CONCLUSION
CONCLUSION

It is commonly believed that characters in a short-play do not undergo development. John Ferguson in his introduction to "Seven Famous One-Act Plays" states this attitude clearly: "In the short play, however, the author has no time in which to develop character and situations. His characters must be flashed on the audience, in the round, so to speak, like figures passing a window; his situation must be apprehended quickly, like a picture hung on a wall."¹

The view does not seem to be convincing. We cannot have a character in the round without presenting it in a certain way to secure the effect. This is the result of art, of the dramatist and the novelist. In a Greek play the restriction of the action of tragedy to twentyfour hours did not interfere with the characters putting on flesh and blood. In Synge's "Riders to the Sea" Maurya gains an added majesty at the end. It is a convention to think that development and duration are interconnected. The longer the one the better is the chance of the other to manifest itself. Normally, the view may be held as correct, but in a drama or work of

art actions and characters lose significance until some relationship is established between them. This relationship is the outward significant mark of a change within and one may suggest that this is development, that this is the change that authenticates character and situation.

We take a play for a brief comment, "Count Albany" by Donald Carswell. Here Prince Charles Edward tells his brother, the Cardinal, how much devotion he has received from his followers. In a few minutes when the death of King James III is announced he completely breaks down, and is unable to speak the formal words the occasion demanded. In the earlier passages there is an indication of his awareness of personal worth. To this he attributed the devotion unto death he had enjoyed from so many people. Now he completely lost that sense of personal worth. His breakdown could be drunkenness but more definitely, it was self distrust. Is not this transition from one attitude to another a sign of development? For here we can see that he had a momentary glimpse of his own unstable character, filling him with a sense of unworthiness for the great position he was called upon to assume. This is a sign of a considerable measure of complexity, not seen in the earlier vindication of his character.
The limitation of the short play to one act is primarily a form of discipline for the dramatist. He has to produce an effect on a greatly reduced scale. This does not mean that the character of the drama itself is thereby changed. What actually happens is that the non-essential is strictly excluded and the most important line of development pursued with rigid economy. Thus in this form there is more scope for intensity of vision because of its greater concentration. But the form's requirements are not always fulfilled with an equal degree of talent, and quite often simple incidents are dramatized which do not require the disciplined procedure validating the best kind of work in this restricted sphere. Comedies, in general, have this episodical character and reveal the lack of coherence which is a spiritual fact far more than the tendency of a series of incidents. We may mention the Lady Gregory plays as illustration of this statement. "The Workhouse Ward", "The Jackdaw" "Coats" are perhaps better examples than others. Even here we find changes in character and situation. Without elaborating farther this point regarding change which John Ferguson has denied to the short play, we may state that change is an essential
element of life. It takes place every moment. With greater sensitiveness we could detect it but the dramatist must have this perceptivity so that through his work we may also gain insight.

The unities of time, place and action are less often broken in the short play than in the long. A shift in time or place will often destroy the effect of concentration. There is also the difficulty of making this shift intelligible within a narrow compass. In Brecht, for example, there are no unities of time and place. He is an experimental dramatist with an anti-Aristotelian axe to grind.

August Strindberg explains what led him to do away with the division into acts. He claims to have made this experiment from "my belief that our decreasing capacity for illusion was possibly weakened by intervals in which the spectator has time to reflect and thereby escape from the suggestive influence of the author-mesmerist. My play will probably last an hour and a half; and since one can listen to a lecture, a sermon, or a parliamentary debate for as long as that, or longer, I imagine that a theatrical piece should not become fatiguing in the course of that time. As early as 1872, in one of my first
dramatic attempts, The Outlaw, I tried this concentrated form, though with very little success. The piece was written in five acts, and was finished when I first became aware of the restless, disjointed effect which it produced. I burnt it, and out of the ashes rose a single, highly elaborated act, fifty pages of type, and playable in one hour. The form of my play is thus by no means new, but it seems to be my own, and under the changed conditions of taste it may have some chance of suiting the times. My ambition would be to get a public so educated as to be capable of sitting through a one-act play lasting an entire evening."  

The account that Strindberg gives of having discovered a concentrated form of drama may not always explain the popular resort to it in this century. There is a tendency among writers of short plays to devise a method of broadening out the view both in space and time by division into many scenes. This is not favourable to a compactness of presentation. In Wolf Mankowitz's "The Bespoke Overcoat" there are sixteen scenes and naturally the construction seems loose and perhaps ill-planned. But the author gives a view which corrects

the initial impression and provides the play with a framework fitting the facts of the story effectively: "The only stage, the only effects, the only theatre I had in mind were in the heart of a drunken tailor."³

The acting time is usually the same as that taken for the action in actual life. The unity of time is not broken because the incidents represented do not normally take more than an hour, at any rate, not longer than a day. Whatever the story, its duration is short and the one-act play finds scope for it without a sense of congestion or undue compression.

