cuss all yo' wants ter--yo' cuss wo'ds don' skeer me. Ah's used ter 'em. Ef ah own' yo' ah make yo' say yo' pra'rs night 'n' mawnin', 'deed ah would.

Roy. Phew! By Jawge, this is a great day! Ah wish ah was twenty-one! What yo' reading Sue?

<sup>10</sup>Julie A. Herne, "Commentary on Act III of Griffith Davenport," American Literature, XXIV (November, 1952), p. 351.

Sue. A dream book.

Roy. A dream book? Gaosh, ah thought only the niggahs read dream books.

Sue. Look heah, Roy Davenpoht--if ah am yo' sistah-in-law, yo' needn't classify me with the niggahs. Ah'm not one of the Davenpoht slaves quite yet.

Roy. No, if yo' weah yo'd be free. That's a paradox, see? Theah awe no mo' slaves in the Davenpoht family, yo' know, they awe all free and get wages now.

Sue. Bev's Jerry isn't free, and mah niggahs awe not free, thank goodness! Roy?

Roy. Well, sistah?

Sue. Does Bev know a light-haided gi'l?

Roy. Yes.

Sue. Who is she?

Roy. Do yo' mean a light-haided oh a light-haided gi'l?

Sue. Light-haided. What did ah say?

Roy. Yo' said light-haided.

Sue. Oh!

Roy. Emma West's got light haih.

Sue. Yes, but she's not in love Bev.

Roy. Ah ce'tainly hope not. What have yo' got into yo' haid about a light-haided gi'l?

Sue. Why, this book says, that fo' a bride to dream that she is being married is a sign that some woman of the opposite sex--

Roy. Opposite s-e-x?

Sue. Opposite complexion ah should have said!  
 Ah do believe ah'm light-haired mahself!<sup>11</sup>

History also supplies a thesis for the play--the inhumanity of slavery. Herbert Edwards and Julie Herne consider the play "essentially a thesis play."<sup>12</sup> Herne was sympathetic with Negroes, as he was with all oppressed peoples. He interpreted the part of a malcontent Negro in The New South with such conviction that he stopped the show, and he introduced the work of the Negro poet Paul Dunbar to William Dean Howells, who wrote a favorable review.<sup>13</sup> In Griffith Davenport, when an escaping slave commits suicide upon capture, his owner kicks his body and says, "There goes \$1500." For some critics there was too much discussion of this problem. Hapgood, for instance, writes, "Even to the thoughtful spectator, excellent speeches by Negroes are hurt by too great length, a long disquisition on slavery is felt to be unsuited to the theatre."<sup>14</sup> But the problem play element is distinctly in the background of the play. It is a starting point for the action in Acts I and II, providing motives for

<sup>11</sup>"Act III of Griffith Davenport," American Literature, XXIV (November, 1952), pp. 332-333. Hereafter, citations to pages of this work will appear in my text.

<sup>12</sup>Edwards, James A. Herne, p. 132.

<sup>13</sup>Edwards, James A. Herne, p. 168, n. 66.

<sup>14</sup>Norman Hapgood, The Stage in America (New York, 1901), pp. 63-64.

Davenport to free his own slaves, but even at that moment the dramatic interest is centered on the effect the action has on Davenport and his family, not on the problem of slavery. After that action, slavery is mentioned only occasionally in the script. The formula of the preaching problem play, which had been a handicap to Herne in Margaret Fleming and Drifting Apart, is effectively controlled within the structure of the play--it cannot take over.

Nor were the war and the problems which precipitated it Herne's main concern in the play. Years before he wrote Griffith Davenport, he remarked that "the next play on the subject must of necessity deal, not with heroes and battles, defeats and victories, but with the effect of the war upon the lives of a single family or group of people."<sup>15</sup> The larger background of the historical conflict is presented through the conflict within the Davenport family, husband and wife, brother and brother, on opposite ideological sides. Katherine says, "It's a serious mattah when two hot-haided factions--determined to have theah own way, no mattah who suffahs through it--take it upon themselves to settle any question. We have it right heah in ouah home. Yo'--(alluding to Griffith)--on one side, Beverly on the othah, it's--it's symbolic of the whole

<sup>15</sup>Julie A. Herne, "Biographical Note," in Shore Acres and Other Plays (New York, 1928), p. xxvi.

country" (III, 338).

The members of the family, however, do not become flat political abstractions but fully realized people caught up in the conflict. Richard Moody writes, "The emotions and thinking of Herne's characters were complex and confused. Katherine Davenport was an ardent believer in the southern cause, but her feeling of loyalty to her husband was so strong that not until the final scene was she able to break from him and act in behalf of her southern compatriots."<sup>16</sup> In Act IV, Beverly, a Confederate officer, writes to his mother, "I wish now that the war had never been. . . . Don't let Roy go into the [Union] Army."<sup>17</sup> Griffith, too, hesitates to become active in the conflict, refusing Lincoln's direct order to become a Union scout because he will not offend the southern sympathies of his wife. The larger conflict which divides the family of the nation is presented visually, at times, in the blocking, the stage directions. For an instance, when the neighbors come to drive Davenport from his Virginia home, Herne puts the neighbors on one side of the stage, opposed to Griffith and the family on the other--except for the vacillating Katherine who is at center,

<sup>16</sup>Moody, America Takes the Stage, p. 166.

<sup>17</sup>Act IV of Griffith Davenport in The Early Plays of James A. Herne (Princeton, 1940), p. 150. Hereafter, citations to pages of this work will appear in my text.

thus focusing the conflict on her personal anguish, rather than creating a direct clash between the forces of slavery and abolition. She decides that they must leave Virginia, not for political reasons but because the family has been insulted (III, 342). All climactic scenes in the play center on the personal tragedy, framed by the larger community disorder. Act IV, for example, ends as Katherine's son, her husband, and the husband of her slave Sallie go off to fight for the Union. The focus is not on the heroes but on the two women, Katherine and Sallie, left alone, planning to return to the old home in the South.

