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**Mad Dogs and Englishmen:
A Study of Noel Coward**

by

Clarence Ralph Morse

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*Mad dogs and Englishmen go out in the midday sun
The Japanese don't care to
The Chinese wouldn't dare to
Hindus and Argentines sleep firmly from 12 to 1
But Englishmen detest a siesta*

*At 12 noon the natives swoon and no further work is done
But mad dogs and Englishmen go out in the midday sun.*

From "Mad Dogs and Englishmen"

FOREWORD

At the event of Noel Coward's death, newspapers and magazines published article after article informing the public that Coward's work was vastly underestimated, that Coward was one of the major artists of the twentieth century, and would go on to quote a line from *Bitter Sweet*: "I believe that since my life began, the most I've had is just a talent to amuse." The reporter or reviewer would then inform his audience that Sir Noel was much more than a song and dance man, and that his plays had substance and artistic shape. Henry James wrote in his "Art of Fiction" that "the only obligation to which in advance we may hold a novel . . . is that it be interesting." There is, of course, a difference in genre between the novel and the drama, but "to amuse" and "to interest" are closely allied. Yet James never had his remark explained nor did it need to be. But with Coward an explanation was necessary.

Mr. Ralph Morse solved this paradox as early as 1954 when this study originated as part of the requirement for a Master's degree. He has currently revised his study, but most of his judgments remain the same. He found then that Noel Coward, much as did Ernest Hemingway, reserved his finest invention for himself — the creation of Noel Coward. This study, hopefully, will allow the student to follow the process of Coward's creation.

Emporia, Kansas
May, 1973

G.D.W.

Mad Dogs and Englishmen: A Study of Noel Coward

by

Clarence Ralph Morse *

I

Nice Plum Puddings and A Round of Beer

By a deceiving lightness of touch in the theatre, Noel Coward has, for some time, charmed the British and American public. A casual glance at his work justifies this public adulation. Upon seeing the plays presented, one understands even more fully how Coward attained a pinnacle of theatrical success. Hilarious confusion, rapidly delivered dialogue, and nervous movement fill the stage with action and excitement. It is said that Coward writes only to "bring down the house,"¹ and he usually does; however, the ways in which he achieves this phenomenal success are elusive.

Perhaps, the most paradoxical feature respecting Coward is the disagreement and controversy in which his critics indulge. In point of fact, it is this controversial position in which Coward has inadvertently found himself that makes him an elusive subject. There is hardly a drama critic who has not, at one time or another, attempted to evaluate the quality of Coward's writing. In view of this situation, it is surprising to discover that two critics rarely agree in their estimation of the man and his plays. There is, however, one major quality of Coward's work about which most critics do agree: this is his unusual ability to "gloss-over" a situation or stock idea. Coward is capable of pinning sequins and spangles, as it were, to the frailest of situations and of giving this glitter to the public, masked as genuine comedy. The fact that his audiences sincerely enjoy this froth and trivia points markedly to the craftsmanship Coward evinces in writing and presenting his plays.

One can easily see that the critics themselves are confused by his plays and his apparent success. It is amusing, indeed, that these same critics achieve similar quality of writing in many instances; *i. e.*, they seem to object most strongly to Coward's lack of depth. Yet, they often demonstrate the same superficial qualities of judgment which they object to in him. Therefore, before one can achieve clarity from these various contradictory opinions, it becomes necessary for him to make a selection of ten reputable critics, British and American, and to find a cross-section of their specific statements about Coward, disregarding the particular play, occasion, or date. Those ideas may best

* Mr. Morse is Educational Librarian at San Jose College, San Jose, California.

¹ Robert Greacen, *The Art of Noel Coward*, p. 4.

be seen with an ease of comprehension if one gives them a fragmentary listing before making any interpretation.

A Synthesis of Contemporary American
and British Criticism

Richard Jennings (British)²

frightfully up-to-date dialogue; swift, sharp dialogue; pungently abusive speech; appealing to the nerves; no appeal to the brain or the heart; superficially naughty; hackneyed in substance; old-fashioned ideas.

Patrick Braybrooke (British)³

excessively modern; flesh and blood characters; disinterested characters; good taste and delightful charm; absolute master of the theatre; penetrating wisdom.

Robert Greacen (British)⁴

first-rate dramatist; no formula for writing; relentless critic of social pretentiousness; simplicity of utterance; easy to understand; enjoyment of life; overly-flippant; lack of depth; inner artistic integrity; technical facility in handling character, atmosphere, and situation.

George Jean Nathan (American)⁵

superficial characterizations; superior contempt for morality; impertinent wit; complete absence of any intelligence in the characters; pathological fear of normality and honest sentiment; dramatic deficiencies; dressed up ideas; sense of comic value in smartly chosen word; unintentional artificiality; cardboard characters; ability in ellipsis, with its mild surprise.

Ivor Brown (British)⁶

neglect of literary values; theatrical eye; casual air; effortless plays; abominably lazy.

Ian Hamilton (British)⁷

master at writing cunningly actable parts; clever at getting laughs; fabulously unreal characters.

Homer Woodbridge (American)⁸

rapid-fire dialogue; satirist of trenchant power; versatile and skilled.

² Richard Jennings, "The Theatre," *The Spectator*, p. 972. December 3, 1927.

³ Patrick Braybrooke, *The Amazing Mr. Noel Coward*, p. 168.

⁴ Greacen, *op. cit.*, p. 87.

⁵ George Jean Nathan, *The Theatre Book of the Year, 1948-1949, A Record and an Interpretation*, pp. 110-113.

⁶ Ivor Brown, "The Theatre," *The Saturday Review of Literature*, p. 304. February 26, 1927.

⁷ Ian Hamilton, "Theatre," *The Spectator*, p. 359, September 19, 1952.

⁸ Homer E. Woodbridge, "Noel Coward," *South Atlantic Quarterly*, pp. 239-51, July, 1938.

Woolcott Gibbs (American)⁹

charmingly promiscuous.

John Mason Brown (American)¹⁰

amazement, not excellence.

Rose Snider (American)¹¹

influence in dialogue.

It is clear that these ten critics hold a few ideas in common about Coward. The similarities are rare. To emphasize the scarcity of agreement among both British and American reviewers, one may paraphrase the similarities of these critics as saying, "realistic in dialogue" and "satiric in theme." However, it is readily obvious that these two standards are inadequate for a complete study of Coward. It now seems necessary to summarize the critical statements to produce a more compact and at the same time a broad cross-section of criticism on Coward's plays. George Jean Nathan, for instance, speaking of Coward's characters, says that ". . . Coward does not compose characters."¹² Patrick Braybrooke, British critic, takes exception to Nathan's statement and remarks that Coward's ". . . characters are flesh and blood."¹³ Robert Greacen vaguely tosses off Coward as a "first-rate dramatist."¹⁴ Nathan again takes issue with the British critic and declares that the playwright ". . . exhibits many deficiencies as a dramatist."¹⁵ Richard Jennings, British, declares that Coward is "old fashioned."¹⁶ This is a new theory, and Jennings seems to stand alone. His idea is strongly disputed by Braybrooke, who, says Coward, is "excessively modern."¹⁷ Nathan sees in Coward a certain "impertinence,"¹⁸ while Braybrooke considers Coward always to be in "good taste."¹⁹ From these opinions, one can arrive at the following additional standards of judgment: Coward writes artificial characters; he is old-fashioned; he is impertinent; he has good taste.

Before additional standards of judgment can be determined, it is necessary to understand how Coward sees himself. The critics are obviously in disagreement, as is indicated by the ideas expressed in the

⁹ Woolcott Gibbs, *The New Yorker*, p. 51, November 9, 1926.

¹⁰ John Mason Brown, *Letters from Green Room Ghosts*, p. 139.

¹¹ Rose Snider, *Satire in the Comedies of Congreve, Sheridan, Wilde, and Coward*, p. 108.

¹² George Jean Nathan, *The Theatre of the Moment, A Journalistic Commentary*, p. 280.

¹³ Braybrooke, *op. cit.*, p. 61.

¹⁴ Greacen, *op. cit.*, p. 18.

¹⁵ Nathan, *The Theatre of the Moment*, p. 279.

¹⁶ Richard Jennings, "The Theatre," *The Spectator*, p. 1038, June 19, 1926.

¹⁷ Braybrooke, *loc. cit.*

¹⁸ George Jean Nathan, *The Theatre Book of the Year, 1947-1948, A Record and an Interpretation*, p. 287.

¹⁹ Braybrooke, *op. cit.*, p. 121.

preceding list. It, now, seems critically sound to include a few thoughts from Coward on his own work to develop a thorough basis for judgment of Coward's plays. Unlike many other dramatists, Coward defends his plays in print and, at times, takes issue with the critics. For this reason, it is wise to investigate Coward's remarks in the light of those of his critics. Short, concise phrases, therefore, have been sifted from the works of Coward and will be seen in fragmentary form as were the remarks of his earlier critics for ease of comprehension. The following opinions are unrelated and not chosen for any specific effect, other than to show Coward's opinion of himself. He says he has a gift for comedy dialogue;²⁰ his characters are unkind;²¹ his remarks are witty;²² his situations are funny;²³ he writes effective dialogue;²⁴ he is adept at the snappy epigram;²⁵ he has dignity and brevity;²⁶ he often has unbalanced relationships between characterizations;²⁷ his plays are difficult to perform;²⁸ he has little or no plot;²⁹ he has little or no action;³⁰ his characters are amoral.³¹

Too, when one discusses an author's work, it is often useful to attempt to divorce the author's personality from the work to determine the value of the product. Such an attempt presents one with a serious problem in discussing Coward, for his work seems based more on a quality of personality than literary composition. Anyone who writes, either privately or for publication, can be considered egotistical, but not in any derogatory sense. He is one who has developed a strong ego, because the mere act of writing implies that an author expects his work to be read, in turn, indicating ego. To be sure, there are instances in which an author is able to submerge his personality and to concentrate on form, achieving a definite objectivity in his writing.

The totally self-centered writer, however, tends to reveal more of his feelings and attitudes than an author who is not dominated by his ego. A play will not necessarily be weaker because a superabundance of personality traits appears in the work. A certain monotony, however, may soon evince itself to anyone who reads several plays of an author who projects much of his personality into his work. It will be seen that Coward, a self-centered, supreme egotist, appears to display his many-faceted personality in all of his plays.

²⁰ Noel Coward, *Future Indefinite*, p. 211.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 327.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 211.

²³ *Loc. cit.*

²⁴ *Loc. cit.*

²⁵ Noel Coward, *Present Indicative*, p. 170.

²⁶ Noel Coward, *Play Parade*, p. ix.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. xiii.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. xi.

²⁹ *Loc. cit.*

³⁰ *Loc. cit.*

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. xvi.

Some place in this idea of personality and ego, perhaps, is the answer to the paradox of Coward — the reason for his success and popularity. Critical appraisal certainly has not shown specifically why Coward has received so much public acclaim. Perhaps, an investigation of his personality will clarify this paradox of success. The present author does not pretend to make a clinical study of Coward's personality; instead, he chooses, to give a summary of personal traits found in the life of Coward. In this way, the playwright's personality may shed new light on Coward's success. Personality traits are often vague and rather broad, but an attempt will be made to use only those traits which are most concrete and which seem most indicative of Coward's personality.

An egotistical nature has already been mentioned as an integral part of Coward's personality, and it has been shown that a certain amount of egotism is necessary for writing. Furthermore, it has been suggested that too much ego may handicap a writer. It may present the situation in which there is difficulty for an author to create a variety of life-like and interesting characters. In addition it may further make difficult the construction of plots and situations which do not all have a familiar tone. Coward admits to a certain amount of egotism but is seemingly not aware of the results it may have on his plays.³² Although egocentricity is a broad, inclusive term, it aids, in part, to delineate Coward's personality and points to one answer of Coward's success.