The choice of theme is a major consideration for the success of this type of play. Again, it is apparent that there can be no sub-plot, and no irrelevant detail or incident can be introduced without damage to the whole. In all our fairly lengthy enquiry the shortest play is "The Spell" by Mary Kelly (Twenty-Four One-Act Plays, 1959). It is less than three pages in print but contains the features whose formal presence in a play's construction is thought essential. The beginning is announced by comments upon a stranger's arrival and the death of cattle through the person's influence. The middle part shows the old woman putting

the heart of a beast into an oven as a magical device for punishment. The climax comes with a knock on the door and the discovery immediately after, of a woman lying dead in front of it. She is identified as "the stranger". This analysis will show the unity of the play and also of the whole class and the economy by which it is achieved. The place of action does not change: whether it is inside a coal mine, a cottage, an inn or a palace or a scientist's laboratory, the action takes place inside it without shift of scene.

The Brecht plays are deliberately anti-Aristotelian. The narrative element is introduced, the unit of time is broken and occasionally the action is a little blurred by its association with circumstances not having an intimate bearing upon it. The Brecht plays also introduce a further element of experiment characterizing the absurd theatre. "The Caucasian Chalk Circle" is a play about justice. The story is about a young peasant girl who has saved a baby from death during a revolution. The form of play Brecht advocated is called the 'epic' or the 'open' drama: "that Man has recently become aware of his own nature in a new way and that this "objectivising of Being" requires the formal development of an "epic" theatre where Man confronts himself in a critical mood."4

A valuable point for our study is the treatment of language at the hands of the different writers. The problem facing them evokes a variety of reactions but the feeling for the need of individuality of expression is a mark of all who take the work as an art requiring a subtlety of effect. Auden in *The Dyer's Hand* (Faber 1963, p.23) quotes Karl Kraus as saying: "My language is the universal whore whom I have to make into a virgin." The problem does not make its impact upon all writers in an equal degree but Eliot, Yeats and Lady Gregory show that they have a keen sense of this.

The regional and dialectal elements in drama are not a contemporary innovation but there is a deliberateness in the use of this material which is characteristic. The dialect of various regions is introduced and normally this is done with tact and accuracy. One wouldn't venture to suggest that the dialectal element is always correctly represented. But if there are errors which to one not to the manner born, will not be apparent, there is perhaps no doubt that writers like Lady Gregory achieve accuracy and at the same time capture important qualities of character through the dialectal medium. Its introduction may have different causes such as the desire for greater liveliness, local colour and atmospheric effect and for representing
a particular class who cannot be otherwise represented.
Emotions like anger, love and jealousy are often introduced in the dialectal medium. Attention has been drawn to this elsewhere in our discussion and also to the various effects secured by its means.

Dylan Thomas, like James Joyce earlier, tried to solve the problem of language by various devices, one of them being coinages of new words. Francis Scarfe has pointed out some of the neologisms which occur in his poetry, such as 'man-iron', 'bonerailed', 'seaspindle', 'seastruck', 'all-hollowed', 'pin-hilled', 'natron'.

One of the earliest neologisms in English are perhaps associated with Lewis Carroll and his Jabberwocky is the first attempt in English to invent portmanto words deliberately; some of these are 'brillig', and 'slithy toves', etc. Joyce was notorious in his "Ulysses" for the practice. He went much further in "Finnegan's Wake".

Stuart Gilbert's article "Prolegomena To Work in Progress" contains a list of new words coined by Joyce: 'voise', 'onsaturncast', 'beausome', 'fleurt', etc.

---

7. Ibid.
8. Stuart Gilbert's "Prolegomena To Work In Progress", Our Examination Round His Factification For Incamination Of Work in Progress by Samuel Beckett and others (Faber and Faber..."
in his Under Milk Wood uses such coinages as 'bible-black' and 'jollyrodgered sea', etc. (An Aldine Paper back 1963, p.1).

Apart from coinages of words the use of language presents another phenomenon which we may associate with Beckett. An example of this occurs in Lucky's speech in Waiting for Godot.

He starts with the words: "Given the existence as uttered forth in the public works of Puncher and Wattmann of a personal God qua qua qua with white beard" etc. continuing through many twistings and syntactical distortion over three pages or so. The first thing to observe is the absurdity of the whole statement, its complete absence of coherence. We can nevertheless, find in the words, a rehash of philosophical and other views representing our civilized heritage. There is knowledge but it is devoid of the power that makes it alive, that makes it creative. Perhaps for a comment on the situation we may borrow the words from Eliot's "The Rock",

Where is the wisdom we have lost in knowledge?
Where is the knowledge we have lost in information?  