Northrop Frye has shown that personal tragedy and the history play are complementary forms, that they can merge.<sup>18</sup> It is a matter of proportion and emphasis. In Griffith Davenport the political framework is always clear, mainly through the recurring image of Lincoln who is, as William Archer observed, "the master-spirit" in the play.<sup>19</sup> In four of the five acts, Herne used important dates in Lincoln's career as the background for the action: Act I, April, 1860, "Coming Events Cast Their Shadows," Act II, May, 1860, "The Nomination of Abraham Lincoln," Act III, November, 1860, "The Election of Abraham Lincoln," Act IV,

<sup>18</sup>Northrop Frye, Anatomy of Criticism (Princeton, 1957), p. 284.

<sup>19</sup>William Archer, Playmaking (New York, 1934), pp. 254-255.



March, 1862, "An Unofficial Patriot," in which Lincoln orders Davenport into the service of the country. In the last act, April, 1864, there is no specific political reference to Lincoln's career, but the final scene, the reconciliation of Katherine and Griffith on the steps of the old home, contains conversation in which they discuss Lincoln as they sort out their own views.<sup>20</sup> Davenport, throughout the play, holds views similar to Lincoln's. He is not an abolitionist at the beginning, for he wants only union and reconciliation.

Herne controls melodrama in the play as carefully as he controls the realistic history play. There is a suggestion of standard melodrama in the scene in Act III when the neighbors force Davenport to leave his home, but, as we have seen above, the interest in that scene is on Katherine, not on the open conflict. There is a jarring note of melodrama in the incident of the suicidal slave, but again the interest is not as much on the melodramatic violence as on the effect on the characters, in this case on Davenport, who is moved a step closer to freeing his slaves. The most melodramatic scene in the play occurs when Davenport is taken prisoner, coincidentally by his son, a confederate officer. Hapgood calls the scene

<sup>20</sup>Hapgood, The Stage in America, p. 67.

"conventional,"<sup>21</sup> and from the summaries it seems to be, but with one important difference: the focus seems to be on Davenport, who is captured as a result of his decision not to follow the army he has led through the Shenandoah valley but to remain behind and find his way to the old home and Katherine. Since there is no copy of the scene extant, it is impossible to say how much Davenport dominates the melodramatic elements of the capture. It is clear from reviews, however, that the melodrama was barely evident throughout the play. John Corbin wrote, "If any one wishes to realize to the full the conventionality of what usually passes for dramatic structure, and the shallowness of the usual stage climaxes, let him go to see Mr. Herne."<sup>22</sup> Lewis Strang wrote, "I can appreciate his efforts to avoid the conventional."<sup>23</sup> "To the few," Hapgood wrote, "the drama is calm, delicate, moving; to the many it is tiresome."<sup>24</sup>

To the many, the play could not be a success in its own time. Herne acknowledged, "People who really want to enjoy 'Griffith Davenport' must bring their brains as well

<sup>21</sup>Hapgood, The Stage in America, p. 66.

<sup>22</sup>John Corbin, "Drama," Harper's Weekly (February 11, 1899), p. 139.

<sup>23</sup>Strang, Famous Actors, p. 26.

<sup>24</sup>Hapgood, The Stage in America, pp. 63-64.

as their pocket-books to the theater."<sup>25</sup> He had transformed his source, Helen Gardener's novel An Unofficial Patriot, into something quite unlike the usual history play. The usual history play, Robert Corrigan has said, traces "the history of an individual who is born, grows old, and dies."<sup>26</sup> Gardener's novel shows the early stages in Davenport's career, as a circuit rider, but Herne shows only the important scenes in which his inner self is revealed. In his study of the inner states of his hero, Herne comes close to the creation of a tragic figure. Davenport is not the victim of fate or of circumstances. There is, as Tiempo observed, an inevitable quality in his character.<sup>27</sup> In Act IV he seems destined to make the final choice which leads to the destruction of his old life; yet he is free to make that choice in response to his inner sense of loyalty and duty, not in response to outside pressures.

He makes three major choices in the play. The first, to free his slaves, is in part an emotional response to the horror of slavery he sees acted out before him in Act II. The choice seems inevitable in the structure of the

<sup>25</sup>Tiempo, "James A. Herne in Griffith Davenport," p. 380.

<sup>26</sup>Robert Corrigan, The Modern Theatre (New York, 1964), p. xvii.

<sup>27</sup>Tiempo, "James A. Herne in Griffith Davenport," p. 377.

act, for the audience has been stirred, as Davenport has been stirred, to want an end to the degradation of slavery. His second choice, to leave his home in Act III, seems inevitable in the face of social pressures from his neighbors. In neither instance is he acting with complete freedom, for he is guided in part by his emotions and outside forces. Katherine recognizes the inevitable quality in each of these choices and remains with him, contrary to her own convictions in both instances. When he makes his final choice, however, in Act IV--to become a Union Scout--Katherine leaves him. She recognizes that he can decline Lincoln's request if he wants to. Even though the pressure of a presidential telegram demands action, the order itself is not binding on Davenport. Governor Morton, Lincoln's emissary, is aware of that, for he builds his strategy carefully to play upon Davenport's inner sense of duty; he cannot rely on the hope that Davenport will acquiesce to the power of the president's office.