In direct juxtaposition to the foregoing idea is the thought that Coward's personality may have, as one of its specific traits, a feeling of insecurity. Coward's self-assurance could almost be considered a defense against insecure feelings; one may consider, for instance, the fact that he is not satisfied to remain in one place, nor is he happy doing the same thing for long periods. He maintains apartments in New York and London, has a large country estate in Kent, and a house in Jamaica.³³ He apparently finds that travel on a large scale fills a need, for he is constantly moving from place to place. He has toured the world on several occasions, made scores of trips between New York and London, has seen all of Europe countless times, is apparently never bored with travel, nor dislikes being away from his home in England.³⁴

Impertinence, which is a trait that Coward does not deny,³⁵ is an attitude of childhood and is also related to feelings of insecurity. Because of a sharp, sometimes caustic wit, impertinence in Coward is a somewhat likeable trait and does not detract from his personality. He is also able to conceal an arrogant nature, otherwise offensive, in a light-hearted impertinence in his plays and in his personal relation-

³² Coward, *Future Indefinite*, p. 211.

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 13.

³⁴ Coward, *Present Indicative*, p. 249.

³⁵ Coward, *Future Indefinite*, p. 300.

ships.³⁶ Coward may boast – and does – that he is writing a particular kind of play better than any other dramatist of today, but his bold speech may be the words of a man who is neither sure of himself nor his works:

Yet I know what I do best. I am a master of comedy. I know that I am funny on stage, and I shall write new comedies, for I have a great wit, and I am a gifted man as well as being a very hard worker.³⁷

This over-confidence may be looked upon as an indication of a lack of confidence. For instance, Coward will not appear in a production for more than three months.³⁸ A play may be popular enough to run a year; however, at the end of the three-month period, Coward closes the show. He says he does this because he is afraid of becoming stale in the part and because he needs time to think, to write, to relax, and to find new ideas.³⁹ It may be, though, that his self-confident attitude is weakening, and he finds it necessary to seek a change in order to fortify himself against future situations.

Through his years of acting and writing, Coward has developed a definite personality trait which one may readily categorize as *polish* – in a personal sense. Coward's manner in public appearances is suave, friendly, gregarious, and completely relaxed. This same polished manner is readily transferred to social intercourse, so that he is often considered gracious and glib, an asset to any party or occasion. With an audience before him, he is able to remain poised and in command of the situation:

There was a dreadful moment of silence during which my heart pounded and my brain searched vainly for the right words, then, realizing that the game was up, I laughed with agonised nonchalance, asked the audience to forgive me, and started again from the beginning, praying that when I came to the forgotten phrase it would drop automatically into my mind. This was a desperate risk, but it worked. I scampered through the whole number without a further hitch and the audience was delighted with it.⁴⁰

This polish, whether inherent or conscious, is a personality trait which undoubtedly adds much to Coward's success as a playwright; for he is able, thereby, to charm a large circle of friends outside of the theatrical

³⁶ *Loc. cit.*

³⁷ Beverly Baxter, "A Cavalcade of Noel Coward," *The New York Times Magazine*, December 11, 1949, p. 35.

³⁸ Richard Maney, "The Last Rites of Closing Nights," *The New York Times Magazine*, May 23, 1954, p. 17.

³⁹ *Loc. cit.*

⁴⁰ Coward, *Future Indefinite*, p. 301.

world. His poised, polished manner leads one to think of him as debonaire, an *homme du monde*. His savoir-faire enables him, apparently, to handle varied situations, regardless of the foreign quality of each to his nature.

The polish in Coward's manners, however, does not conceal other characteristics in his personality, some of which decidedly may be less complimentary. There is, at times, a certain impulsiveness which reveals an unpredictable nature. Coward often says, in his autobiographies, that he has reached a point in a given situation wherein he can no longer stand the status quo.⁴¹ He, then, on impulse, changes his surroundings, finds a new idea for a play, or starts to work on a new musical. His impulsive nature is never more apparent than when he is writing, for his quick mind allows him to finish a play often within a week or sometimes less.⁴² Perhaps, one should not imply that Coward composes a play wholly on impulse, for he often tells one he has the idea in his mind for several months before he begins the actual writing;⁴³ but it does appear logical to assume that much of the phrasing, repartee, characterization, and situations are the results of impulsive writing. The spontaneity of Coward's method of composition does not necessarily detract from the value of his works, but it does indicate that impulsiveness is a personality trait of considerable importance.

Coward is also a combination of enthusiasm and energy; he loves the theater and is able to work long, hard hours on shadowy stages and in stuffy rehearsal rooms;⁴⁴ he is able to cope with unruly actors and to instill enthusiasm in even the most languid actress;⁴⁵ his energy makes it possible for him to be a giant in the theatrical world.⁴⁶ Both his energy and enthusiasm are a contagion which electrify the air and give all of his plays, in production, an added lift. There may sometimes appear to be a kind of laziness in Coward's writing, yet the overall picture of the man is that of great industry and an abundance of energy.

Coward's energy manifests itself in another way, somewhat less importantly than the preceding, which may reveal another facet of his personality. This trait is best understood by the word *nervousness*, for there is in Coward's make-up an incredible amount of nervous activity.⁴⁷ Perhaps his engagements and theatrical life keep him so busy that relaxation is difficult, and he, therefore, appears restless. It is also possible that his abundance of energy contributes to excitable mannerisms. A quickness of speech and action, which has been noted earlier, adds

⁴¹ Coward, *Present Indicative*, p. 249.

⁴² Coward, *Future Indefinite*, p. 211.

⁴³ Coward, *Play Parade*, p. xv.

⁴⁴ Rosamond Gilder, and others, *Theatre Arts Anthology, A Record and a Prophecy*, p. 512.

⁴⁵ Coward, *Present Indicative*, p. 214.

⁴⁶ Greacen, *op. cit.*, p. vii.

⁴⁷ Coward, *Present Indicative*, p. 214.

substance to the theory that Coward's personality has, as one of its major traits, an intensity.

Perhaps the most unusual trait of all, and to some extent the reason for his alleged excitability, insecurity, and arrogance, is an outward display of effeminacy.⁴⁸ Whether this is intentional or not cannot be determined here, but it does appear to exist and to exist rather openly. In reading Coward's autobiographies, one feels in certain instances that they are written from the feminine point of view:

We discussed, the three of us, over delicatessen potato salad and dill pickles, our most secret dreams of success. . . . when all three of us had become stars of sufficient magnitude to be able to count upon an individual following irrespective of each other, then, poised serenely upon that enviable plane of achievement, we would meet and act triumphantly together.⁴⁹

We stood and sat about talking brightly. Natasha's manner was tremendously gay and I knew she was near to tears.⁵⁰

The weather was nippy and the house, as usual, freezing, for Gladys is famous for her imperviousness to temperature. However, I grabbed two hot-water bottles and slept blissfully, sniffing up the fresh Kentish air.⁵¹

This tone not only occurs in *Present Indicative* and *Future Indefinite*, but also in certain of his plays. The speeches of the male characters are often more feminine than masculine, suggesting that Coward has an affinity for the feminine point of view. It is important to note here, too, that during his childhood and youth Coward's mother was the dominating figure in the household.⁵² It was she who discovered his theatrical possibilities and trained, developed, and encouraged them. He speaks of his mother often in terms of endearment.⁵³ This apparent effeminacy is mentioned here solely because it may be a clue to the enigma of Coward and because it seems to be an important trait in his personality. One should consider, for example, the role of Elyot in *Private Lives*: Coward, in the original role, played the part with a completely light-hearted ease that few other actors can approach. When Donald Cook played the same rôle in the revival of the play in 1948, his masculinity led one critic to say, "Cook does ably by the part of the husband originally played by Coward, but casting any such masculine

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 136-37.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 137.

⁵⁰ Coward, *Future Indefinite*, p. 151.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p. 210.

⁵² Coward, *Present Indicative*, pp. 150-151.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, p. 153.

actor in a role essentially effeminate in speech, thought and act makes what otherwise might be aberrantly amusing sound rather dirty and unpleasant."⁵⁴ Characters and plays which are written for an express purpose or for one type of personality do not readily lend themselves to another's acting or directing talents.

Perhaps, the supremacy of feminine characteristics and point of view is related to sensuality, which is another of Coward's personality traits which may be seen in his plays. This sensual aspect seems to color not only his writing but to invade his acting and perhaps his relationships with other people. Sensuality suggests a lascivious or carnal nature, but it is here being used in an unintellectual or unspiritual connotation of the term. Coward's sensuality, therefore, may be included as a personality trait that may unveil ideas leading one to a more accurate evaluation of the man's works.

It has been suggested in the foregoing material that Coward's plays do not merit the wide acclaim which they have received. True, confusion exists among Coward's critics in that some have difficulty in deciding just what there is in the plays that makes them so successful. This confusion or indecision results in vague, critical writing, leading to general appraisals of Coward; *i. e.*, some find his plays to be the work of a master dramatist,⁵⁵ while others see only the froth,⁵⁶ the lacy decoration,⁵⁷ the garnish,⁵⁸ as it were. None supports his conclusions with concrete evidence, however. The public, on the other hand, has constantly flocked to see a Coward production. Therefore, the possibility of success without literary merit becomes a paradox for which an explanation may be discovered and in which may lie the unraveling of the riddle of Coward.

An evaluation of the critics, of Coward's own estimation of himself, of Coward's personality seen objectively, has been suggested and made in an attempt to dissolve the paradox. The critics, in general, have said that Coward is a master of the gay, light-hearted situation, an author who dresses up trivia and who succeeds in passing it off as the "genuine article." In general, this is the essence of their judgments. On the other hand, Coward believes himself a satirist with a great gift for comedy dialogue, a sympathetic mouthpiece for small groups of decadent people, an author of dignity and brevity, a master of the snappy epigram, and a playwright whose works require a certain kind of performance for success — a puppeteer of some merit. Coward's personality, as gleaned from his two important autobiographies, may be

⁵⁴ Nathan, *Theatre Book of the Year, 1948-1949, A Record and an Interpretation*, p. 113.

⁵⁵ Braybrooke, *op. cit.*, p. 136.

⁵⁶ *The [London] Times, Weekly Edition*, November 3, 1927.

⁵⁷ Allan S. Downer, *The British Drama, A Handbook and Brief Chronicle*, p. 319.

⁵⁸ George Jean Nathan, *The Theatre Book of the Year, 1946-1947, A Record and an Interpretation*, p. 142.

resolved as gregarious, extraverted, garrulous, polished, effeminate, frivolous, *ad infinitum*.

It becomes evident, therefore, that one cannot possibly divorce the personality of Noel Coward from the plays of Noel Coward, no matter what the critics think or say. To judge an author's works by such an unstable standard as personality is, at best, a tenuous proposition. In the succeeding sections of this study, therefore, the author will attempt to investigate nine Coward plays, pointing up personality traits whenever they may be obvious and lending to his discoveries the support of the critics who have written on Coward if they may be useful in the attempt to place Coward in his proper dramatic position.

II

Attacking the Mayfair World

Through four decades Coward has constantly appeared before the public, first as an actor and second as a playwright-actor. This dual achievement of Coward has made it difficult for one to make a critical appraisal of his importance without first dealing with the vitality of Coward's personality. The time has now arrived when it may be possible to look objectively at the comedies of Coward and to seek out the reason for so great a following. The most objective way to look at the author's work seems to be the mechanical one of choosing, ultimately, five standards or criteria for judgment and to determine from these the basis of Coward's success. The five criteria can have broad connotations when necessary: realistic dialogue, for instance, may be used for the snappy epigram, the vicious invective, or the clever line. In addition to realistic dialogue, four other useful criteria may be artificial characterization, weak plot, amoral and satirical quality, and personality projection. Each of these, applied to certain of Coward's works, may enlighten one regarding Coward — the man and the playwright. It may also be helpful to treat the plays chronologically to determine the trends in his work.

