

TWELVE ONE-ACT PLAYS FOR STUDY AND PRODUCTION

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PREFACE

The methods of studying and of producing one-act plays suggested in this volume have grown gradually out of many years of experience in the classroom and the student theater. In this fact lies whatever the methods may have of value and practicality. The purpose of the collection — to help fill a need in colleges and schools in supplying material for literary study, English composition, speaking, and actual staging — is sufficiently stated in the Introduction.

The individual instructor will, of course, use in the book what he may find to his special purpose, making any "permutations and combinations" that his own needs and tastes may dictate. This is taken for granted. Fortunately, today most instructors are so alive to their opportunities and so well prepared to make the best of them, that the old-time specific and detailed advice, the top-lofty and rather condescending prescription, is likely to be rather a hindrance than a help and is sure to be an impertinence.

Probably no two persons will agree as to what would constitute the ideal selection of plays for such a volume as this, so wide is the variation in local conditions and needs and in personal aptitudes and tastes. But certain fundamental principles of selection will perhaps be generally accepted: that in *content* the plays should be neither commonplace nor oversubtle, should have at least a fair degree of purely literary value, and should have solid substance to furnish matter for discussion; and that in *form* they should be fine in technique and should possess distinction without being too radical or "experimental." Even when these very general principles have been applied, the range of choice is not so wide as one might suppose, and after the list has been made in theory, it is still further reduced by limitations of copyright. The present volume offers plays that are representative in that they illustrate various outstanding types of drama, that each is characteristic of its author, and that all are the work of playwrights of established reputation.

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The plays named in the Reading Lists of this volume are available in not too expensive editions. These plays are intended for use in the college or school library, as are the books named in the Bibliography. The class or the producing organization usually takes great interest in building up a library of this kind, which, when once begun, grows with remarkable rapidity and which should be at the disposal of every instructor and of the many students who would be glad to make use of it.

A number of persons or groups have participated, consciously or unconsciously, in the making of this book. Primarily the publishers, authors, and agents made the volume possible by graciously permitting the use of the plays which they controlled. Various members of the editorial and Press staffs of Messrs. Ginn and Company have patiently and with excellent taste and judgment helped to make the volume usable and attractive in both arrangement and typography, and have made many valuable suggestions as to the editorial content. The staff of the Drama Book Shop, New York, has supplied many informative details for the Bibliography. Mr. Barrett H. Clark has given assistance of more than one kind. Students and fellow workers in The Play Workshop of The Polytechnic Institute of Brooklyn have indirectly and unknowingly contributed a large portion of the subject matter. It goes without saying that the authors of the various works cited in the footnotes have, albeit unconsciously, coöperated indefatigably; indebtedness to these is inadequately, and perhaps unkindly, repaid by making them, willy-nilly, partners in the undertaking. Mr. Theodore Fuchs has from the very beginning to the final proofreading given so much and so many kinds of aid that adequate acknowledgment is out of the question. But this catalogue of indebtedness had better abruptly close lest the book jeopardize its claim to any shred of originality.