When Governor Morton suggests that Davenport's knowledge of the Virginia countryside is invaluable to the Union, Davenport replies, "Hold on, Governor, hold on! When I first came here we talked that all over and agreed to hoe in our own cornfields" (IV, 151). Morton continues to plead his case--that Davenport is the only man who can do the job--but Davenport replies "with much feeling" that the South is his home. He cannot fight against her. He

must remain neutral. The governor tries another approach: when he takes out a map of the Shenandoah and allows Davenport to point out how useless it is, Davenport's interest is captured. When the governor suggests, however, that Davenport go as a chaplain, "an unofficial patriot," he forces Davenport to become more deeply committed, for the governor knows that the former circuit rider is not the kind of a man to act as a scout under the false guise of a man of God. Davenport reacts as expected: "No. If I do this thing, I'll do it outright" (IV, 153). Governor Morton offers a commission as a Colonel, but Davenport still hesitates: "I shall be a spy, all the same, in my own heart--I shall be a spy" (IV, 154). Then the governor makes his last move: he presents Lincoln's order, and comments as if the discussion were concluded, "You'll probably have to go into commission at once" (IV, 154).

When Katherine reads the president's telegram--"Order your man, Davenport, to report to me immediately. A. Lincoln"--she is indignant: "Well--I--your man, Davenport--the presumption" (IV, 155). Her answer to Davenport's dilemma is to tear up the order, a choice which is open to him. When she is told that Governor Morton considers it Davenport's duty to comply, she puts the issue clearly: "Governor Morton is not dictator in this family" (IV, 156). She already has two sons fighting in this "brutal war," and no one has the right to take her

husband from her. When she argues her love for him, he responds by recalling the horror of war--"young sons like yours dragging bleeding limbs," "terror stricken horses trampling down these wounded boys" (IV, 158). His duty is to serve humane ends, to act to bring a swift conclusion to the war. Even though Katherine has always respected his unselfish motives, she makes one last appeal to their love, but he answers, "This is not a question of your life or my life, or of our love for each other. The life of the nation is at stake" (IV, 158).

She allows him to go his chosen way. But she will not remain with him. Her duty is where her heart is, in the South, doing whatever she can to help her people. Through the consequences of the earlier decisions she could stay with him, for he clearly had little freedom of choice, but in the final decision, where he has free choice, she cannot stay with him. He has chosen to place himself in a universal role, a martyr to a higher cause, rather than remain in his role as her husband, neutral to what is going on in the world around him. He must follow the consequences of that decision alone.

Davenport attains heroic stature in that decision. In Act V, he leads the Union Army successfully through the Shenandoah valley, betraying his former homeland to her enemy. When his job is done, however, he makes another choice: rather than rest secure in the stereotyped role

of the conquering hero leading the Union Army on to victory in Richmond, he decides to find his way, alone, back to the old home and Katherine. Carrying out this personal mission, he is captured by Confederate scouts. As a prisoner of war, he sees Katherine for the last time in the play as he is led off toward Libby Prison. Their reconciliation is, from the accounts in the summaries, a recognition that he has fulfilled his chosen destiny. There are no recriminations or regrets, only a quiet scene of understanding as they sit alone on the steps of the mansion.

Although both Uncle Nat in Shore Acres and Griffith Davenport are humanitarian idealists, Davenport is not as likeable as Uncle Nat, who tempers his idealism with practical common sense and humor. Davenport becomes so completely idealistic by the end of the play that he is almost unsympathetic. His choice to obey Lincoln makes little sense on any rational or practical bases, as Katherine points out; his inner loyalty to the ideal of a unified nation in which all men are free overrides practical and personal concerns. Brander Matthews found "a certain austere nobility" in the play.<sup>28</sup> This quality, which raises the play, and its central character, close to tragedy, is probably what alienated Herne's audiences.

<sup>28</sup>Matthews, "Makers of American Drama," p. 8.

Corbin thought there were too few of the lighter qualities of Shore Acres in the play.<sup>29</sup>

What lightness Corbin could find was, he felt, not strong enough "to survive the peculiarities of their dramatic presentation."<sup>30</sup> These peculiarities were qualities which can be called "Chekhovian," qualities which make the play seem ahead of its time. Herne is concerned with the psychological development of his characters, as contemporary critics clearly saw.<sup>31</sup> The motivations are often confused and complex, never stereotyped or simple. For instance, Davenport's agonizing reversal from neutral to patriot in Act IV is the result of several motives--his love of Lincoln, his Christian ideals, his recognition of the military situation, his inability to act deceptively as a spy, his hatred of war, his disavowal of slavery, his sense of duty to conscience, and his love for his family and at the same time his love for his country. Each of these motives has been established in short fragmentary episodes earlier in the play. "Conditions of soul," Montrose Moses called them. They constitute the form of Herne's play, fleeting, often inarticulate, moments that

<sup>29</sup>Corbin, "Drama," Harper's Weekly (February 11, 1899), p. 139.

<sup>30</sup>Corbin, "Drama," Harper's Weekly (February 11, 1899), p. 139.

<sup>31</sup>Tiempo, "James A. Herne in Griffith Davenport," p. 380.



reveal the inner man. Corbin found this quality in the play distressing. Although he admitted that many of the incidents and situations were interesting, he felt the whole was "so fragmentary that there is really no story to follow. . . . They take no definite form in one's mind."<sup>32</sup> He thought many of the scenes irrelevant and aimless, leading to no conventional climaxes. The climaxes are subdued and unconventional. Even the major climax, as Katherine allows Griffith to go at the end of Act IV, is quiet. When Katherine sees that argument is useless, she says, "Well, then--go," and she immediately announces her decision to return to the South. Griffith realizes the rightness of her decision and the scene ends quickly as they kiss tenderly and part, with no tears.