I'll Leave It to You was the first Coward play to be produced. It opened at the Gaiety Theatre in Manchester and moved to London on July 21, 1920, where it played for five weeks at the New Theatre.⁵⁹ *I'll Leave It to You* is the work of an inexperienced writer in dialogue and characterization. Patrick Braybrooke says of the characters, "though [they are] not perhaps typical of the late Coward [they] glance in that direction."⁶⁰ This is a platitude, since an author's first work generally points to his later achievements. It can be assumed that the characters "glance in that direction," because they have so little motivation which is standard in the later Coward. The characters are a family of brothers and sisters drawn from the upper middle-class, who find, to their horror, that for the first time they must support themselves. Much of the author's own personality may be seen in this play. The characters' frightened reactions to the fate which has made them self-reliant resemble the insecure feelings which Coward may have developed as a boy when family finances were inadequate.

Coward sums up his first play by saying *I'll Leave It to You* is ". . . amusing, unpretentious, and not bad construction."⁶¹ This same idea on plot and construction is also suggested by Braybrooke

⁵⁹ Noel Coward, *Present Indicative*, p. 117.

⁶⁰ Patrick Braybrooke, *The Amazing Mr. Noel Coward*, p. 23.

⁶¹ *Loc. cit.*

when he states that there were no "dull interludes" or "inactive periods" in Coward's first play.⁶² In passing, one should note that there is no critical mention of the amoral quality which is generally considered to be so much a part of Coward's works.

Five years elapsed before Coward wrote another comedy which excelled *I'll Leave It to You* in public reception. He composed five other plays and musicals during that period, but it was not until *Hay Fever* appeared in 1925 that Coward "continued the attack on the Mayfair world."⁶³ Here again, Coward represents the smart set in a family that knows neither responsibility nor genuine pleasure. His personality is never more apparent than in this family whose only pleasure is in their work. Coward, as has been observed, works incessantly and derives most of his pleasure from his profession. Even when he is travelling, his mind is mulling over ideas for plays; and on many occasions, he wrote plays in foreign countries.⁶⁴ To Coward, as to the Bliss family in *Hay Fever*, work and pleasure are one and the same thing; the work, in some instances, is of the creative sort — writing, painting, acting. Coward's only occupation has been the theatre, apparently, for nowhere does he indicate his ever having worked at anything else; and he does people his plays with characters from the artistic world. The character of Simon, the selfish, egocentric boy in *Hay Fever*, is a role in which Coward starred and one which he created for his own acting abilities.

Hay Fever, a play of situation rather than one of plot, is considered by one critic to be Coward's most representative play. This critic says that Coward, ". . . long ago gave up any intention he may have had for improving society by calling attention to its frailties."⁶⁵ In *Hay Fever*, Coward's lightness of touch is especially apparent. The slight use of plot, the unbelievable characters, the family quarrels, and the projection of the author's personality do seem to represent Coward as he was then — and still is — a master of the light touch.

Dialogue, in *Hay Fever*, does appear to be representative of all his works; for there is the clipped speech, the nervous repartee, and rapid-fire give and take, the stichomythia, so to speak, of Senecan drama. The characters' conversation lacks some intelligence; however, one is not aware of the non-intellectuality but, rather, of the swift movement of the dialogue which keeps him interested and excited. In *Hay Fever*, Coward does not exact much from the public in the way of intelligent listening. For example, an illustration of the dialogue may

⁶² *Loc. cit.*

⁶³ Robert Greacen, *The Art of Noel Coward*, p. 22.

⁶⁴ *Private Lives* was written in Shanghai; *Post Mortem*, on shipboard between Ceylon and France; and *Design for Living*, on shipboard between Panama and Los Angeles. Cf. Coward, *Play Parade*, pp. xii, xiv, xvi.

⁶⁵ Rose Snider, *Satire in the Comedies of Congreve, Sheridan, Wilde, and Coward*, p. 108.

indicate, more clearly, Coward's use of stichomythia. The following excerpted conversation, I, i, is between two strictly Bohemian people, the teenage son and daughter of a faded actress who refuses to realize that she is no longer the darling of the stage:

- Sorel: You didn't shave this morning.
 Simon: I know I didn't, but I'm going to in a minute.
 Sorel: I sometimes wish we were more normal and bouncing,
 Simon
 Simon: Why?
 Sorel: I should like to be a fresh open-air girl with a passion
 for games.
 Simon: Thank God, you're not.
 Sorel: It would be so soothing.
 Simon: Not in this house.
 Sorel: Where's mother?
 Simon: In the garden practising.
 Sorel: Practising?
 Simon: She's learning the name of the flowers by heart.
 Sorel: What's she up to?
 Simon: I don't know — Damn! that's crooked.
 Sorel: I always distrust her when she becomes the squire's lady.
 Simon: So do I.
 Sorel: She's been hard at it all day — she tapped the barometer
 this morning.
 Simon: She's probably got a plan about impressing somebody.
 Sorel: (taking a cigarete) I wonder who.
 Simon: Some dreary, infatuated young man will appear soon, I
 expect.
 Sorel: Not today? You don't think she's asked anybody down
 today, do you?
 Simon: I don't know, has father noticed anything?
 Sorel: No, he's too immersed in work.
 Simon: Perhaps Clara will know.
 Sorel: Yell for her.
 Simon: (calling) Clara! Clara!
 Sorel: Oh, Simon, I *do* hope she hasn't asked anyone down today.
 Simon: Why, have you?
 Sorel: Yes.
 Simon: (crossly) Why on earth didn't you tell me?
 Sorel: I didn't think you'd care one way or the other.

One can readily see how this dialogue may have created action and interest on the stage but was not much as literary fare. There is, unquestionably, dramatic value in this neatly arranged dialogue, because it lends itself to farce or light comedy and is, therefore, appropriately placed in *Hay Fever*. It is modern speech. Rarely does one's conversational ex-

periences today demand lengthy, involved sentences. Today's speech utilizes a minimum of complex syntax; and modern, ordinary conversations are composed of short, rapid speeches. Coward writes with an economy of words, allowing none to be riders in a sentence. Modern speech is plain but effective, for it is not composed of hortatory sentences; indeed, much current speech makes little use of the complete sentence to convey ideas, for vocal communication is enhanced by facial expressions and body movements. There is, consequently, little need for the long, involved sentence in today's conversation. The minimum essential in modern speech is ease of communication, most readily accomplished by the use of short, concise words and phrases. Coward reproduced, in *I'll Leave It to You*, this modern form of conversation and early showed his abilities for conversation.

The Marquise, Coward's second attempt at a romantic comedy, is a radical departure for him from the Mayfair set. Romanticism, as presented by Coward, has the light-hearted, farcical situation which becomes confused and is not resolved until the final scene. *The Marquise*, written in the United States, was first produced at the Criterion Theatre in London in 1927, with Miss Marie Tempest in the title role.⁶⁶ Coward returned to London from a rest in Honolulu while *The Marquise* was running at the Criterion. He says only that it was beautifully played by Miss Tempest and others and that "William Nicholson had designed an accurate and charming setting."⁶⁷ Following the London opening, *The Marquise* was produced in the same year at Vienna at the Volkstheater. Coward attended the opening night and remarked that the audience appreciated ". . . *The Marquise* with a zeal that [he] could not but feel was out of proportion to the merits of either the play or the performance."⁶⁸

Coward's wit, in *The Marquise*, according to an American reviewer, ". . . is a slender thing, scarcely equal to an entire evening."⁶⁹ An English reviewer agrees that, here, the Coward wit had not yet reached a perfection typical of the later works by saying that there were, ". . . a few awkward moments when facetiousness is jostling wit."⁷⁰ For instance, the mischievous quality in the character of the Marquise lends itself to facetiousness but can claim little actual wit. Coward's jocular type of wit, however, seems to be at home in the fanciful eighteenth century country, Trans-Ruratania, which he invented for this play. The characters in *The Marquise* are eighteenth century cousins to those of the Mayfair set, for their motivations and loves are as confused as those

⁶⁶ Coward, *Present Indicative*, p. 265.

⁶⁷ *Loc. cit.*

⁶⁸ *Loc. cit.*

⁶⁹ Olive M. Saylor, "The Play of the Week," *Saturday Review of Literature*, p. 452, December 17, 1927.

⁷⁰ Ivor Brown, "The Theatre," *The Saturday Review of Literature*, p. 143, February 26, 1927.

of their modern counterparts. To please their fathers, two youthful persons, who do not know that they are half-brother and half-sister, agree to marry one another although each is in love with someone else. The Marquise, who is the former mistress of the two fathers and mother of both the boy and girl, appears mysteriously and remakes everybody's life to suit the romantic fashion of the play. If the characters are frail, they are no more so than the plot, for the plot is scarcely more than a situation; but in the nimble hands of Coward, the tenuous plot is concealed in the hilarity of the situation.

From the romantic period setting of Trans-Ruratania, Coward turns again to the modern, sophisticated Mayfair set. He lashes out with a satiric viciousness at his contemporaries, and especially at their social institutions, in *Private Lives* (1931), but gives the work a glossy cover which suggests that he is not satirizing with serious intent. Coward does not pretend to be a social reformer.⁷¹ *Private Lives* was written in Shanghai for Gertrude Lawrence, and both Coward and Miss Lawrence, by their expert performances, made the play a success when it first appeared in London at the Phoenix Theatre. Coward drew a certain amount of criticism by closing the show after three months when it could have run much longer.⁷²

Private Lives is thin and elusive, and no one realizes this more than Coward when he says that, ". . . the play's fabric was light and required light handling."⁷³ "Situation" as such seems to be that which Coward substitutes for plot. *Private Lives* is an unconvincing coincidence wherein a formerly married couple who are divorced happen to be staying at the same hotel with their new spouses; both couples are on their honeymoon. The light touch of Coward deprives the play of some solidarity which it might otherwise have. There is disagreement, here, however. One critic says, "*Private Lives* is Coward's wisest play . . . his wisdom is penetrating."⁷⁴ Others see it as a "skimpy, sketchy comedy,"⁷⁵ or "slight and brittle,"⁷⁶ or "forced and empty."⁷⁷ These critics do not admit that the play is plotless, which fact makes their somewhat vague but picturesque criticisms incomplete.

Private Lives is dialogue for an experienced actor and actress, but Coward thoughtfully adds two puppet-like characters to assist the play along and to add contrast.⁷⁸ He apologizes for the poor characterizations of the two second leads in the play: "Larry [Sir Laurence Olivier] managed with determination . . . to invest the wooden Victor with

⁷¹ Snider, *loc. cit.*

⁷² Coward, *Present Indicative*, p. 338.

⁷³ *Loc. cit.*

⁷⁴ Braybrooke, *op. cit.*, p. 121.

⁷⁵ *New York Theater Critics Reviews*, Vol. 9, No. 29, 1948, p. 209.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 214.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 212.