S. M. T.

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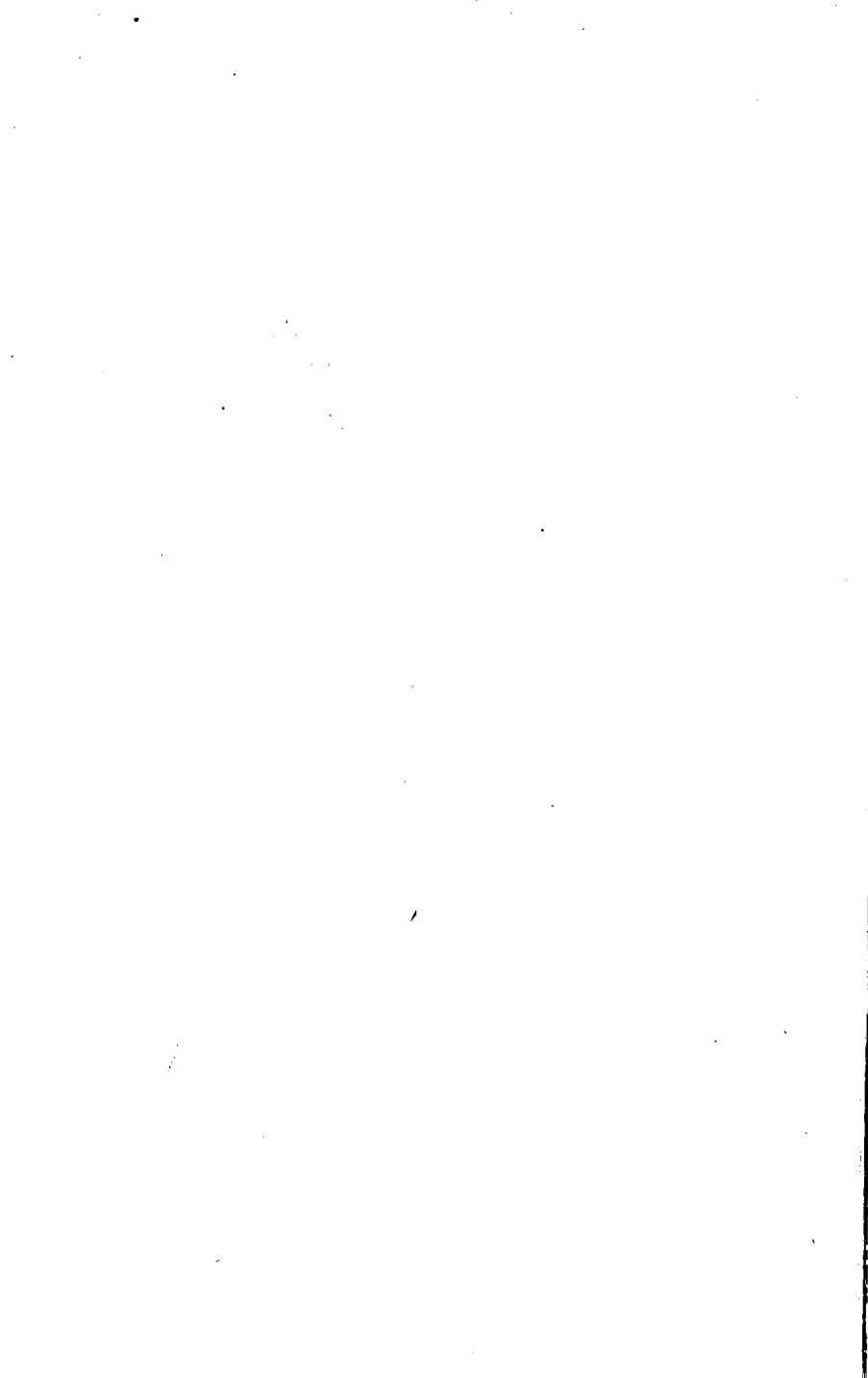
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**TWELVE ONE-ACT PLAYS
FOR STUDY AND PRODUCTION**



INTRODUCTION

I. THE PLACE OF THE DRAMA IN COLLEGES AND SCHOOLS

That the study of the drama, and the actual production of fine plays, in schools and colleges is educational in the best sense is a fact now generally recognized. And this general recognition is not surprising in an age when ideas of what constitutes education are becoming so much broader and more thoughtful than ever before in modern times. It would be simply unintelligent to neglect such an excellent means of self-development, discipline, and pleasure, — a means that produces results which America needs more than almost anything else: promotion of the arts, appreciation of the arts, legitimate and disciplined self-expression, and the development of the student's entire personality, — in other words, a means that works toward the actual realization of the Greek ideal of the complete man.

Fortunately, then, the study and production of the drama has found its way, within the past decade, into almost all schools and colleges, either as a recognized portion of the regular curriculum or as an extracurricular students' activity. Formerly, here and there a college course was devoted to the history of English drama, with some study of the great plays of the dramatic literature of the past, but virtually no attention was given to the living drama of the present, and the study was almost exclusively literary; plays were discussed only as literature and not as works primarily intended to be performed before an audience. Even when, in rare cases, the *theater* side of the play was considered, there was, as a rule, little or no attempt to picture or discuss the setting, the acting, and the directing that the play would receive if it were produced; in other words, there was little consideration of the theater arts as related to the play under discussion.