With such subdued climaxes (subdued at least by the standards of Herne's contemporaries), the many incidental scenes could easily seem to be pointless; but each suggests a state of mind. For one instance, before Governor Morton begins to persuade Davenport in Act IV, Davenport reads aloud a long letter from his son Beverly in the Confederate Army. The letter is dull and rambling, unless we see how it acts upon Griffith, dramatizing for him the tragedy of a family and a nation divided, and preparing, in part, for his acceptance of Lincoln's call. For another instance,

<sup>32</sup>John Corbin, "Drama," Harper's Weekly (March 4, 1899), p. 213.

the random chatter of Sue and Roy at the opening of Act III (the act in which Davenport decides to leave home) about the "light-halided gi'l" shows Roy to be quite the opposite of his brother Beverly and suggests, though vaguely, why he will oppose Beverly later. On the surface, the scene is a caricature of southern frivolity; underneath, it reveals Roy's deeper attitudes.

The acting in Herne's production was also subdued, in harmony with his script. Corbin complained that the actors dealt "rather with the repression of feeling than with its utterance." "Mr. Herne," he felt, "appears never to have an emotion of any kind. Mrs. Herne's utterance is less handicapped, and therefore more appealing, though still far from being positively expressive. Their acting tends toward monotony. . . . Yet, granting their convention of repression, the depth of feeling they portray is marvellous."<sup>33</sup> Herne instructed his actors to underact. For example, in Act III, the old woodsman, Lengthy Patterson, is deeply moved by Davenport's decision to leave his home. He cries silently. Herne directs, "The actor must not wipe his eyes, nor brush his hand across them; he must make no demonstration of crying" (III, 348).

To suggest that the play has a Chekhovian quality is not to say that it ranks with the plays of Herne's Russian

<sup>33</sup>Corbin, "Drama," Harper's Weekly (February 11, 1899), p. 139.

contemporary. In the American drama of the 1890's, however, the play is unusual in these qualities of fragmentary snatches of life, seemingly irrelevant incidents, repressed dialogue, subdued climaxes, and unusual as well in the form which achieves unity by revealing the successive inner emotional states of the characters. With only two acts of the script to examine in detail, it is impossible to make extravagant claims for the success of that form, but these remaining acts demonstrate Herne's awareness and control of a dramatic form unique in its own time, and they suggest how close he came to developing a character who creates his own destiny with a tragic awareness of the consequences, not only for himself but for the world he has known.

## CHAPTER VI

### EARLY MELODRAMA

It is pointless to expect a developed form that moves through emotional states in Herne's early melodramas, The Minute Men of 1774-1775, Within an Inch of His Life, and Hearts of Oak. The plays are almost completely restricted by the form of the popular melodrama of surface excitement and spectacle. Stereotyped characters declaim their emotions in the old way, as expression told before an audience, not as expression of an inner emotional state revealed through dramatic action. Yet in a few isolated scenes Herne's plays suggest what might have been.

The Minute Men of 1774-1775 is the most interesting of these early plays for two reasons other than the traces it contains of Herne's later handling of form. It is his first play without a collaborator, and it is an informative contrast to his later history play Griffith Davenport. As a history play, The Minute Men of 1774-1775, according to one observer, catches "the atmosphere of the War for Independence" with an abundance of realistic detail.<sup>1</sup> At the end of Act II, there is a tableau of The Battle of Concord,

<sup>1</sup>Arthur Hobson Quinn, A History of the American Drama from the Civil War to the Present Day (New York, 1936), p. 137.

"rehearsed and arranged from plates that will prove most acceptable."<sup>2</sup> The scene previous to this one, however, breaks historical accuracy by introducing Herne's heroine, Dorothy Foxglove, into the battle as a vivacious patriot rallying the Minute Men to the cause. Unlike Griffith Davenport, whose adventures as a Union scout were modeled on Helen Gardener's father, Dorothy Foxglove exists nowhere except in Herne's imagination. Act IV ends with another tableau, The Battle of Bunker's Hill, again based on famous paintings of the battle. The final curtain in the play descends on still another tableau, less historically accurate but certainly in the spirit of the time: "Drum Corps playing. They march off. . . . Then a company of soldiers with their officers. They march off. . . . Cannons boom. Bells ring. Second Company. Same. Drum Corps. Third Company. Yankee Doodle. All the ladies, handsomely dressed, strewing flowers. General Washington on horseback--accompanied by his Generals all made up in character and on horseback. More soldiers. The stage is completely filled. Characters shout. Ladies wave their handkerchiefs. Soldiers all shout. Washington lifts hat. Grand Tableau" (pp. 98-99).

Another atmospheric thread running through the play

<sup>2</sup>Early Plays of James A. Herne, ed. Arthur Hobson Quinn (Princeton, 1940), p. 71. Hereafter, references to this edition will be cited in my text.

is the spirit of the New American, creating a sense of history if not history itself. Dorothy embodies that spirit when she rejects her role as the daughter of a British Colonel and declares that her title is "one of which I am very proud--An American Girl" (p. 84). Ann Campbell, a rustic stereotype, spends most of her time in the play trying to become an active member of the American militia: "America's my country! An' if it comes to a fight, I can carry a musket an' use it too as well as the next man" (p. 47). During all of Act III she walks "a la militaire" and declares at one point that if Congress were to call up women, she would "raise a regiment on 'em that'll lick Satan out'n the same number o' Red Coats an' make 'em wear petticoats afterwards" (p. 72). Her moment of glory comes as she assists in the capture of a British squad. Reuben Foxglove is another American type, the frontiersman who exchanges his woodsman's clothing for the uniform of a Continental sergeant: "We've took the swaddling clothes off'n the child Independence and dressed him in Continentals--no more creepin' for him. He's got to walk alone now! An' afore King George knows it he'll walk clean through the British Armies" (p. 91).