⁷⁸ Greacen, *op. cit.*, p. 29.

enough reality to make him plausible."⁷⁹ He also admits to the wooden qualities of Sibyl played by Adrienne Allen: "Adrienne played Sibyl with a subtle tiresomeness and a perfect sense of character, more character actually than the part really had."⁸⁰ Sibyl and Victor are stock characters who are not real people, because they create little interest in regard to their own predicaments. The reader does not care what happens to them and is little moved by Sibyl's tearfulness or Victor's fussing and fuming. Their formality in dealing with a serious situation brings out their woodenness. Elyot and Amanda have disappeared, and Victor and Sibyl, in I, i, meet while searching for their departed spouses:

- Victor: Good evening.
 Sibyl: (rather flustered) Good evening — I was — er — looking for my husband.
 Victor: Really, that's funny. I was looking for my wife.
 Sibyl: Quite a coincidence. (She laughs nervously.)
 Victor: (after a pause) It's very nice here, isn't it?
 Sibyl: Lovely.
 Victor: Have you been here long?
 Sibyl: No, we only arrived today.
 Victor: Another coincidence. So did we.
 Sibyl: How awfully funny.
 Victor: Would you care for a cocktail?
 Sibyl: Oh no thank you — really —
 Victor: There are two here on the table.
 (Sibyl glances at the two empty glasses on the balustrade, and tosses her head defiantly.)
 Sibyl: Thanks very much, I'd love one.
 Victor: Good, here you are.
 (Sibyl comes over to Victor's side of the terrace. He hands her one and takes one himself.)
 Sibyl: Thank you.

There is apparently no intention on the part of Coward to invent life-like characters for the second leads in *Private Lives*. He is able, hereby, to make Amanda and Elyot seem more vivacious and unconventional than might otherwise have been possible.

Although the situation is improbable and the characters, in part, unreal, the dialogue never lags; and the crisp epigram becomes the whole embodiment of Coward's wit. For example, Elyot explains to Amanda that she must "Be flippant. Laugh at everything, all their several shibboleths. Flippancy brings out the acid in their damned sweetness and light."⁸¹ Again, in *Private Lives*, Coward makes use

⁷⁹ Coward, *Present Indicative*, p. 338.

⁸⁰ *Loc. cit.*

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, p. 232.

of the quickly spoken phrase; give-and-take in a heated argument is seldom more expertly presented. The scene in I, ii, in which Amanda discovers that Elyot is at the same hotel and is pleading for Victor to take her away illustrates Coward's employment of stichomythia:

Victor: There's something behind all this.
 Amanda: Don't be silly. What could there be behind it?
 Victor: Well, for one thing, I know you're lying.
 Amanda: Victor!
 Victor: Be honest. Aren't you?
 Amanda: I can't think how you can be so mean and suspicious.
 Victor: (patiently) You're lying, Amanda. Aren't you?
 Amanda: Yes, Victor.
 Victor: You never had a sister dead or alive.
 Amanda: I believe there was a stillborn one in 1902.
 Victor: What is your reason for all this?
 Amanda: I told you I was unreliable.
 Victor: Why do you want to leave so badly?
 Amanda: You'll be angry if I tell you the truth.
 Victor: What is it?
 Amanda: I warn you.
 Victor: Tell me. Please tell me.
 Amanda: Elyot's here.
 Victor: What?
 Amanda: I saw him.
 Victor: When?
 Amanda: Just now, when you were in the bath.
 Victor: Where was he?
 Amanda: (hesitatingly) Down there in a white suit.
 Victor: (skeptically) White suit?
 Amanda: Why not? It's summer, isn't it?
 Victor: You're lying again.
 Amanda: I'm not.
 Victor: Well, what of it?

In this excerpt one can see, again, Coward's early use of the vicious invective and sarcasm. Brooks Atkinson, in his review of the Bankhead revival of the play in 1948, says, Mr. Coward has a genius for venomous phrases."⁸² The play, at the time of its revival, was seventeen years old; yet, the dialogue had not lost all of its power.⁸³

The cynicism, as shown through the dialogue, reveals Coward's amoral theme in *Private Lives*. The divorced couple remarry, but they do not love their new partners. They violate the wedding vows on their honeymoon and return to Paris to live in a little love-nest after

⁸² *New York Theatre Critics Reviews, op. cit.*, p. 211.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, p. 212.

five years of being divorced. Elyot attempts to justify their immoral actions by saying that, in the eyes of the Catholic Church, they were never divorced and that their actions are, therefore, above reproach. Neither Elyot nor Amanda subscribes to the Catholic faith; still they find it comforting, in their cynical minds, to think that at least one social institution might condone their fickle natures. Both of them are convinced that their actions are not sociably acceptable, and the talk of the church in II, i, is an indication of cynicism and ultra-sophistication.

Amanda: Do you realize we're living in sin?

Elyot: Not according to the Catholics. Catholics don't recognize divorce. We're married as much as we ever were.

Amanda: Yes, dear, but we're not Catholics.

Elyot: Never mind, it's nice to think they sort of back us up. We were married in the eyes of heaven, and we still are.

Elyot and Amanda are laughing at the institution of the church, as Coward is laughing at the institution of marriage.

It can be argued that Coward's personality is everywhere apparent in *Private Lives*. It is possibly not too presumptuous to indicate that the shallow characters who live, seemingly for their own pleasure, do reflect the personality of the author. One should consider, for instance, that Coward has never associated himself with any form of religion;⁸⁴ perhaps, he sees the value of embracing a faith but does not feel that it applies to him.⁸⁵ Coward has begun to satirize the institutions of home, marriage, and family; yet, he never has married or established a home of his own. It appears logical, therefore, to assume that Coward satirizes these institutions, because they do not fit into his scheme of things. He has been called a perennial bachelor. Coward, also, is selfish with his pleasures. He derives pleasure from acting, but only for three months at a stretch; he derives pleasure from writing, but for no longer than a week or two; he derives pleasure from a home and intimate friends, but always without the responsibilities that a home and marriage involve. The role of Elyot is an excellent example of an egocentric person who has a disregard for the effect his actions may have on the lives of others. Coward shows a facility in depicting characters whose egocentricity is exceeded only by their sexual desire.

Coward kept the idea for *Design for Living* (1933) in his mind for eleven years until he was certain that Alfred Lunt and Lynn Fontanne and the author could achieve an equal degree of success as

⁸⁴ Greacen, *op. cit.*, p. 70.

⁸⁵ In *Cavalcade*, Coward depicts a love scene on board the *S. S. Titanic*, in which two young people discuss their chances for future happiness through their current love for each other. Coward closes the scene with a darkened stage and the orchestra playing, "Nearer My God to Thee."

the three leading characters.⁸⁶ Compelled by their social irresponsibility, the three characters, Otto, Leo, and Gilda, in *Design for Living*, constitute a fantastic triangular affair. The triangle is one of reciprocity, for Gilda is in love with both Leo and Otto; both Leo and Otto love Gilda; and Leo and Otto also are in love with each other. In I, i, Leo explains the situation to Gilda in this fashion: "The actual facts are so simple. I love you. You love me. You love Otto. I love Otto. Otto loves you. Otto loves me." The characters are too incredibly fabulous to represent real persons who might be encountered in one's daily routine. Here, again, is evidence that Coward's characters are from an extremely small segment of society, if, indeed, such characters could possibly exist contentedly in our modern world. The characters which Coward creates in *Design for Living* give the play interest because of their unreal and unbelievable actions.

At the same time, the actions of Gilda, Leo, and Otto are sharply drawn satires on one's social and moral responsibilities. As in *Private Lives*, marriage, especially, is made the brunt of caustic humor. In *Design for Living*, the three characters live happily together for some time, if none too calmly. Gilda eventually marries an outsider, but two years later she returns to Leo and Otto. Coward describes the amoral qualities of this relationship by referring to the participants as ". . . glib, over-articulate and amoral creatures . . ." ⁸⁷ In *Design for Living*, Coward has continued his theme of social satire by bringing together three people who do not accept the conventions of a moral society. One critic has said that comedies like *Private Lives* and *Design for Living* ". . . in their disregard of generally accepted moral standards, in their insistence that so much that the people hold dear lack value . . . come gaily and consistently . . ." ⁸⁸ This is a pertinent observation, indeed.

Again, in *Design for Living*, it is possible to distinguish Coward's personality in his play. Coward is an artist, a playwright, and actor. Leo, in *Design for Living*, is also a playwright. Otto is a painter. Gilda becomes an interior decorator. Coward, as in his other plays, draws his characters from a world of artists. It is reasonable to assume Coward thoroughly understands the artistic personality, because it has so many traits similar to his own. The characters in *Design for Living* are constantly travelling from place to place, even touring the world, just as Coward has done. For example, in III, i, Leo, Otto, and Gilda are together again for the first time in two years. Grace, a new acquaintance, is addressing Leo:

Grace: (sinking into a chair): Where did you come from on your freight boat, Mr. Mercure?

⁸⁶ Coward, *Play Parade*, p. xv.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, p. xvi.

⁸⁸ Coward, *Present Indicative*, p. 376.

- Leo: Manila.
 Otto: It was hot in Manila.
 Leo: It was also very hot in Singapore.
 Gilda: (drily): It always is, I believe.
 Otto: It was cooler in Hong Kong; and in Vladivostock, it was downright cold!
 Leo: We had to wear mittens.

Here, is the cosmopolitan traveller, at ease momentarily in an English drawing room. Coward, like his characters, is able to speak endlessly of exotic places. In *Present Indicative*, he mentions some of the lands he has seen by saying: "Kuala Lampar, Penang, Colombo, Kandy, Aden and Suez — names on a map no longer, but places I had been to. . . ." ⁸⁹ The flippant personality of Coward is evident in both volumes of his autobiography and also in his characters. For example, Leo, in *Design for Living*, says to Ernest, Gilda's husband: "Why, good heavens, King Solomon had a hundred wives and was thought very highly of. I can't see why Gilda shouldn't be allowed a couple of gentlemen friends." ⁹⁰ An example from *Present Indicative* may serve to illustrate Coward's flippant personality in his autobiography, as well. In the United States, Coward had turned *I'll Leave It to You* into a short story and had sold it for five hundred dollars to the *Metropolitan Magazine*. From the proceeds, he mailed forty pounds home to his mother, who still ran a rooming house. He speaks of the incident by saying, "I was able to send forty pounds home to Mother to compensate for the loss of Mrs. Herriot, who had inconsiderately abandoned our drawing room suite early in the year in favor of the grave." ⁹¹ The light-hearted temper of the foregoing remark typifies Coward's flippancy in his autobiography.

Coward is not only consistent in presenting a pert attitude in his plays but is also consistent in writing a dialogue which is complimentarily insolent and which, at the same time, falls naturally on the ear. While Coward achieves this ease and natural quality in dialogue, his work is not common level stuff. Indeed, it is full of imagination. The following scene from *Design for Living*, II, i, in which Gilda and Otto discuss marriage, carries a certain risqué connotation but illustrates Coward's imagination and naturalness of dialogue:

- Gilda: Where do we go from here? That's what I want to know.
 Leo: How would you feel about getting married?
 Gilda: (laughing) It's not that dear.
 Leo: I know it isn't, but —
 Gilda: But what?

⁸⁹ *Loc. cit.*

⁹⁰ Coward, *Play Parade*, p. 110.

⁹¹ Coward, *Present Indicative*, p. 139.

- Leo: It might be rather fun. We'd get a lot more presents now than if we'd done it before.
- Gilda: The honeymoon would be thrilling, wouldn't it? Just you and me alone finding out about each other.
- Leo: I'd be very gentle with you, very tender.
- Gilda: You'd get a knock in the jaw if you were!
- Leo: (shocked) Oh, how vulgar. How inexpressibly vulgar!
- Gilda: . . . I shouldn't feel cozy married. It would upset my moral principles.
- Leo: Doesn't the Eye of Heaven mean anything to you?
- Gilda: Only when it winks.
- Leo: God knows, it ought to wink enough at our marriage.

Here, Coward's humor is derived from a risqué situation revolving around a discussion of free love.