Plays were produced in schools and colleges, certainly; they always have been since the Middle Ages; but until recently

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there was little attempt to relate this largely unorganized and often haphazard production to the regular courses in the drama. Aside from the production of standard classics of English, French, German, and other dramatic literatures the plays were usually of small merit, and the productions themselves were usually anything but illustrations of good theater art.

But within the past decade or so our point of view has changed, and largely for the better. The old purely literary study of the drama has been vitalized and broadened by the consideration of fine modern plays in various literatures, and — a significant accompaniment — these plays are discussed not only as literature but also as products intended to be performed before an audience. In addition to such formal classroom study, literary and theoretical, courses are offered in the theater arts, including scenic design and construction, lighting, costuming, acting, and directing; and sometimes the very plays discussed in the classroom are actually produced by the students. In many institutions not only the literary courses in the drama, but those in the theater arts are credited toward a degree.

This actual work of production has had a remarkably vitalizing effect upon the classroom study of the drama, — the theoretical discussion of individual plays, the history of the drama and the theater, and kindred subjects. Students who participate in the various phases of production — who make scenery, devise lighting, act, and direct — are almost invariably the most interested students of dramatic literature and of the history of the drama and the theater. Such coördination, such coöperation and dovetailing of theory and practice, of literary and theater study, of reading about the thing and actually doing it, is rendering the work in drama in our colleges and schools more vital, significant, and interesting than it used to be, with promise of a future finer and more fruitful than any of us would have dreamed of a few years ago. Hence the present volume, and other books of its kind, as a small contribution toward the realization of that promise.

The value of literary study of the drama. To neglect the reading and discussion of plays, both long and short, is to neglect one of the most lively, interesting, and stimulating forms of modern literature, closer to life, perhaps, than any other form and fuller of ideas, most impressive in its portrayal of men and manners, and

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most attractive to the student. The past thirty years or so have formed the most productive period of the drama; more really fine plays have been written than in any one period before, — every kind of play dealing with every imaginable subject, portraying every kind of character, written in every kind of style. True, there has been no Shakespeare, no Calderón, no Molière, no Sophocles; but there has been an Ibsen, a Tolstoi, a Strindberg, a Maeterlinck, a Hauptmann, a D'Annunzio, a Shaw, — men of genius all (and other dramatists of genius and a hundred or so highly talented), whose best work is already established as great literature. And it is the modern, even the contemporary, in literature that makes the most immediate appeal to the student. He is living in *today*, and he should see how the world of today is interpreted by its leading writers. Once interested in the literature of his own period, the student is led naturally, easily, and pleasantly to the literature of the past. The path to such natural appreciation seems to lead backward in time, but psychologically and educationally it leads straight forward.

What the reading aloud, the acting, and the staging of plays means to the participant. Classroom courses that aim at training the mind, or imparting general information, or inculcating a thorough knowledge of some one subject are admirable and essential. Student activities that develop the body, improve the health, develop qualities of leadership, and afford experience in business management are admirable, too, provided they be not carried so far as to dominate the student's interest and take too much of his time. But in the average American college and school little or no provision is made for what the American student especially needs, — what the typical American citizen especially needs, — the development of the æsthetic sense, the opportunity for self-expression in the fine arts, and the consequent raising of the study, appreciation, and pursuit of the fine arts to a level of dignity which they deserve, and the general recognition of them as a vital and integral part of life.