Although each of these characters adds to the general atmosphere, none of them controls that atmosphere. They are merely picturesque sketches, unlike Griffith Davenport, who contains within his character the conflict of the

larger political and historical struggle. Because his action can symbolize, in a sense, the historical action, the larger conflict becomes dramatically meaningful. In The Minute Men of 1774-1775, most of the characters are museum figures who tell us about the conflict, but do not allow us to experience it in the expression of their inner emotional states. One character, however, has the potential for more complete dramatic development, Sir Frederick Shelton, a minor character in the melodramatic formula of the play. He is loyal to King George but in sympathy with the cause to which his daughter, Dorothy, and her friends have dedicated themselves. At the end of the play, Dorothy asks him, "Father! Is it right that you go--now? Right that you should sever every earthly tie--Right that you should fight against . . . the husband of your child [Dorothy's husband]?" His reply is the final speech in the play (before the tableau with Washington): "Hush! A soldier has no choice. Love is strong, but honor and duty are impregnable. I go. But if I live, I will return to pass my days among you--and ask no sweeter resting spot than in a land hallowed by a mother's sufferings--blessed by a daughter's love" (p. 98). Even though his choice is presented as a melodramatic cliché--love vs. duty--there is in Sir Frederick a potential play, a play that could develop history in terms of the personal tragedy Herne created in Griffith Davenport. Sir Frederick's inner

conflict is the same that troubled Davenport, and it is resolved in the same way: he will follow the path of conscience, hoping all the while that when his call to duty is served, he can come back to love and family. This last speech is the only moment in the play that Sir Frederick's conflict is expressed--and then it is expressed in words which are hollow because the conflict which could make them dramatically moving has been developed in only one other moment in the play--when he releases his daughter's American friends unharmed. And that action occurs offstage and is reported later.

No character in the play is developed in enough depth to express in emotional terms the meaning of the Revolution. But then no play of the Revolution has ever been completely successful on the American stage. Dunlap's André has a place in theatre chronicles, but its hero is little more than a stereotype of the misunderstood martyr. Maxwell Anderson's Valley Forge had only limited appeal. Walter Prichard Eaton could find no drama of interest on the subject.<sup>3</sup> In 1898, when Herne saw Bernard Shaw's treatment of the subject in The Devil's Disciple, he wrote, "I think that play barely escaped being a great piece of work. Mrs. Herne was with me when I saw it. The first two acts were distinctly great, and Mrs. Herne said,

<sup>3</sup>Walter Prichard Eaton, The American Stage of Today (Boston, 1908), p. 259.



'Now, here is a great play.' We were both delighted; but after the second act it went off into driveling melodrama."<sup>4</sup>

Herne's own play is so completely bound up by the conventions of driveling melodrama that no other form is discernible. The plot is intricate, filled with short exciting scenes--a surprise capture of a British squad, an Indian attack, a virtuous heroine in the clutches of the villain, two foundlings eventually returned to loving parents (the identity of one discovered from a locket given the girl by her dying mother, the identity of the other revealed by a vengeful villain in a moment he supposes to be a triumph).

Laced through the melodrama are scenes of rustic humor between Ann Campbell and the woodsman Reuben, an early role Herne created for himself. The comic plot involving their mature courtship has much of the simple, and pointless, humor Herne worked with later in Sag Harbor in the characters of Captain Dan'l and Elizabeth. A more successful comedy in the play develops in the relationship between Dorothy and Lieutenant Smollet, a British grenadier. In Act I, Dorothy lectures Smollet on the difference between "Colonists" and "Americans," and praises liberty, "the grandest word ever uttered by the tongue of man" (p. 53). Realizing that she has been discourteous to Smollet,

<sup>4</sup>James A. Herne, "The Present Outlook for the American Drama," The Coming Age I (March, 1899), p. 254.

an Englishman, she asks forgiveness and begins a game of toy soldier with him.

Smollet: Oh! I am to be decorated? What for, pray?

Dorothy: Gallant conduct in the field! [Pinning apple paring on his left breast] That's for polishing the silver. [Puts one on right breast] That's for cleaning the windows so nicely!

Smollet: You are too good!

Dorothy: [Putting one on left ear] That's for being the dear, good-natured, courteous gentleman that you are.

Smollet: Thank you!

Dorothy: [Putting one on right ear] And this, wear as the colors of your lady whose beauty you are to defend against all comers!

Smollet: Believe me, I will prize the last beyond all else in life!

Dorothy: There! Now stand up! And let me see how you look on dress parade! [He has the pan of apples. She puts him in position] Attention! Heads up! (p. 54)

Later, in Act III, Smollet must fulfill his military duty and take Dorothy prisoner in order to return her to her father, Sir Frederick. She begs him to release her for the sake of their earlier friendship, but when he refuses, she respects his loyalty to his duty but deceives him into surrender.

Dorothy: Do you remember the day I decorated you with apple parings?

Smollet: I shall never forget it.

Dorothy: You used to call me your little Captain.

Smollet: And shall be proud to do so still.

Dorothy: Does it become me?

Smollet: Everything becomes you! It is a pleasure even to be the object of your sport!

Dorothy: I wonder if you have forgotten our drill. Let me have your sword. Now! Attention! Heads up! [Coming close to him] Lieutenant Smollet--~~[Laughing]~~ You are my prisoner! [He laughs. She at once changes her manner and says in low quick decisive tones] If you attempt to move but as I dictate, I'll send a bullet through your brain. [Throwing away sword and quickly snatching pistol from his belt, cocking it and pointing it at his head.]

Smollet: My dear Miss Foxglove-- (p. 77)

Their final meeting in Act V is a scene of tender understanding:

Dorothy: Lieutenant--I am indebted to you for many acts of kindness. How shall I thank you for them?

Smollet: [Lightly, but with a strata of deep feeling underneath] Pshaw! I've done nothing any other fellow wouldn't have had himself cashiered for the privilege of doing! The society of a charming lady--~~[Bows. She smiles]~~ is not so often thrown in the way of a poor devil of a soldier that he can afford not to be civil! True--I did at one time hope that you--~~[She looks at him appealingly]~~ Well--no matter. [Seriously] I've passed the happiest hours of my life in your company. If I, in return, have afforded you any amusement--

Dorothy: Pleasure--let us call it pleasure,  
Lieutenant!