Although playwrights may not always be good critics of their own plays, Coward discussed the merits of *Blithe Spirit* (1941) before it even went into rehearsal. It is always valuable to learn precisely what an author thinks of his own work before it is seen by the critics and the public. Coward wanted his reader to know that his views were not boastful; rather, he was just proud of his achievement:

For six days I worked from eight to one each morning and from two to seven each afternoon. On Friday evening, May ninth, the play was finished and, disdaining archness and false modesty, I will admit that I knew it was witty, I knew it was well constructed, and I also knew that it would be a success. My gift for comedy dialogue, which I feared might have atrophied from disuse, had obviously profited from its period of inactivity.⁹²

It had been about eight years, from *Design for Living* to *Blithe Spirit*, since Coward had written this kind of a play. But his brief estimation of *Blithe Spirit* can be considered an understatement, as far as the public is concerned, for the play ran for almost five years (July 2, 1941, to March 9, 1946).⁹³

Undoubtedly, the trademark of a successful Coward play is usually the dialogue which carries the play along. *Blithe Spirit* certainly has its share of this kind of dialogue. It revolves around the ghostly return of a man's first wife during his second marriage. It is a difficult theme to handle, but the play is adroitly held together by witty lines, and as one British critic has said, ". . . one is reminded again of the resemblance between Coward and good tennis; the strokes are so fast that one cannot quite see how they are achieved."⁹⁴ This analogy may be

⁹² Noel Coward, *Future Indefinite*, p. 211.

⁹³ *Loc. cit.*

⁹⁴ Greacen, *op. cit.*, p. 39.

qualified somewhat by saying that good tennis is best exemplified by expert players, just as Coward's dialogue can only be handled by expert actors. On the surface, however, the lines may appear easy to deliver and natural to phrase as in the following excerpt from II, i:

- [Elvira, Charles' first wife, returns as a ghost and enters by windows carrying a bunch of grey roses. Ruth is Charles' second wife.]
- Elvira: You've absolutely ruined that border by the sun-dail – it looks like a mixed salad.
- Charles: Oh, my God!
- Ruth: What's the matter now?
- Charles: She's here again.
- Ruth: What do you mean? Who's here again?
- Charles: Elvira.
- Ruth: Pull yourself together and don't be absurd.
- Elvira: It's all those nasturtiums – they're so vulgar.
- Charles: I like nasturtiums.
- Ruth: You like what?
- Elvira: (putting her grey roses into a vase) They're all right in moderation but in a mass like that they look beastly.
- Charles: (crosses over to right of Ruth, center) Help me, Ruth, you've got to help me –
- Ruth: (rises and retreats a pace to the left of her) What do you mean about nasturtiums?
- Charles: (takes Ruth's hand and comes around to left of her) Never mind about that now – I tell you she's here again.

Here, too, one sees Coward's employment of the short statement.

The dialogue, in a Coward play, has to be good; otherwise, most of his work would not hold together, and sometimes even the dialogue is hard put to keep things going. Burns Mantle, on *Blithe Spirit*, says, "An entire evening of ghostly wit naturally wears a little thin."⁸⁵ John Mason Brown looks with suspicion on *Blithe Spirit*, for he detects Coward's showmanship and is inclined to think it deludes the audience into praising a play that is really a weak dramatic vehicle. He says, ". . . it is . . . amazing as a demonstration of how a genuine magician can pull a whole rabbit from one small top hat."⁸⁶ As Coward himself noted, his gift for comedy dialogue was still strong but so was his gift for glossing over a situation, making it appear stronger than it really was.

Charles Condomine, the frustrated husband of the ghost and the living wife in *Blithe Spirit*, is another of Coward's characters taken from the artist class. Condomine is a writer, a character which seems

⁸⁵ *New York Theater Critics Reviews*, Vol. 2, No. 24, 1947, p. 237.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 240.

to be a stock role in all of Coward's plays. Perhaps the writers, artists, and actors who so frequently appear in Coward's works do not wholly reflect his personality, but their presence indicates that they have a temperament similar to Coward's. The egotistical nature of Coward again in apparent through the consistent use of writers as characters in his plays. Since Coward is himself a writer, it appears, almost, that he might be advertising his profession.

In the role of Madame Arcati, Coward shows some heretofore unrevealed skill in character delineation. Madame Arcati, to be sure, remains the same person throughout, a fumbling, wholly inadequately prepared, professional mistress of the seance; but Coward has managed to invest her character with charm, reality, and sympathy. Much of the humor of the entire play derives itself from Madame Arcati's rather frantic and quite vain attempts to allay the spirit of Elvira. The dramaturgy which Coward reveals in his manipulation of this character is rather alien to most of his former efforts. He seems to have felt his character more profoundly than usual. One, perhaps, does not have as much sympathy with Elvira, who had to wait around so long in draughty corridors to make her reappearance upon earth, as he does with Madame Arcati while she vainly attempts to justify her professional standards and tries everything from her book of spiritual lore to return the muddled situation to normality. Here, indeed, Coward invented a character credible, alive, and sympathetic.

Blithe Spirit is, perhaps, the climax to Coward's writing career, for in addition to the thoughtfulness given to the role of Madame Arcati, he attempts a perilous dramatic venture in creating the ghostly Elvira. Putting a ghost upon the stage and tightly incorporating its actions into the plot of a drama which deals with earthly inhabitants and their foibles is difficult. The problem arises from the fact that the playwright must make the audience believe in this ghostly device, regardless of its incredulous nature. Coward, through the use of the medium, Madame Arcati, gives a naturalness to the return of a spirit from the other world. He combines Elvira's existence with those of the living by making her actions, mannerisms, and speech the same as the other characters. Elvira, although a ghost, is a lovely, malicious phantom of no conscience and much charm. Coward, here, proves his skill in writing actable parts by creating a role which is more difficult than most to develop.

The attack on the Mayfair set is renewed in *Present Laughter* (1943), wherein a forty-year-old actor, Garry Essendine, who is a matinee idol, is kept busy in his bedroom entertaining the feminine elite of London's cafe society. Early one morning, Daphne Stillington, a debutante who has theatrical ambitions, appears clad in the actor's pajamas after having spent the night in his apartment. This occurs at the beginning of the play and sets the mood. The amoral quality of the play becomes at once apparent, even to a casual reader. There

is the usual assortment of wooden characters, stock situations, and frail plot. The two business managers of the actor display little sense as well as little feeling or emotion. Joanna Lypiatt, wife of the first business manager, engineers an affair with her husband's partner to break the ring of close affection which surrounds the actor, believing that she may inveigle Essendine's affections and hereby fulfill her ambition to become the actor's wife. The plot is thin, as can be seen, but the usually clever, suggestive lines are there, flavored with Cowardian gestures; and these help the play to bounce along the Coward road. For example, in I, Daphne openly discusses the matinee idol with his secretary:

Daphne: Have you been with him for a long while?

Monica: Just on seventeen years.

Daphne: How wonderful! I expect you know him better than anybody.

Monica: Less intimately than some, better than most.

Here one may observe another Coward device — that of presenting a character through the eyes of another. This device leads to audience anticipation and prepares the audience for what it will see when the "real thing" enters the scene. It is an old trick, which serves an author well. When properly handled, it simplifies the difficult task of controlling an audience's thinking and aids in shaping its opinion.

Coward's unusual affinity for the feminine point of view is never more apparent than in *Present Laughter*. It is, perhaps, strange that only the women have a predatory nature. In reviewing *Present Laughter*, George Jean Nathan makes a startling suggestion regarding the arrangement of characters when he says that, "One particular oversight [occurs] in not having the women play the men's roles and the men the women's. It would have made for a very much more logical and convincing evening."⁹⁷

Although one can not seriously look for much Coward autobiography in the play, he may observe that Garry Essendine in *Present Laughter* is Coward's age and is involved in Coward's profession, all of which strongly suggests that Garry Essendine is a kind of mouth-piece for Coward. Indeed, in I, Garry gives a young playwright this kind of advice:

Go and get yourself a job as a butler in a repertory company if they'll have you. Learn from the ground up just how plays are constructed and what isactable and what isn't. Then sit down and write at least twenty plays, one after another, and if you can manage

⁹⁷ George Jean Nathan, *Theatre Book of the Year, 1946-1947, A Record and an Interpretation*, p. 145.

to get the twenty-first produced for a Sunday night performance, you'll be damned lucky!

This advice is, in essence, the way Coward found success — “from the ground up.” If personality projection is not exactly apparent, there is certainly a distinct indication that Coward put his own feelings and ideas into the character of Garry Essendine. Garry is the epitome of egocentricity as he struts and frets across the stage. It becomes more revealing to see the egocentricity in Coward's male characters, especially when the possibility exists that the character and the author are, in a sense, one person.

Following *Present Laughter*, Coward busied himself with war time activities, writing revues, songs, and light musicals. Eight years elapsed before he, again, attempted a play somewhat reminiscent of the younger Coward. *Relative Values* opened at the Savoy Theatre, London, 1951.⁹⁸ The important difference between this play and those of the earlier Coward is that there is an underlying theme throughout, a theme which concerns something other than sexual activity among the Mayfair set.

Relative Values (1951) tackles *nationalized England* as its subject, a word foreign to the niceties of the Mayfair set which Coward understands. Politically, Coward appears to dislike the fashionable idea of social equality, and it may be he took this opportunity to express his opinions. Nigel, the Earl of Marshwood, plans to marry Miranda Frayle, a Hollywood actress. Nigel's titled mother, Felicity, disapproves. When she discovers that Miranda is the sister of Moxie, her personal maid, she takes drastic steps to avoid upsetting their little upper-class world of social inequality. Coward's ideas on the subject are expressed by the butler, Crestwell, who seems to run the household much to his own liking, and who is another Coward characterization that seems to have been given the kind of understanding accorded Madame Arcati. Felicity believes she must disguise Moxie's identity, for it would be an impossible situation if her future daughter-in-law should learn that her sister is a servant in the house. Felicity, in I, ii, discusses this problem with Crestwell:

- Felicity: What would she [the cook] do if Moxie ceased to be part of the domestic staff and became my personal secretary?
- Crestwell: (incredulously) Secretary, my lady?
- Felicity: Well — companion-secretary.
- Crestwell: To what degree would such a metamorphosis affect the status-quo, my lady?

⁹⁸ Noel Coward, *Relative Values*, n. p.

- Felicity: Well, I don't know — I mean, that would all have to be gone into very carefully.
- Crestwell: Meals, for instance.
- Felicity: (helplessly) Oh, dear — that is a problem, isn't it?
- Crestwell: A problem certainly but not an insoluble one. I presume that she could eat in the dining room when you were "en famille" as it were?
- Felicity: Yes — I suppose so — yes, of course she could.

Obviously, the butler is Coward's apostle who speaks for an un-socialized England when he fears that the status quo might be upset. In *Future Indefinite*, Coward has stated clearly his own position:

. . . nothing will convince me that the levelling of class and rank distinctions, and the contemptuous dismissal of breeding as an important factor of life can lead to anything but a dismal mediocrity.⁹⁹

Coward's seriousness with the theme of social inequality led one English critic to remark that, ". . . as soon as this suspicion took root, the play itself took on a . . . not altogether agreeable light."¹⁰⁰ As in the past, Coward's insistence upon a serious theme seldom has resulted in an improvement of his works, and, perhaps, one should call attention to this fact again at this point. *Relative Values*, however, was more successful than others of this kind, perhaps, because Coward kept the serious elements balanced neatly with comedy.¹⁰¹

Throughout the play, the dialogue is typical of the former Coward; and the little debates between the characters have the same fire which springs from a quick, nervous temperament that is suddenly angered and quickly appeased. In the following excerpt, from I, ii, Felicity and her son, Nigel, discuss the disguise of Moxie.

- Nigel: What's Aunt Rose going to say?
- Felicity: Aunt Rose is in too much of a frizz about your marrying a film star to worry her head about Moxie.
- Nigel: How dare she be in a frizz? It's none of her damned business.
- Felicity: Neither's this.
- Nigel: Miranda's one of the most wonderful people in the world. She's given romance and happiness to millions.
- Felicity: With the apparent exception of Aunt Rose.
- Nigel: To hell with Aunt Rose.