Acting. A student who takes part in the production of a play under really competent guidance gains a training that cannot be duplicated by any other means. It is, or should be, to him an educational experience of a high order, and no less truly educational because it is pleasurable. His preliminary study of the character that he is to impersonate, his attempt to render that

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character completely in voice, action, and all the other means within his power, inevitably give him a broader and more searching knowledge of human nature — a keener sense of what is admirable and what is despicable. His imagination (a superb attribute now being steadily atrophied by motion pictures and the like, as well as being discouraged by our current educational methods) is quickened and developed healthily and normally. His sense of the varying values of words and of their expressive arrangement into sentences of speech is also quickened. His pronunciation of words, his articulation, and his enunciation are immensely improved (in all these the American student is notably and deplorably deficient). His voice is also improved (the average American voice is nothing less than atrocious), and the improvement of this organ of individual expression is of the utmost value to him in society, in business, and in the development of his own personality. His use of his body and the coördination of speech and bodily action, his bodily poise, his legitimate self-possession, all are immeasurably and beneficently developed. Nothing can so well accomplish these very desirable results as can acting. In this light, acting becomes not a frivolous pastime, not a form of self-indulgence, not an effeminate diversion for those unable to participate in sterner activities, but an essential art, — dignified, educational, invaluable.

Perhaps this insistence upon the educational value of amateur acting and the hard work that may enter into it sounds unduly heavy, ominous, and threatening to the very ones who should be led to try it. Hence we should, and in all honesty can, hearten ourselves with the refreshing fact that such acting, in spite of all the hard work that it may entail, is the best and most productive, the most alluring and delightful, kind of play, both for young persons and for older ones. We are told by our kindly critics, and told perhaps with truth, that adult Americans do not know how to play, how to enjoy themselves, except through artificial excitement and making a great noise. Fortunately, and after many generations of self-repression (and of general contempt for acting as a form of sport), not only young Americans in colleges and schools but the middle-aged, elderly, and even aged are finding out what a rare good time they can have by acting in plays, and how such diversion helps to keep them young and limber in body and mind. When young people become ac-

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customed to acting in college and school, when they have taken the plunge and have found that the "water is fine," they have both discovered a truth and formed a recreational habit, and the chances are that they will never altogether forget the truth or discard the habit.

What the staging of plays means to the participant. The production of a play — the designing and building of settings, the lighting, the costuming (if this be required by the play) — does more to quicken and develop the student's feeling for beauty of form and color than any other means that can possibly be employed. Here is a world in itself, and one in which almost any student can pursue his own favorite path, in which he can exercise his own natural endowment. When he designs or makes scenery, or does both, he not only uses his feeling for form and color, but he also uses his skill as carpenter, builder, mechanician. No wonder that he responds to the work, revels in it, works like a Trojan at it. He soon begins to feel the unique joy of the creative artist; he has made something that expresses a part of his being that was never expressed before. By such activity he not only gives normal and wholesome expression to an essential faculty (and thus *expressed*, not *inhibited*), but he inevitably acquires an appreciation of art that could be gained in no other way. This means that he comes to recognize the arts as legitimate, delightful, even essential to the nation's cultural life. More specifically, he comes to understand something of the art of the theater, to form a taste for the best; and this makes him a potential member of the theater audience of the future, which will demand that the American theater shall rise to its best possibilities and which, by its intelligent appreciation, will enable the theater to respond to this demand.

The inference from all of the foregoing is this: participation in the study and production of drama tends, under competent leadership, to a remarkably complete rounding out of the student's being, — tends, as was hinted at on a preceding page, to the production of the Greek ideal of "the four-square man," developed physically, mentally, morally, spiritually, — body trained, mind quickened, conscience sensitized, æsthetic nature opened up and gratified. It is absurd, of course, to say that only work in the drama can accomplish this ideal or realize it even in part; but it is surely safe to say that such work affords a present, ready, and

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effective means of at least contributing to the accomplishment of this end, and a means the most varied, rounded, and all-appealing.

All that has been said in the preceding paragraphs assumes that the work in drama is directed competently (and firmly) by an instructor who knows precisely what he is aiming at and knows how to reach his aim without jeopardizing other essential interests of the student and without creating antagonism. Special aptitude and training are as necessary to this work as to the conduct of any other course in the curriculum. Even the most competent and tactful instructor will have to take constant care that his students, their interest once awakened, do not overdo. Enthusiasts are only too likely to spend more than its due time and energy upon the drama, and in consequence to neglect other studies and their own bodily and mental health. It is easier, however, to curb and direct interest than to awaken it; and the competent instructor may be trusted to keep enthusiasm within due bounds and to preserve both the special interests of the student and the general interests of the institution.