Smollet: Pleasure! Why, I'm content--and if  
circumstances will only permit--I will  
dance as merrily at your wedding as if  
it were my own. [Bows very ceremoni-  
ously. She curtseys very low.]  
(p. 98)

These scenes have been reproduced here in some detail, for they are--along with the scene between Sir Frederick and Dorothy--the only moments in the play which give a suggestion of the kind of drama Herne could eventually write, expressing inner emotional states through loosely-structured vignettes. The Minute Men of 1774-1775 might have developed into a moving play if Herne had explored the emotional relationships between Dorothy, the American, and Smollet and Sir Frederick, the British, but such speculation, of course, does not save the play in its present form. Instead of concentrating on inner development, Herne wastes his dramatic energy on the surface excitement of melodramatic episodes which rarely suggest the inner lives of the characters who overpopulate his play.

In contrast to the unrealized possibilities in The Minute Men of 1774-1775, Within an Inch of His Life, an early collaboration with Belasco, is a standard melodrama which adheres so closely to formula that a critic is forced to invent traces of form. In his History of the American Drama, Professor Quinn wisely dismisses the play with the comment that it is "of interest as the first

instance of collaboration of Herne and Belasco."<sup>5</sup> In the introduction to the edition of Herne's early plays, Quinn writes, "It is not on the whole unskillful."<sup>6</sup>

In the conventions of the melodrama it is not completely unskillful, but it is crude and unpolished. In spite of Belasco's statement that it was "an instant success,"<sup>7</sup> Professor Edwards' evidence suggests that the play did not draw well.<sup>8</sup> The script and what little we know of the production indicates that the play should have been popular, for it had adequate spectacle, an involved plot, and exciting climaxes.

The most impressive spectacle is a fire which destroys a mansion onstage. Belasco uses red and yellow silk streamers to make his conflagration as realistic as possible, and then, to heighten the effect, he directs the madman Cocoleu to step from the flaming building carrying a child to safety. The combination of a "mad scene" and fire is spectacle enough for one play, but there is more--a shooting and an onstage death from poison. The plot in which these events occur is essentially a detective story,

<sup>5</sup>Quinn, History, p. 130.

<sup>6</sup>Arthur Hobson Quinn, "Introduction" to Early Plays of James A. Herne, p. vii.

<sup>7</sup>William Winter, The Life of David Belasco (New York, 1918), pp. 113-114.

<sup>8</sup>Herbert Edwards and Julie A. Herne, James A. Herne (Orono, Maine, 1964), p. 28.

and the audience is kept in suspense until the end when the real assassin is discovered. Strong climaxes support the suspense. The curtain for Act III, for instance, descends on the Countess's accusation of her former lover as the murderer of her husband: "Yes, I believe him guilty! May Heaven bring down on his head the misery he has inflicted on mine!"<sup>9</sup> In the manuscript that speech is followed by anti-climactic advice from the detective: "Calm yourself, madam! Calm yourself! Justice shall be done!" (p. 16) This speech, however, was crossed out in the manuscript and "was evidently not used in the acting version,"<sup>10</sup> thus insuring a strong curtain.

Elements like these suggest that the play should have pleased an audience used to melodrama, but there are weaknesses in the handling of the conventions. The exposition at the opening of Act I, for instance, is crude. Two characters, who later have little to do with the play, tell members of the audience what they need to know about the hero, and the hero himself shows off his gun and explains that one barrel is empty, a fact the audience needs to know to establish his innocence. Act IV opens with the maid speaking to herself about all the incidents that have occurred since the curtain fell on Act III. The

<sup>9</sup>Early Plays of James A. Herne, p. 16. Hereafter, references to this edition will be cited in my text.

<sup>10</sup>Quinn, Early Plays, p. 16 fn.

conventions of asides and soliloquies, used in both of these scenes, are handled with little skill. At one point in the play the playwrights even forget to follow the consequences of these standard conventions. In Act I, the Countess exclaims in an aside, "If I were free, I would be his [her lover's] wife. God! Luckily, that thought never occurred to me before. Murder!" (p. 6) Jules, her lover, standing beside her at that moment repeats her words later, "Then she exclaimed, 'Oh, God! Luckily that thought never entered my brain before. Murder'" (p. 23). In the convention of the aside, he could not hear her comment.

There is also a lack of skill in the handling of coincidence, always to be expected in melodrama, but carried to absurdity here. In Act IV, the Countess appears in Jules' cell for no reason whatever. In Act III, her husband wanders in to overhear her conversation with Jules. He is supposed to be in bed, ill. Ironies are also blunt, and unexplained. At the end of the play the Countess graciously gives Jules to the innocent heroine and plans to enter a convent, as any sinning woman in melodrama should, unless she has been killed off before the final curtain. The irony here, however, is that the heroine, Dionysia, has earlier declared that she would go to a convent if only Jules might be free of the murder charge.

Standing around in all of this crude melodrama are characters who have no life beyond their stereotype--an

innocent, self-sacrificing girl, a jaded French Countess who keeps a lover, an aging Count married to a woman too young for him, a not so bright detective, a comic maid flirting with a comic doctor, and a loyal, old retainer who believes in the hero's innocence. The one character who has any potential for life is Jules, for he might make a choice and follow it through to establish his individuality, but he simple-mindedly accepts what is happening and makes no attempt to find meaning in it: "I am innocent and can face death like a man. You have done all you could for me, but fate has ordained it otherwise" (p. 36). He makes only token attempts to do anything for himself, preferring, rather smugly, to remain the stereotyped innocent victim and ignoring the rhythm of dramatic life.