⁹⁹ Coward, *Future Indefinite*, p. 37.

¹⁰⁰ Ian Hamilton, "Theatre," *The Spectator*, p. 77, December 7, 1951.

¹⁰¹ *Point Valaine* and *Sirocco* are plays which have a serious theme and were complete failures.

- Felicity: Will you do as I ask? About Moxie, I mean?
 Nigel: I suppose so, but I don't approve of it and I never shall.
 Felicity: And you promise not to tell anyone, even Miranda.
 Nigel: How can you be so silly, Mother? Everybody's bound to know, sooner or later.
 Felicity: Will you promise?
 Nigel: If you insist.
 Felicity: I do insist. It's terribly important.
 Nigel: All right, I promise.

Again, Coward is invective, and his malice continues to be flip and pointed.

Sentimentality appears in the Victorian setting of *Quadrille* (1952). This is the only comedy Coward has written in which the history of America plays an important part. Coward is often mentioned as one of the international set, but rarely does he relegate England to a secondary position in his settings. Although *Quadrille* deals with the opening of America by the railroad, the locale is England and France. *Quadrille* is also Coward's first comedy to be set in the Victorian period; but, like most of the others, it is predicated on the theme of intrigue. Serena is married to Hubert, and Charlotte is married to Axel. Hubert goes off to France, taking Charlotte with him. Axel and Serena pursue them and fall in love with each other. There is little that is either new or exciting in a situation of this kind; but Alfred Lunt and Lynn Fontanne, who played Axel and Serena, gave stature to the slightest of dramas. *Quadrille* was a good vehicle for their talents. Of the Lunts' acting and Coward's play, a British critic has said that, ". . . the Lunts' theatre is the actors' theatre, not the playwright's . . . and for this reason *Quadrille* is an excellent play — hardly in fact noticeable as a play at all."¹⁰² This points up the theory that Coward is possibly more of a showman than a first-rate dramatist. His plays seem written from the actor's viewpoint, in most cases.

One noticeable difference in this comedy is the author's attempt to be highly figurative in dialogue. This attempt seems to result in sentimentality, as, for example, in II, i, when Axel pleads with Serena to come to America:

Come to my country, ma'am. Your own true quality will immediately recognize its valor and forgive its young vulgarities . . . Oh, Lord, the whole of life seems newly washed, seen from the open door of a caboose.

Certainly, here, one finds a mawkish sentiment, undiluted. Coward has always possessed a command of words as is evidenced in his deft

¹⁰² Ian Hamilton, "Theatre," *The Spectator*, p. 359, September 19, 1952.

use of dialogue and repartee; but he has not, even in *Quadrille*, indicated that he is capable of writing lines of exquisite beauty. He has never shown that he approves of such writing in the drama. The poetic value of Coward's works may be more that of a florid writer than of a poet. The language in this passage is highly figurative, almost to the point of being metaphorically confusing. Possibly, then, one should not label this as "poetic" in the strictest sense of the word. It is, however, florid, embellished, embroidered, rhythmical, and mawkish. It may not be too severe to say *Quadrille* has sentimental overtones. The play has little else of interest to set it apart from the rest of Coward, for it is identical with Coward's usual treatment. One or two characters seem important and real; the others are puppets who add contrast and variety to the same situation of marital intrigue, youthful infatuation, and illicit sex.

Quadrille reflects Coward's personality in much the same manner as do his other plays; like Coward, the characters travel about the Continent and England; like Coward, they appear unsettled, and there is an intensity in their desires. Coward has seldom remained longer than a few months or weeks in one place. His physical and mental mobility suggest an intensity toward life which is constantly reflected in his fictional characters.

Nine comedies by Coward have been examined with special emphasis on dialogue, characterization, personality projection, plot construction, and amoral and satirical values. This investigation has disclosed certain weaknesses in character construction, some of which are deliberate on the part of Coward. In *Private Lives*, the puppet characters seem to have been added for the purpose of lending variety to the delineation of the principal characters. In *Blithe Spirit* and *Relative Values*, however, one can see Coward's skill, potential as it were, in his treatment of characters like Madame Arcati and the butler, Crestwell. In general, however, Coward's characterizations seem flat, puppet-like and mechanical.

There is little question of Coward's weakness in plot, for each play consists, largely, of situation with just enough narrative to keep the vehicle moving. Ordinarily, however, the flimsy plots do not detract from the success of Coward's dramas, for light comedy and farce do not demand more than they ask.

Coward's polished dialogue is one quality that lifts his plays above mediocrity. Dialogue, however, has not always been able to accomplish this Herculean task, for some of Coward's plays, *I'll Leave It to You* and *The Young Idea*, have failed, in spite of the dialogue. Coward's ability to reproduce a natural kind of chatter, which is in keeping with his Mayfair set, is obviously the quality which sets him apart from the works of other playwrights. At the same time, Coward is a master of the modern epigrammatical statement.

Coward's themes are sometimes monotonous, for they consistently involve the risqué and treat of a Bohemian-like atmosphere — plays, for example, like *Hay Fever*, *Design for Living*, and *Private Lives*. He makes it possible for an audience to re-adjust to the code of morals of his characters by appearing to chuckle at their mis-doings.

An element of Coward's writing which appears frequently in almost all of his plays is his personality. In almost every play, it is possible to point to some character or characters and say that *these* may be Coward. Just what this personality projection has to do with the success of Coward's plays cannot be accurately determined, but it seems to have exerted a strong influence in his choice of character and situation. It is important to note that Coward appeared as one of the principal players in six of the nine comedies examined. These are *I'll Leave It to You*, *Hay Fever*, *Private Lives*, *Design for Living*, *Present Laughter*, and *Blithe Spirit*. Undoubtedly, Coward wrote these plays to express his own personality; otherwise, one cannot easily justify Coward's creating so many parts which lend themselves to his particular style of acting. Egocentricity appears often in Coward's autobiographies and his numerous plays. Another important consideration which may have significance to Coward's egocentric personality is the well-publicized fact that for twenty-five years he appeared in no play or production other than those he wrote. He understood the importance of appearing in his own plays, perhaps, better than anyone else. Each of Coward's characters has the appearance and motivation of an egotist, and one may conclude that they are Coward on the stage, prepared by Coward at the desk.

Realizing that the critics will see a continuous line of similarities in his characters and that their mannerisms, personality, and general characteristics bear a resemblance to him, he states that, ". . . a professional writer should be animated by no other motive than the desire to write, and by doing so, to earn his living."¹⁰³ However, in the same book, Coward contradicts his previous statement and says that, "My original motive was to write a good play with a whacking good part in it for myself, and I am thankful to say . . . that I succeeded."¹⁰⁴ It becomes apparent that this particular role is not an isolated case, but is only one of many instances in which Coward's egocentric personality is the force behind the play. From this information, it is possible to suggest that the success of Coward, the writer, may well be predicated on something other than his work as a playwright, *i.e.*, by his work as an actor.

¹⁰³ Coward, *Play Parade*, p. viii.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, p. x.

III

A Whacking Good Part

An investigation of Coward's success is not complete until one has looked into his sundry other contributions to the theatre. Coward is unique in the theatrical world in that he is not restricted in his creativity to one phase of the theatre. Everything that it is possible for one to do in the drama, Coward has done at one time or another. An inspection of five additional major types of his contributions to the entertainment world may reveal interesting facts about Coward and may lead one to a more complete understanding of his success.

The remaining five major types, or divisions, of his works may be categorized as the serious play, the motion picture, the revue, the musical comedy, and what one may call the miscellaneous, for lack of a better term. This particular arrangement is employed for the sakes of clarity and thoroughness. Fourteen works by Coward are included in this section, eighteen of which have been produced. The fourteen written works are hereafter examined in the light of critical opinion, public acclaim, Coward's own acting and directing the production in addition to his composition, and Coward's own opinion of the work.

In contrast to the many comedies which Coward wrote, there are about eight serious plays, one of which received considerable critical, as well as public, acclaim. The *Vortex* (1923) is Coward's first success of any importance and shows him as a playwright developing rapidly into a mature dramatist after only three years. *I'll Leave It to You* was written in 1920. The sordid events of *The Vortex* seem to be convincing, and one feels that this is the Mayfair set without the light-hearted treatment. Florence Lancaster, a faded beauty, who wished to remain lovely and desired, enjoys the adulation and attention of younger lovers and ignores her son, Nicky, who becomes addicted to drugs as a defense against his mother's immorality. Nicky's fiancée is whisked away by the masculine charms of his mother's latest lover, resulting in a long last-act dialogue in which ". . . debauchee son upbraids debauchee mother, ending up with his head in her lap,"¹⁰⁵ thus giving some hope that this society of matron and son may yet find themselves. If this seems to be more of the 1960's than of the 1920's, so be it. An indication of the success of this play may be found in these words of Coward: ". . . I sat nightly at the end of the play receiving people and giving them drinks and cigarettes, and listening to their praise. So much praise."¹⁰⁶ *The Vortex* was highly successful

¹⁰⁵ Kenneth Tynan, "Theatre," *The Spectator*, p. 326, March 14, 1952.

¹⁰⁶ Noel Coward, *Present Indicative*, p. 200.

as one critic put it. "It reflected society life so accurately that the theatre was shy of being such a perfect mirror."¹⁰⁷

As is true of many of Coward's plays, he designed a role in *The Vortex* to fit his own particular style of acting. This is often disastrous to his plays in revival, for one critic notes that, ". . . all concerned find themselves wishing that he [Coward] had not succeeded in writing into it a temperamentally skin-tight part for himself. What was a supreme virtue in 1924 has now apparently become a fatal weakness."¹⁰⁸ It is increasingly evident that Coward's plays without Coward often do not measure up to the original production. It may be that the author is better able to interpret his own role, or it may be that a certain quality exists in the character's personality which no other actor is able to copy — the egocentricity, perhaps. Whatever the case, it appears that the very element in a Coward play which makes it most successful is also the element which may bring about the play's demise.

In a tropical setting, Coward attempts to present a tragedy of international love and loose morals in *Point Valaine* (1935). Once again his very good friends, Alfred Lunt and Lynn Fontanne, played the leading roles. However, not even the Lunts could save this dismal melodrama from complete failure in the opinion of both critics and the audience. In *Point Valaine*, Coward left behind his smart drawing room set and drawing room conversation in favor of the intrigues of a second-rate hotel near a tropical sea.

The mistress of the hotel finds relaxation and satisfaction in a violent love affair with her major-domo, a half-caste Russian. A young, injured pilot appears at the hotel to recuperate from an air crash. He recovers rapidly enough to sleep with the mistress, be discovered by the half-caste Russian, who immediately flies into a violent rage, and plunges into shark-infested waters nearby. After seeing the revival in 1944, Coward sadly remarked that, ". . . the fundamental weakness of the play was its basic theme. It was neither big enough for tragedy nor light enough for comedy."¹⁰⁹ This observation more than adequately accounts for the play's failure. Coward's remark may be supported by the blunt statement of one critic: "*Point Valaine* is . . . an empty and obvious play."¹¹⁰ Coward did not appear in person in this play; however, it may be assumed that he directed it, for he was in the New York theatre during all of the rehearsals, and he tells of the many problems that beset the play and players during this period.¹¹¹ For example, it was discovered that the sets were too large and too heavy for ease of movement and had to be cut down at the last minute.

¹⁰⁷ Patrick Braybrooke, *The Amazing Mr. Noel Coward*, p. 61.

¹⁰⁸ *The [London] Times*, April 10, 1952.

¹⁰⁹ Noel Coward, *Future Indefinite*, p. 326.

¹¹⁰ Edith J. F. Isaacs, "Broadway in Review," *Theatre Arts Monthly*, p. 171.

¹¹¹ Coward, *Future Indefinite*, p. 327.