II. THE ONE-ACT PLAY AS LITERATURE

When the one-act play is considered simply as *literature* (apart from its primary function as a piece for the stage), a number of matters have to be made plain if the discussion is to be profitable and interesting. For instance, there is the striking analogy between the one-act play and the short-story as regards their respective relations to the long play and the novel; the meaning and function of the various elements, such as plot, character, setting, dialogue, that as a whole constitute the play; the meaning and application of various technical terms that are useful as aids to discussion; the special qualities that give literary value to a play; the development of the one-act play and the reasons for its present vogue. Obviously, these various matters are closely interdependent; their boundaries often overlap; and any attempt to separate them too rigorously and distinguish between them too closely would be supererogatory and even absurd. Yet some kind of sorting and classifying, if not carried too far, may tend to clarify and explain what might otherwise remain hazy and undefined.

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THE ONE-ACT PLAY AND THE SHORT-STORY

The one-act play as a form of literature is as distinct from the longer play as is the short-story from the novel. Both novel and short-story are fiction, and both are narratives; both have as their component elements plot, characters, and setting; both usually employ description of places and persons. But the short-story is not a brief or condensed novel, and the two kinds differ in more than length. A novel is not merely a series of short-stories, strung together with the same characters; nor is a short-story a condensation of a novel or a section of a novel. If one tries to condense the essence of a novel into a short-story, he gets merely a *synopsis* of the novel, giving an effect totally different from that of a short-story; and if he tries to draw out a short-story into a novel, he finds that his material is too scanty, and that what was effective in the short form becomes worthless in the long one.

The novel usually abounds in impressions upon the reader, — many effects, without unity; the short-story aims at one impression and is in one prevailing mood. The novel usually tells a story composed of many incidents, covering, as a rule, a considerable period of time (though some novels cover only a few hours); the short-story usually treats only a single incident, or two or three incidents so closely connected that they have the effect of one. The novel, as a rule, employs many characters and develops their traits slowly, so that the reader finds them out by degrees; the short-story uses only a few characters and develops them quickly. The novel often presents several crises and many ups and downs of experience; the short-story presents, as a rule, only one crisis. The method of the novel is leisurely; the method of the short-story is necessarily swift, — it must come quickly to the issue. Other differences might be indicated, but the point is that the two forms are different in their purpose and in their method; each is a distinct literary work of art.

The relation of the one-act play to the longer play is analogous to that between the short-story and the novel. Both are species of the drama, as the short-story and the novel are both species of narrative. Their subject matter is in general the same; that is, they both treat any subject, "in the heavens above, in the earth beneath, or in the waters under the earth," which they

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find capable of being made dramatically effective. As a rule, both have *action* of some kind, either physical or psychological; they present characters that express themselves by means of speech and action; both presume some kind of setting for their action, — that is, an environment amid which their persons move; both have the same varieties, — such as tragedy, comedy, melodrama, farce.

Now appears a difference between the one-act play and the longer play not unlike the difference between the short-story and the novel. The longer play has time to present a series of incidents; the one-act play, as a rule, presents only a single incident (although sometimes, when it has more than one scene, it of course presents more than one incident). The longer play may and usually does produce a variety of impressions upon the reader or auditor, or induce in him a variety of moods; the one-act play gives only one impression and induces only one mood (that is, one preponderating mood). The longer play has, as a rule, more characters than the one-act play, for the obvious reason that its greater length enables it to handle and develop more characters; the one-act play, in its short length, can comfortably handle only a few characters, — not often more than four or five, — and it must introduce these characters early in the action (if they are important), develop them swiftly, and interest the reader in them immediately. Both the longer play and the one-act play develop their characters by means of speech and action, but the one-act play, on account of its very brevity, is forced to be especially economical of both speech and action; it has no place for any action or word that does not further the plot or help to reveal character or to establish the mood, or atmosphere, of the play. Its method, as compared with that of the longer play, is swift, and its style is highly condensed. It cannot admit the kind of general comment or discussion that is often found in the longer play, — observations on things in general more or less connected with the subject of the play; every line must contribute to the one impression or effect that the dramatist is aiming at. Bad construction and faulty style are sometimes pardonable in a longer play in the light of actual merits that the play may possess, but such faults are fatal to the one-act play, since its scope is so small. The one-act play compared to the longer play is like a miniature painting compared to a large or an ordinary

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painting. Faulty brushwork, drawing, coloring, that might be overlooked, or might not be so obvious, in a large painting become glaringly apparent in a miniature. The smaller the scale upon which the work is done, the more nearly perfect must be the workmanship.