If there is any rhythm of life or any sense of form in the play, it is in a kind of movement we are familiar with in the nineteenth century operas which are still produced today, where the audience is moved by a succession of exciting climaxes only vaguely explained in the plot. There are two interesting "love duets," for instance, between Jules and each of the women in love with him, and there is a violent confrontation between these two women as the innocent comes to sacrifice all to the villainess, if only Jules can be saved. And there is, as noted, a "mad scene." But movement, on the whole, is too sketchy and uncontrolled to make a sustained impact.



To examine Within an Inch of His Life in more detail would add little to the present discussion. Enough has been said to suggest where Herne began his career as a playwright. His collaborator Belasco continued to polish the conventions of this play into very skillful melodrama, but Herne began to move in another direction, already evident in his last collaboration with Belasco, Hearts of Oak.

To establish in a practical way the division of authorship in the script of Hearts of Oak is impossible today. Quinn suggests that Acts I, III, and VI are Herne's, on the authority of Mrs. Herne.<sup>11</sup> William Winter assumes that Belasco created most of the play. He quotes Belasco as saying of Herne's contribution, "He did a lot of good work on it. . . . He introduced a lot of Rip Van Winkle stuff."<sup>12</sup> Since the script has more traces of the Rip Van Winkle stuff than of the earlier excursion into French melodrama, one can agree tentatively with Mayorga's appraisal that the whole "suggests Herne's manner rather than Belasco's,"<sup>13</sup> for there are several scenes which explore the lives of the characters quietly and in realistic detail. These scenes seem to be at odds with the

<sup>11</sup>Quinn, History, pp. 135-136.

<sup>12</sup>Winter, Life of David Belasco, p. 199.

<sup>13</sup>Margaret Mayorga, A Short History of the American Drama (New York, 1932), p. 213.

melodramatic framework into which they are supposed to fit.

The plot is a *mélange* of mistaken identity, sacrifice of love for duty, and a retelling of the Enoch Arden story. Terry Dennison believes, mistakenly, that his ward Chrystal is in love with him, when she is actually in love with his other ward Ned Fairweather. Chrystal marries Terry and sends Ned away because she must be true to her sense of duty, repaying Terry for his many kindnesses in raising her after she had been left an orphan. Terry, of course, finds out about his mistake too late, and departs on an expedition to the polar regions, returning at the end of the play to hear of his wife and child one last time before he dies. In the interim Chrystal marries Ned. In the final death scene Ned and Chrystal recognize Terry's generosity.

This melodramatic framework is principally the work of Belasco, adapted from an English play, The Mariner's Compass. Herne did not know about Belasco's source until after the play was produced. Belasco's spectacular touch is evident in several scenes, and notably in the storm in Act I, a realistic tour de force: "All the effects used in the act, the movement of the sea, the noise of the surf, the rain and storm effects are practical. The storm, from the moment it begins, increases gradually, until the end

of the act, when it becomes furious."<sup>14</sup> At the end of the act, a ship breaks up on the horizon, and the men on shore haul the survivors to safety with a life line. Act II includes the spectacle of a real mill wheel in full operation, "forced into rapid motion by a stream of real water" (p. 272). The spectacle of a real baby and a cat are also probably Belasco's invention. He recalled them years later as evidence of his "faith in the little things."<sup>15</sup> When that baby was onstage, it created its own spectacular drama which has nothing to do with the rest of the play. A stage direction suggests the attitude toward the baby as spectacle: "All of this business can be elaborated as Baby gets used to the stage and to the people. Whatever the Baby does must be acted upon by the actors and taken advantage of, as it is impossible to set down in so many lines just what the Baby will or will not do, so watch out for the star's humor" (p. 291).

Although the spectacle of the baby in Act III may have been Belasco's idea, most of the script of the act is Herne's, on the authority of Mrs. Herne. Herne had a chance to experiment with the quiet scenes of daily life which occur in all of his later plays. For instance,

<sup>14</sup>James A. Herne, Shore Acres and Other Plays, p. 257. Hereafter, references to this edition of the play will be cited in my text.

<sup>15</sup>Sheldon Cheney, The New Movement in the Theatre (New York, 1914), p. 160.

there is a long scene between Uncle Davy and the baby in which he sings to her, counts her toes, makes her feet dance in time with his tune, and tosses her in the air, affectionately. The scene leads to a comic argument between Uncle Davy and Aunt Betsy, a spinster, over the proper handling of babies. Herne was to use scenes like this in later plays to develop the humanity of his major characters. But Uncle Davy is a minor local color character who does not function in the framework plot of the play.

There is a dinner in this play, too, foreshadowing Herne's later use of that realistic device. In Hearts of Oak, the dinner is mostly comic by-play, perhaps justified as a prelude to the serious melodrama which follows it when Terry discovers that he has lost his mill and his money because a bank has failed. But the main justification for the scene is the opportunity to examine the everyday actions of everyday people.

While these scenes have little function dramatically, they do illustrate, as Professor Edwards has pointed out, "Herne's growing conviction that audiences are more interested in people than in action itself."<sup>16</sup> The success of the play for many years on the road indicates that Herne's assumption was valid. He had yet to learn how to weave

<sup>16</sup>Edwards, James A. Herne, p. 32.

that interest in people into the total form of his play, making the static scenes threads in a unified design, as he was to do later in plays like Griffith Davenport.

A few detailed scenes of this kind, however, do advance the dramatic action of Hearts of Oak. The most successful occurs in Act V when Little Chrystal meets her father, Terry, who has returned from his long arctic voyage. She does not know him of course, and he is blind. His gradual realization of the results of his decision to go away, leaving Ned to take care of his wife and child, builds throughout the scene. The first part of the scene is a typical Herne scene between an old man and a child, amusing and almost comic.

Terry: No! No! No! You need not call your mother, child, I do not want anything.

Little Chrystal: [Surprised] No!

Terry: No!