Too, the Lunts and Coward were irritable with each other.¹¹² A rain machine had to be scrapped at the last minute.¹¹³ And, as a fitting climax, even the first-night audience was uncooperative. In Coward's own words, "The first-nighters were soggy and comatose, if not actually hostile."¹¹⁴ Inasmuch as the play had opened earlier in Boston, the New York audience had been prepared for the events of the evening. Indeed, one critic was so amazed at the proceedings that he said, "It is impossible to believe that Mr. Coward, a fellow of some humor, could have written such zymotic bilge with a straight face."¹¹⁵ There is no doubt, however, that the play was written in all seriousness, zymotic or not, for Coward remarks, "I sat at the back of the theatre and watched the play march with unfaltering tread down the drain."¹¹⁶ While observing the revival he also indicates that he was trying to do a heavy dramatic play, if not a profound tragedy, for he claims, "It was not surprising that seeing it again . . . should give me a few pangs of embittered nostalgia."¹¹⁷ It is odd, indeed, that Coward, is not capable of writing a successful non-comedy. When he abandons the Mayfair set, with its smart talk and sophisticated humor, his dramatic talents appear nullified. At the same time, the fact that Coward did not appear in *Point Valaine* may have some bearing on its failure, for as reported the plays in which Coward takes a leading role seldom fail. His stage presence and personality seem to give his plays that elusive element which is necessary for success. In the case of *Point Valaine*, it is doubtful, however, whether the combination of the Lunts and Coward would have been powerful enough to impart sympathy and humor to a vehicle so dolorous.

Coward's war-time and post World War II plays are, in some instances, a different type of composition altogether from any he has previously written. *This Happy Breed* (1943), for example, is in contrast to the usual smart set with which Coward frequently indulges himself. In *This Happy Breed* Coward attempts a salute to the common man, a new idea for him, and one which finds him shakily uncertain in his knowledge of the lower classes. The play opens in 1919 just after World War I and brings the Gibbon family through difficult days to 1939 and the brink of another war.

Both *This Happy Breed* and *Present Laughter* were in the final week of rehearsal in 1939 when Germany invaded the Lowlands.¹¹⁸ The shows closed, ostensibly, for the duration, but reappeared in re-

¹¹² *Loc. cit.*

¹¹³ *Loc. cit.*

¹¹⁴ *Loc. cit.*

¹¹⁵ George Jean Nathan, *The Theatre of the Moment, A Journalistic Commentary*, p. 281.

¹¹⁶ Coward, *Future Indefinite*, p. 327.

¹¹⁷ *Loc. cit.*

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 67.

hearsal in 1943.¹¹⁹ The former, according to Coward, was successful because it “. . . played to capacity for the entire season.”¹²⁰ Coward himself appeared in *This Happy Breed* as Frank Gibbon, the youthful husband, the new father, the mature man, and the new grandfather, a kind of cavalcade of character. The whole idea of *This Happy Breed*, for that matter, is somewhat episodic, a treatment which Coward has handled so successfully in the past. The playwright, acting in his own play and giving it a special Cowardian treatment, pleases his public immensely; and indeed, it is the public that Coward wishes to please. At the same time, however, one can seriously argue that Coward writes to please himself, too. For instance, one must recall the many roles which Coward has created to fit his own personality and which almost defy the talents of any other actor. Obviously, his acting is more adaptable than his writing skill to new situations, and, once again, the public is deceived by the personality of the playwright. One critic sees through the framework of *This Happy Breed*, and suggests that, “. . . it tells the sometimes drab story of the durable Gibbon family, their births, marriages, deaths, their small joys and fair-sized sorrows . . . it is lean on drama and lacking in depth.”¹²¹ The last phrase in the foregoing quotation could also serve as a criticism of Coward's comedies, in so far as they are “lean” on composition and “lacking in depth.” In *This Happy Breed*, therefore, Coward remains a born sophisticate, a man who is completely out of character when dealing with the lower classes.

As in other instances, Coward's attempt to write a serious play, *Peace in Our Time*, indicates that he is not sure of his ground outside the Mayfair set. It is interesting to note, however, that Coward did not give up his attempts to write serious plays, in spite of the fact that he did not achieve a completely successful public or critical acceptance of them since *The Vortex* (1923). *Peace in Our Time* (1947) proved that Coward and serious drama are not compatible. *Peace in Our Time* becomes melodramatic, by Coward's insistence upon employing a Nazi stormtrooper as a villain and a small segment of London's residents in the Sloan Street area as victims. Righteousness overpowers evil in spite of insurmountable obstacles that bar the way. The plot of the play — Germany conquers England in World War II, executes English rulers, and sets up Nazi rule — is certainly one of interest and imagination. One of its faults, however, is the fact that the ultimate end is known, England *uber-alles*, before the play ever begins. This anticipation destroys any suspense Coward may have built and negates audience interest and excitement, making the drama seem contrived and entirely artificial, which, of course, it is. It is important to this

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 234.

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 245.

¹²¹ *Time*, p. 65, May 10, 1943.

study merely because it represents Coward's working with a medium that is somewhat alien to him.

Most criticism on *Peace in Our Time* seems directed at one rather small but important detail in the play, contained in the scene of a pub in the Sloan Street area. He personifies England's bravery and courage in the character of the proprietor of the pub. One critic takes exception with Coward's choice of the proprietor and says, ". . . he went morally and dramatically wrong in his choice of the man who represented Britain's courage and the woman who represented Britain's defiled."¹²² The moral aspect is important; but if these choices had been more dramatically sound, the moral issue could be subordinated. The choice of a prostitute, who fraternizes with the Nazis, as the representative of "Britain's defiled," does seem poor, indeed. On the other hand, in *Peace in Our Time*, Coward indicated a talent for depicting individual episodes with clarity, but he did not always succeed in making these incidents an integral part of a tightly constructed drama. *Peace in Our Time* is not episodic in the exact meaning of the term; however, in referring to the play, one critic remarked that Coward was ". . . brilliant in his management of an episodic play . . ." ¹²³ Coward's employment of the episodic technique is discussed in more detail later.

It is apparently not impossible for Coward to write, act, and produce any form of theatrical entertainment which is requested of him. Motion pictures came within the scope of his talents; and here, again, he shows he is capable of doing the whole show — from writing the scenario to directing the cast. His most important motion picture was *In Which We Serve* (1941), a war-time picture of the English Royal Navy. Coward has an affinity for the Navy, which dates back to the 1920's, when he first began his extensive travels. It may also date to the unsuccessful and unhappy months which he spent in the British Army in World War I. Whatever the reason for this devotion to the sea, it undoubtedly aided him in the writing and the acting of this film.

The musical revue, a type of theatrical entertainment in which Coward succeeded, especially in his earlier years, may aid one in a search for that elusive but important element that has made him famous. Coward's name appeared in lights for the first time with his revue, *London Calling* (1923), which was an all-Coward show.¹²⁴ *London Calling* was incredibly successful: the revue ran for about a year, and Coward said, "The houses had been packed at every performance for the first three months."¹²⁵ Much of the success of *London Calling* was Coward's own, for he collaborated on the book and music

¹²² Beverly Baxter, "A Cavalcade of Noel Coward," *The New York Times Magazine*, December 11, 1949, p. 22.

¹²³ "The Theatre," *New Statesman and Nation*, p. 90.

¹²⁴ Coward, *Present Indicative*, p. 172.

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 171.

and did many of the sketches himself.¹²⁶ As early as 1923, Coward displayed outstanding skill in the writing of brief sketches and in the planning of episodic stage productions, in which continuity is loose and the events are only slightly related, if at all. Later, this gift becomes even more important to Coward and his future successes.

This Year of Grace (1928), surpassed even the success of *London Calling*, and it, too, was an all-Coward show with the author's appearing in the New York production at the Selwyn Theatre. Of the English company Coward remarks, "Everybody fared well, and the notices were ecstatic."¹²⁷ The American production, starring Beatrice Lillie and Coward, was equally successful. One critic, however, seemed more concerned with Coward and his part in the show: "*This Year of Grace* is interesting because everything in it that could be called writable — the speeches, songs, and music — Coward wrote and together with Miss Lillie, he tops the list of performers . . ." ¹²⁸ Obviously, when Coward succeeds, he is very successful; and when he fails, he fails.

Certain of Coward's works do not lend themselves to a particular classification. At a younger age, when his passions were more quickly aroused, Coward wrote *Post-Mortem* (1930), a satire on the evils of war and journalistic propaganda. The satire is close to tragedy, in a sense, for it convinces one of the hopelessness of Coward's generation and spells the doom of a society and even, perhaps, of civilization.

Hope is represented by John Cavan, a soldier who was killed in 1917 but who returns as a ghost in 1930. John visits old friends and finds that they have forgotten the war and that they are shallow and immoral and live for their own pleasures. Upon returning to England and the world of the living, John discovers that there was truth in a statement made to him by a fellow soldier in 1918. The soldier had said, "It isn't poor old England, particularly; it's poor old human nature. There isn't a hope for it anywhere, all this proves it."¹²⁹ Of all Coward's serious plays, this is the only one that ends on a completely hopeless note.

One especially interesting device made use of in this drama is that of having the first and last scene played on exactly the same set. This is Coward's way of indicating to the reader that all of the intervening action of the play has taken place only in the mind of John Cavan, who is dying. In this way, the spiritual return of John is understood; but it is unfortunate that Coward withheld this information until the last, for if the reader were aware that the action were an hallucination of a man nearly dead, the play would have credence. As it is,

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 166.

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 286.

¹²⁸ Stark Young, "Three Graces," *The New Republic*, p. 15, November 21, 1928.

¹²⁹ Coward, *Play Parade*, p. 357.

the reader is lost in a maze of normal relationships between the spirit and the living persons. It is a complete lack of dismay on the part of the other characters, who accept the ghost without question, that confuses.

According to Coward, *Post-Mortem* was not written for the theatre but was put into play form, because he felt more at home in this medium than in any other. It is for this reason, perhaps, that it has never been produced. Although Coward says: ". . . one day perhaps it will be. I think it might be quite effective, provided that it is expertly directed and acted."¹³⁰ Coward wrote *Post-Mortem* at a time when some of his most successful work was appearing — *Cavalcade*, *Private Lives*, and *Design for Living*. For this reason, there really may be something of dramatic value in the play.

Coward combined his sense of the theatre and his knowledge of stagecraft in *Cavalcade*, which is a procession through the years from 1899 to 1930. It is a play, a spectacle, a pageant, or an extravaganza. It is important to an understanding of Coward, for it shows, beyond a doubt, his genius for showmanship. He uses every trick at his command to excite and thrill; the audience is swept along the years with mechanical stages, ramps, expert lighting, elaborate sets, and the talents of a huge cast. The production received superlative reviews, all of which Coward summed up by saying, ". . . mounting paens of praise — not a discordant note."¹³¹ The show undoubtedly caught the fancy of the playgoers, for one critic remarked, "*Cavalcade* is the most popular play London has seen in ten years."¹³² As further indication of the success of the spectacle and of Coward's remarkable showmanship, a British critic was impressed sufficiently to say that, "[Cavalcade] is history acted, history sung and history sobbed."¹³³ Overjoyed at the success of this play, Coward was, at the same time, unhappy about the distortions and hidden meanings which critics and others found in *Cavalcade*. Some thought it was a "call to arms"; others, "a message to the youth of the nation."¹³⁴ According to Coward, it was certainly none of these; he merely wanted to do a show on a grand scale; perhaps, to exercise his knowledge of stagecraft, to test his sense of the theatre, and to display his showmanship.

At the same time, Coward believed that a short play had an advantage over a long one, in that the shorter piece could sustain a mood without becoming weak, needing, therefore, no padding. Consequently, Coward wrote nine short plays, collected under the title, *Tonight at 8:30* (1936), and presented three of the plays on alternate evenings.