The dramatic incident, or episode, selected for the one-act play must be as nearly as possible complete in itself; that is, it must be of a kind that will be easily and at once understood by the audience, with very little if any preliminary explanation (called *exposition*). Usually it brings its incident or episode to an end with the close of the play, leaving nothing unsaid or undone that the audience cannot easily supply for itself (as in *The Trysting Place*,¹ by Booth Tarkington). From this it is evident that many stories are unfit for treatment in one-act plays; they are too long and complicated, or they do not include any situation or episode that is entirely complete in itself, or they require too long an explanation to make them understood.

In this respect the one-act play is certainly limited as compared with the longer play; but in some other respects it has the advantage. For instance, it can sustain a difficult mood more easily without interruption or let-down, because it is short. *The Intruder* and *Home*, by the great Belgian dramatist Maeterlinck, depend for their effect upon a tension of expectancy and a mood of unearthly apprehension which can be kept terribly effective throughout a one-act play but which would be almost impossible to sustain throughout a longer play, and which, if sustained, would probably be intolerable. The feeling of horror which that type of play known as the "thriller" aims to arouse in the audience can scarcely be sustained effectively through more than one act: such tension is too extreme. Fantasy and fairy-tale are not easily kept up throughout three or four acts, but may be entertaining and even delightful in one. That is, the one-act play has the advantage of being able to handle effectively certain moods, sometimes delicate and beautiful, sometimes absurd, and to sustain such moods without let-down or interruption. In its selection of material and its method, its ability to handle moods, its unity of effect, its swiftness, its condensation, it is, as contrasted with the longer play, what the short-story is as contrasted with the novel.

¹ Included in this volume.

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ELEMENTS OF A PLAY

The elements of a play, either one-act or longer, are the various constituent factors of it. The most obvious element is what is usually termed *plot*; that is, the story, the action. The plot is developed by means of the speech and movements of the persons in the play. It is true that a play may exist without a plot, strictly speaking; that is, the characters may simply sit or stand or move about and talk, without taking part in any story. This is the case in Strindberg's play *The Stronger*. It might be said that such a play is not a play at all, but simply a conversation. Such a method is dangerous at best, for as a rule it takes a real plot or story to hold one's attention on the stage, and where there is no plot in a play the dialogue must be of unusual excellence to compensate for the lack of it, — must be very wise, or very witty, or both, like the dialogue in the plays of George Bernard Shaw, which are chiefly conversational (*Getting Married*, for instance).

The plot, or story, of course entails some kind of movement, — of action; but this action is not necessarily physical or external, though it is usually such, as, for instance, in *A Night at an Inn*,¹ by Lord Dunsany, or *The Confessional*,² by Percival Wilde, or *Where the Cross is Made*,³ by Eugene O'Neill, or most of the other plays in this volume. Sometimes the action is chiefly, or almost altogether, psychological or internal, as in Dunsany's *Glittering Gate*, where nothing happens until the great gate of heaven swings open at the close of the play; or Stuart Walker's *The Medicine Show*, where all is talk, to reveal the traits of three lazy louts; or Synge's famous tragedy *Riders to the Sea*, where the remarkably beautiful and expressive dialogue presents a tragedy of the spirit as dramatic as any physical action; or Drinkwater's tragedy in verse *X = 0*, where two pairs of soldiers talk, in turn, without physical action except as an interpolation between the scenes. The shorter plays of Maeterlinck, especially *The Intruder* and *Home* (see also page 11), are particularly representative of this kind of inner action, which can be rendered so essentially dramatic as to produce upon the audience the effect of violent physical movement.

Often the element of plot is emphasized at the expense of all other elements; that is, the principal aim of the play is to tell

¹ Included in this volume.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.