The example is a good indication of how variously the

1929, originally published in Paris), pp.67-75
linguistic sources are used for conveying a true picture of the confusion of our times. The following comment on Antonin Artaud published in the T.L.S. may throw light on this aspect of the question. "Both experiences (of Balinese Theatre and of life in Mexico) confirmed him in his oft-repeated beliefs, first of all, that rationalistic language, and indeed verbal expression of any kind, is, in the theatre, often harmful, and of secondary importance at best, since any clear idea is dead and useless and secondly that the public must be brought into contact with the real nature of existence, which is "cruel"; his ambition was to affect the whole public, not just an elite.

The expression "Theatre of Cruelty" has caused some confusion, not only in the public mind but also perhaps among certain theatrical practitioners. Artaud in his two Manifestes du theatre de la cruauté, does not intend it in a sadistic sense, and, in spite of his connexion with the Surrealists who had a fondness for Marquis de Sade, he does not appear to mention the divine name at all in the works so far published. His meaning is that the theatre should be fully cognizant of the problem of evil, i.e., of the terrible mystery of
life; it should be in his striking phrase, "de la metaphysique en activité". ... Mr. Philip Toynbee, who recently deplored the present modish interest in cruelty, has said that no one nowadays would think of inventing a Theatre of Kindness. Perhaps not, but such a theatre existed in the eighteenth century; it was the bourgeois drama, which preached do-goodism and dripped with virtuous tears. In fact, Artaud's design was to shock the audience into a full awareness of the horror of the human condition.

The absurd theatre of Beckett and Ionesco is an oblique commentary on the modern situation. What is important about it, is that, instead, of being a mode of entertainment it has become a source of new pessimism. For it seems to declare that all meaning has been knocked out of life. It expresses the spirit which belongs to the period following the second world war and is in its essence tragical. What gives it relevance is not the sense of meaninglessness which informs it but a parody of the standards and the ways of life in a highly mechanized world with its external, unspiritual modes of existence. A young man marries a motor-car in an Ionesco play or a

woman with three noses. It is like preferring an aeroplane with three engines for its greater efficiency. What seems powerful in this world is not the creative hand of God but the mechanical hand of man. The absurdist point of view is thus a reaction to the continuing mechanism of life.

One important section has been reserved for experimental plays. Many of these are of American or Continental provenance. Some are English in origin. Beckett's "Waiting for Godot" was produced before an audience not having any education, so to speak, yet they understood the writer's intention. The theatrical medium does not mean merely language. It includes the milieu and gestures which carry the meaning and correct the inadequacies of the language itself. The Ionesco plays are full of absurdities, yet they have an appeal which may be made effective on the stage. In our estimate the absurdities are an oblique representation of a tragic view of life. But while in tragedy the highest values triumph whatever may be the fate of the hero and the heroine in the Ionesco plays the loss of all values seems to be the theme and the source of tragedy. Here in this world we have a closed-in atmosphere with the resultant effect of suffocation. The mirth here is laughterless, it is the
mirth of the hollow-men.

Aldous Huxley in an essay, "Art and the Obvious" (Music at Night, Chatte and Windus, pp. 23-31) has called attention to the avoidance of what we call the "great truths" in the art of this century, because these truths have been so vulgarized by incompetent and worthless writers that the more sensitive recoil from making any reference to them. In "Square Pegs" Clifford Bax's Gioconda impersonates Harry, a modern lover, and the words she uses give an idea of the off-hand style of wooing, being a reaction to the elaborate and aristocratic modes practised in earlier centuries. The proposal of marriage is made in these terms:

And in the spring

The parson gets our guinea. What about it?

The bare and unemotional approach is a sign of how much reluctance is felt by a lover to use the romantic terminology and attitude. The explanation may be the fear of sentimentality to which Aldous Huxley draws attention.\(^{13}\)

13. Strindberg's view on the subject may be noted: "But perhaps there will come a time when we have become so developed, so enlightened, that we shall view with indifference the spectacle presented by life, which now seems cruel, cynical, and heartless; when we shall have closed down those inferior, unreliable thought machines which are called feelings, and which become superfluous and harmful when our organs of discrimination are fully developed." International Modern Plays, August Strindberg's "Lady Julie" (London, J.M. Dent & Sons Ltd.) p. 6.
An important characteristic of modern short plays is the emphasis laid upon the middle and the poorer classes. This want of vital appeal in the upper ranks of society has driven writers to seek their material in humbler spheres which at least never suffer from the lack of variety.

