

THE ONE-ACT PLAY AS A SPECIFIC DRAMATIC TYPE

The one-act play, like the short story, has come into its own and it is exceeding in high places. The recent hit Broadway production of "Wilder, Wilder, Wilder" features three one-act plays written by one of the theatre's most prolific playwrights, Thornton Wilder. Other One-Act Broadway openings included "Five by Tenn" and "After The Night & The Music", showcasing authors Tennessee Williams and Elaine May, respectively.

The one-act play is with us and is asking for consideration. It is challenging our attention whether we will or not. In both Europe and America it is one of the conspicuous factors in present-day dramatic activity. Theatre managers, stage designers, actors, playwrights, and professors in universities recognize its presence as a vital force. Professional theatre folk and amateurs especially are devoting zestful energy both to the writing and to the producing of this shorter form of drama.

The one-act play is claiming recognition as a specific drama type. It may be said that, as an art form, it has achieved that distinction. The short story, as everyone knows, was once an embryo and an experiment; but few nowadays would care to hold that it has not developed into a specific and worthy literary form. This shorter form of prose fiction was once apologetic, and that not 80 many years ago; but it has come into its own and now is recognized as a distinct type of prose narrative. The one-act play, like the short story, also has come into its own. No longer is it wholly an experiment. Indeed, it is succeeding in high places. The one-act play is taking its place among the significant types of dramatic and literary expression.

Artistically and technically considered, the one-act play is quite as much a distinctive dramatic problem as the longer play. In writing either, the playwright aims so to handle his material that he will get his central intent to his audience and will provoke their interest and emotional response thereto. Both aim at a singleness of impression and dramatic effect; both aim to be a high order of art. Yet, since the one is shorter and more condensed, it follows that the dramaturgy of the one is somewhat different from that of the other, just as the technique of the cameo is different from the technique of the full-sized statue. The one-act play must, as it were, be presented at a "single setting": it must start quickly at the beginning with certain definite dramatic elements and pass rapidly and effectively to a crucial movement without halt or digression. A careful analysis of any one of Anton Tchekov's "The Boor", will reveal this fact. The shorter form of drama, like the short story, has a technical method characteristically its own.

It is a truth that the one-act play is well made or it is nothing at all. A careful analysis of Sir James M. Barrie's *The Twelve-Pound Look*, Paul Hervieu's *Modesty*, Althea Thurston's *The Exchange*, will reveal that these representative one-act plays are well made and are real bits of dramatic art. A good one-act play is not a mere cheap mechanical "tour de force"; mechanics and artistry it has, of course, but it is also a high order of art product. A delicately finished cameo is quite as much a work of art as is the larger statue; both have mechanics and design in their structure, but those of the cameo are more deft and more highly specialized than those of the statue, because the work of the former is done under far more restricted conditions. The one-act play at its best is cunningly wrought.

Naturally, the material of the one-act play is a bit episodic. It deals with but a single situation. A study of the plays by Sir James M. Barrie, Paul Hervieu, Susan Glaspell and Althea Thurston will reveal that no whole life's story can be treated adequately in the short play, and that no complexity of plot can be employed. Unlike the longer play, the shorter form of drama shows not the whole man--except by passing hint--but a significant moment or experience, a significant character-trait. However, vividly this chosen moment may be interpreted--and the one-act play must be vivid--much will still be left to the imagination. It is the aim of the one-act form to trace the causal relations of but one circumstance so that the circumstance may be intensified. The writer of the one-act play deliberately isolates so that he may throw the strong flashlight more searchingly on some one significant event, on some fundamental element of character, on some moving emotion. He presents in a vigorous, compressed, and suggestive way a simplification and idealization of a particular part or aspect of life. Often he opens but a momentary little vista of life, but it is so clear-cut and so significant that a whole life is often revealed thereby.

The student must not think that because the one-act play deals with but one crisis or but one simplified situation, it is therefore weak and inconsequential. On the contrary, since only one event or situation can be emphasized, it follows that the writer is obliged to choose the one determining crisis which makes or mars the supreme struggle of a soul, the one great change or turning-point or end of a life history. Often such moments are the really vital material for drama; nothing affords so much opportunity for striking analysis, for emotional stress, for the suggestion of a whole character sketched in the act of meeting its test.

The one-act play is a vital literary product. To segregate a bit of significant experience and to present a finished picture of its aspects and effects; to dissect a motive so searchingly and skillfully that its very roots are laid bare; to detach a single figure from a dramatic sequence and portray the essence of its character; to bring a series of actions into the clear light of day in a sudden and brief human crisis; to tell a significant story briefly and with suggestion; to portray the humor of a person or an incident, or in a trice to reveal the touch of tragedy resting like the finger of fate on an experience or on a character--these are some of the possibilities of the one-act play when handled by a master dramatists.