Little Chrystal: I'm so so sorry. 'Pon your word?

Terry: 'Pon my word.

Little Chrystal: Ain't you fooling?

Terry: No, my child, I have all I want. When I was discharged from the hospital they gave me some money.

Little Chrystal: Was you in the hospital?

Terry: Yes.

Little Chrystal: What did you steal?

Terry: I didn't steal anything.

Little Chrystal: Then you must 'a' killed somebody, didn't you?

Terry: No--I didn't kill any one (p. 315).

The bantering mood changes to a scene of understanding between the generations as she leads him to the flowers by the monument erected in his memory by Chrystal and Ned. When she leans against his knee, responding to his paternal kindness, she reminds him of his own child.

Terry: But I want you to come here and let me tell you of my own little girl.

Little Chrystal: Have you got as nice a little girl as me?

Terry: I hope so--but I haven't seen her since she was a tiny thing in her cradle.

Little Chrystal: I wish you would go and find her and bring her to my house to play with me. Won't you please? (p. 317)

A recognition scene follows. Avoiding an obvious lachrymose scene, Herne develops the action slowly, dramatizing much of the feeling and sentiment in action rather than statement. When Little Chrystal finally sits on his knee, he gives her a kiss, but in the intensity of his emotions he becomes too forcible, and she pushes him away "pettishly."

Terry: Chrystal, I want you to put your arms around my neck--you put your little arms around my neck--and try--try hard--Oh--so hard--to make believe that I'm your father. Only let me hear your little voice call me father once--only once! Try my child--try for God's sake--try--hard--hard--hard!

Little Chrystal: Oh, I can't! You ain't a bit like my pa. Mama says he was so strong, and big and tall and brave and handsome--oh--so handsome! And you ain't big and tall and handsome. And every night I see him--just as Mama says he used to look!--see him in my dreams (p. 320).

The act ends as she leads him along to join the wedding festivities. It is never explained why she is not in the church attending her mother's wedding.

While this scene depends on melodramatic irony and sentiment for much of its effect, it moves, on the whole, smoothly and quietly because Herne has created a series of simple actions to occupy the child and the old man rather than a forthright expression of their deeper emotions. It is the kind of scene he would later develop in even quieter tones. The final scene of the play is also surprisingly restrained, even though it has more than enough sentimentality. Terry pretends to be a friend of the supposedly dead Terry.

Terry: When he found his time had come, he dragged himself to my side and said, "If ever you live to return to Marblehead--I want you to find out Chrystal--that's my wife," he says, "and give her this. It's a lock of my baby's hair. . . . Kiss her for me and say I sent it; she'll believe you. And if you find her married, why Ned'll be her husband, and he won't mind." And then he said, "Tell my little baby to put her arms around your neck and call you father. It is my last wish."

Little Chrystal: Father!

Chrystal: [Realizes for the first time that it is Terry.] Terry! Oh, Ned, Ned! —  
Why did you not tell?

Ned: Hush, darling. He willed it so (p. 329).

Quinn writes of this scene, "The last scene might in incompetent hands seem sentimental, but in Herne's performance the dignity of Terry's self-sacrifice secured the sympathy of his hearers."<sup>17</sup> In The Literary History of the United States, Sculley Bradley writes, "Uncounted thousands wept."<sup>18</sup> Audiences were moved because Herne had developed his sentimental characters with quiet actions which only suggest the deeper emotional movement underneath. He is not free, of course, from the melodramatic framework which constantly threatens to turn the play into sensation, nor is he free of the language of sentimentality. Herne realized later that the play was an artistic failure: "It was very crude and faulty in many ways, but it did have the human touch which is the one absolutely vital thing in any play that is ever to be a success."<sup>19</sup>

In Terry there is a suggestion of the strong-willed hero whose choice of action leads to a definition of his humanity. He takes all the blame on himself for what has

<sup>17</sup>Quinn, History, p. 135.

<sup>18</sup>Sculley Bradley, Literary History of the United States (New York, 1963), p. 1005.

<sup>19</sup>James A. Herne, "Forty Years Behind the Footlights," The Coming Age, II (August, 1899), p. 127.



happened (pp. 305-306). When he comes back in the final acts, he returns only to understand the effects of his choice. Even though there is too much of the sacrificial lamb in his character for him to be completely believable, his actions are plain and quiet enough to suggest human dignity and to avoid melodramatic stereotype. As Herne conceived him and played him, he has the making of a tragic figure, but the plot he finds himself in is too contrived and the language of his speeches is too charged with sentimentality to allow him to achieve tragic stature. When Herne rewrote this play as Sag Harbor, he changed it to a comedy, eliminating the primitive tragic elements. Martha (Chrystal) stays with Ben (Terry) while Frank (Ned) pairs off with a new character, Jane. By the time of Sag Harbor Herne realized the improbabilities in his early script and reshaped it into an entirely different form.

Hearts of Oak is a fitting end to a study of Herne's plays, for we end where he began to realize those qualities which we have seen develop in his later plays. Never completely free of the formulas of his time, he nonetheless transformed the carefully observed truths of everyday life into plays which, as we have seen, approach the significant forms of tragedy and comedy, and expresses his humane vision of life. While a study of Herne's plays does not suggest a fervent claim for recognition of an unappreciated playwright "lost" among the antiques of the 1890's

theatre, such a study does provide commentary upon the art of the drama--both what was considered art in the older formulas of the drama and what endures as essential dramatic form. Herne was, as his plays bear evidence, more concerned with the quality of his art than with a few hours entertainment in the popular theatre. "Art," he wrote, "is a personal expression of life. The finer the form and the color and the larger the truth, the higher the art."<sup>20</sup>

<sup>20</sup>James A. Herne, "Art for Truth's Sake in the Drama," The Arena, XVII (February, 1897), p. 368.

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