In the course of our discussion we have considered the plays mainly subject-wise but have also given a long section to plays examined from the point of view of the medium used. The poetic drama is the classification adopted for our analysis. As Ronald Peacock observes: "It indicates a text in verse, which meaning derives ultimately from classical times. It means, secondly, the romantically poetic, and this refers rather to certain themes and attitudes irrespective of verse or prose forms, as we observe in fairy tales and in an author like Maeterlinck, whose plays are intensely romantic though in prose. Thirdly, it means lyrical and musical style, primarily in verse, but also in prose." 14

Peacock's classification seems reasonable and seen in its light we have to assign to the third class Synge's plays in prose, Dylan Thomas's 'Under Milk Wood' and also

a few plays by Lady Gregory. Eliot writing in verse will satisfy the conditions laid down for the first group. We may include in it Fry, Auden and Stephen Spender and some others. Yeats may belong to the second class, characterized by lyrical and musical style. Eliot's formula for a verse drama is that it should not be written if prose would do instead. This idea that a dramatist should make a medium a subject for such an enquiry and decision seems to be unlike the practice of any writer we know of. For the play or the poem imposes its structure on the imagination and the question as to what medium should be used does not arise. In his essay on "Poetry and Drama", Eliot has ascribed to the poetic drama a higher range of effects than are open to prose. In his own dramas with the exception of "The Murder in the Cathedral" Eliot does not seem any near the sublime which in his opinion is accessible to poetic medium. It is possible that his extreme caution in limiting his verse to a kind of pedestrian level robs it of a higher reach and thus removes the justification for a resort to verse form. Yeats is perhaps more impressed by verse as a medium linked to his ideal theatre than was his younger contemporary. Accordingly, his medium distances him
from the everyday world. For he has been very clear in his view that what is an art form has no business to be like ordinary life. His symbolism and adoption of some of the technique of the Japanese Noh play are sufficiently unambiguous as regards the nature of the theatre he wanted to serve.

Christopher Fry writes lively verse in "A Phoenix Too Frequent". Its easy transition from one mood to another reveals his mastery over the form. This play as well as some others he has written attest his power. In the foregoing pages an analysis has been made of "A Phoenix Too Frequent". The important characteristics of the form and content have there been considered. There are plays in which the verse form is merely an aid to a kind of farce. To this class will belong Clifford Bax's "Square Pegs". The question remains: does dramatic verse help the play? J. L. Styan rightly assesses the importance of poetry in the theatre when he answers: "Poetry can make the drama uniquely precise not only for the actor to work with, but also for the audience to react to. It can do this especially where the author's subject cannot be represented by the details of real life. Through dramatic poetry he can secure the depth and intensity characteristic of poetic method. The answer is, surely, that the effect of poetry
in the theatre will be of the same order as the effect of words in a poem. It will extend the range and power of the author's meaning. It will compel drama on the stage of such a kind that the image of it in the audience's mind will be something wider and yet finer, something enlarged and yet more pure than it could be if it were written in prose. The poetry is there to express and define patterns of thought and feeling otherwise inexpressible and indefinable. This is the legitimate reason for its use.  

Among the various classifications followed in this dissertation a long section is devoted to Biographical and Literary plays. The point to notice in this connection is that the subject is either borrowed from Tudor history or literature or from a subsequent period of history. An exception is provided by one or two plays whose themes belong to the Homeric times. That English history before the time of Elizabeth has been left more or less untouched would seem to argue that early material would require a larger scale than the short play provides, or that the period is not sufficiently known to the public for any kind of dramatic representation. "The Murder in the Cathedral" is concerned with a 12th century theme of temptation and

martyrdom, and it is in three acts.

In a separate section we have dealt with plays written on the basis of a Shakespearian theme. It is interesting to note that Hamlet has proved a larger scope for such dramatic effort than any other play of the dramatist. As the analysis given above has been made fairly exhaustive, further comments are not offered.

The other classifications include social and domestic themes, satire, propaganda, farce, psychological plays, religious plays, fantasies, etc. Irish plays have been given a separate section. In these we find a richness of imagination and variety of creative effort which are refreshing.

The themes in the dissertation required analysis no less than their treatment as an index to the short plays' achievement. The nature of the theme quite adequately represented the intellectual level of the audience and their capacity to enter into the problems posed. In the concluding remarks it may be admitted that being unable to attend to questions of treatment and technique in the case of each play I have tried to state the interesting points in connection with each of them.
This is done in a manner which seeks to avoid the disturbing sense of sameness coming from the repetition of a common pattern. Moreover, it has already been stated that the short play has a form not unlike the conventional drama as conceived since Aristotle. It is the experimental type which called for careful consideration of technical questions of symbolism, psychology and the problem of communication.