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. xv.

¹³¹ Coward, *Present Indicative*, p. 353.

¹³² Ashley Dukes, "The English Scene," *Theatre Arts Monthly*, p. 27, January, 1932.

¹³³ Braybrooke, *op. cit.*, p. 148.

¹³⁴ Coward, *Present Indicative*, p. 353.

The pieces are varied and range from tragedy in *The Astonished Heart*, to realistic drama in *Still Life*, *We Were Dancing*, and *Fumed Oak*; light comedy in *Hands Across the Sea* and *Ways and Means*; musical sketches in *Red Peppers* and *Shadow Play*; and one costume piece, *Family Album*. Many of the plays contain songs and dances which add vitality, realism, and naturalness. Coward and Gertrude Lawrence appeared in some of these plays at the Phoenix Theatre, London. The reception of this production proved that the old-fashioned idea of presenting three short plays during an evening could still be successful.

Coward developed another of his latent talents with the musical comedy. In 1929, he wrote what has since become his most celebrated musical comedy, *Bitter Sweet*. The twenties were eventful years for Coward; he had tasted the sweetness of success and had known the bitterness of despair. His future was assured, and he was, in addition, an important figure in the theatre. *Bitter Sweet* was not typical of those works of Coward which had appeared before 1929. He had not, heretofore, attempted a romantic musical comedy, although he had hints of proclivities in this direction in his early revues.

Some credit must be given to Coward for his bloodhound sense of successful box office — an innate sense, as it were, of what the customer liked. He was not always correct in his assumption, but, as far as *Bitter Sweet* was concerned, he was never more accurate. In *Present Indicative*, he said: "There had been little or no sentiment on the London musical stage for a long while. . . . It seemed high time for a little romantic renaissance."¹³⁵ Coward's eye, here, is on the box-office.

Bitter Sweet opened in Manchester. According to Coward, the first night was "riotous . . . and press notices next day were incoherent with praise."¹³⁶ A fashionable audience attended the London opening, and its reaction was vastly different from Manchester.¹³⁷ Coward remarked that they were "almost as responsive as so many cornflour blancmanges."¹³⁸ But the most disheartening blow befell him on the following day when he saw the reviews, for they were "incoherent" with unpleasant criticism. Since Coward had written the book and lyrics, composed the music, and produced the whole operetta, its success or failure was certainly all his. He tersely sums up the critics' remarks: "Some praised the book, but dismissed the music as being reminiscent and of no consequence. Some liked the music, but were horrified by the commonplace sentimentality of the book. The lyrics were hardly mentioned."¹³⁹ There is little wonder that Coward ap-

¹³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 287.

¹³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 302.

¹³⁷ *Loc. cit.*

¹³⁸ *Loc. cit.*

¹³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 303.

peared undone by this uncomplimentary criticism, since the show, in all phases, was an all-Coward production.

An episode which occurred earlier between Coward and an old friend is of interest in an examination of *Bitter Sweet*. In a discussion of music and the arts, Hoytie Wiborg told Coward that if he continued to write lyrics, sketches, plays, and music ". . . no good would come of it." Wiborg went on to say that this versatility would lead Coward to a "dilettante's grave," and concluded that, on the piano, Coward was ". . . erratic in the right hand and non-existent in the left."¹⁴⁰ Later, on the opening night of *Bitter Sweet*, Coward smiled triumphantly at Miss Wiborg. According to Coward, she ". . . shook her head gloomily, as though her worst forebodings had been proven."¹⁴¹ Nevertheless, after twenty-five years, *Bitter Sweet* continues to be a popular production, although it seems to have been relegated to the outdoor summer theatre.

In spite of the critical diatribes and advice from friends, *Bitter Sweet* is Coward's favorite among all his works. He is able also to say specifically why he regards it so highly:

Bitter Sweet has given me more complete satisfaction than anything else I have written up to now [1937]. It has that particular mood of semi-nostalgic sentiment, when well done, invariably affects me very pleasantly. In *Bitter Sweet*, it did seem to me to be well done, and I felt accordingly very happy about it.¹⁴²

Conversation Piece (1934) is a bit of nineteenth century fluff with a Pygmalion theme. The usual Coward wit sparkles throughout, and the whole play is embellished with an elegance typical of a Coward production. Its words and music are easy on the ear, and one critic said of them: ". . . they are of the later Coward period — so easy to parody, so difficult to imitate."¹⁴³ Perhaps, one reason again in for the sparkle of *Conversation Piece* is the fact that Coward appeared in the leading role in the production. Once more, Coward's appearance seems to add life to his plays and musicals. *Conversation Piece* is best described as charming but frail, for it has the slightest of stories told with a wit and elegance.

Frailty appears to be a word which describes most of Coward's musicals. It seems especially appropriate for the *Ace of Clubs* (1950). The scene is a night club, the Ace of Clubs. The characters are a sailor and his girl and a gang of hoodlums from the underworld. There is not much here, obviously, from which to build a musical; neverthe-

¹⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 144-145.

¹⁴¹ Coward, *Present Indicative*, p. 145.

¹⁴² Coward, *Play Parade*, p. xii.

¹⁴³ Peter Fleming, "The Theatre," *The Spectator*, p. 270, February 23, 1934.

less, Coward's nimble wit glosses it over, and the *Ace of Clubs* follows along the lines of Coward shows. Coward usually has a trick or two on hand to support his musical comedies; the *Ace of Clubs* is no exception. A revolving stage was added to the equipment in the Cambridge Theatre, London, and undoubtedly enhanced the proceedings. However, one reviewer says, ". . . on the whole, it is a weary Mr. Coward who has written and composed *Ace of Clubs*."¹⁴⁴ The weariness of Coward, as suggested by the critic, is apparent in other plays and musicals which have appeared in the last five years. But, weary or not, Coward continues undaunted, to attempt to find a place in today's theatre for himself as important as that which he held in the 1920's and 1930's. He has not yet realized this ambition.

It must not be thought, however, that Coward no longer has a following; for he does, as is proved by the June, 1954, reception accorded to *After the Ball*, his newest musical. *After the Ball* is a musical adaptation of Oscar Wilde's *Lady Windermere's Fan*. The major critical objection to Coward's treatment of the earlier play appears to be the divergence of emphasis between Coward and Wilde. This difference is resolved in the idea that Coward makes light of prim Victorian behavior while Wilde accepted it as his natural heritage. Wilde was a Victorian who was commenting upon his age; Coward is a twentieth century sophisticate laughing at that age, partly because it seems fashionable to do so.

Although weary, as the critics say, Coward is still able to embellish a production with epigrams and cliches and to draw, as always, both praise and condemnation for them. Apparently, the music of *After the Ball* is acceptable, at least to one critic who said, "For the sake of the score, we can endure the . . . melodrama and . . . epigrams."¹⁴⁵ As is so often the case with Coward's critics, vague cliches clutter their reviews, and such items, as the following, are still common: ". . . it [*After the Ball*] falls a long way short of being an artistic triumph."¹⁴⁶

In 1936 Coward wished to refurbish the old-fashioned idea of presenting three short plays during an evening. Here, he was animated by the nostalgic in his nature to revive a dramatic fashion, only recently dead. His attempt appeared to be successful. Both English and American audiences enjoyed the performances. Coward hoped for this reception, for he suggests in the preface to *Tonight at 8:30*, ". . . that a good time be had by all."¹⁴⁷ These nine short plays served to emphasize the broad nature of Coward's theatrical contributions.

¹⁴⁴ Harold Hobson, "Mr. Coward's *Ace of Clubs*," *Christian Science Monitor Magazine*, July 15, 1950, p. 8.

¹⁴⁵ J. C. Trewin, "Many Happy Returns," *Illustrated London News*, p. 1102, June 26, 1954.

¹⁴⁶ *The New York Times*, July 18, 1954.

¹⁴⁷ Noel Coward, *Curtain Calls*, Preface.

For years Coward had wanted to do a show on a grand scale, and *Cavalcade* afforded him the opportunity. This particular work is more indicative of Coward's showmanship and stagecraft than any other play to date. *Cavalcade* shows him as a master of episodic play, a man with a genius for preparing and presenting a pageant on the grand scale.

The phase of theatrical entertainment in which Coward's talents have not figured greatly is the motion pictures. Several of his works have been made into screen plays, both in America and England, and some have been successful. During World War II, Coward wrote, directed, and acted in a motion picture about the Royal Navy. *In Which We Serve* put Coward's name in the minds of a new generation and revived his name in a decade that was considerably more modern than his bad-mannered society of 1920.

In another form of theatrical production, Coward displays a new gift. This gift is his talent for musical comedy in which he is capable of writing the book and lyrics, composing the music, and even appearing in the principal role. Most of his musical comedies have not been a great success; however, there is one that is kept alive in revivals year after year. *Bitter Sweet*, Coward's first attempt in this genre is, to date, his most successful musical comedy.

IV

Future Definite

In retrospect Coward lived in such an aura of colorful activity with a touch of the bizarre that one could have expected a dramatic flair at his death, but such was not the case. Sir Noel died suddenly of a heart attack on March 26, 1973, in a favorite locale, his vacation home in Jamaica. However, the years immediately preceding his death were typically Coward. These final years saw an incredibly strong revival of his work in both America and England, so his "talent to amuse"¹⁴⁸ appears to have vindicated him in the end; and his critics must look with disbelief upon this unexpected return of popularity and wonder why it happened. It is not uncommon for a revival of playwright's work to follow shortly after his death, but how typical of Coward to manage to have it happen near the close of his life, and still at a time when he could thoroughly enjoy the tribute to his genius.¹⁴⁹

A Coward production implied far more than is usually meant by the term. From the basic idea to the finished composition, to the lead actor, the director, the singer, the dancer, the producer, the composer, he was the "whole show." Sir Noel made the British and American theatres glitter for fifty years with his unique talent for stichomythian dialogue and lyrics and catchy melodies. But his gift for being entertaining did not end with music and lyrics only, for he wrote light comedy, with or without music, also serious plays, romantic comedies, musical reviews, novels, poetry, and short stories. He also painted in water color, completed two volumes of his autobiography, and was working on a third at the time of his death. He also wrote for and appeared in films and performed in cabarets. It is almost inconceivable to think that one man could participate in absolutely all areas of the theatre, but Coward's rare and unusual gift not only allowed him to involve himself to this extent, but also to be unexpectedly successful. His talent and contribution to the theatre may be debated for years to come, but a gift of such theatrical versatility is not likely to occur again.

Notwithstanding this overwhelming and egotistical mania for total involvement in his own productions, many of his famous colleagues and contemporaries considered it good theatre and probably good business to act in a Coward show. And obviously the greatest names of the theatre world loved Coward and the professional association with him, for they appeared together time and again. Such names as Gertrude Lawrence, Sir Laurence Olivier, Alfred Lunt and Lynn Fontanne, Beatrice Lillie, and many others starred in his best known plays. In

¹⁴⁸ Sheridan Morley, *A Talent to Amuse*, p. 410.

¹⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 409.

spite of the times when exhaustion, boredom, and tedium made Coward a difficult colleague, the great professionals of his day, for the most part, understood him. Perhaps the most revealing remark about what it was like to work with Sir Noel was summed up by a fellow actor of Coward's later years. Michael Caine, with whom he did a film in Dublin in 1968, said that, "acting with Coward was rather like acting with God."¹⁵⁰ Coward was admittedly stagestruck from the age of five, and this 68-year love affair with the theatre must have at times made him a testy actor towards those of lesser experience.

His capacity for work was so great, and his drive to write and compose so compelling that he quickly became bored by repetitious non-creative activity. He, therefore, necessarily moved quickly from one theatrical endeavor to another. He allowed his shows to run for only three months so that his performance would not deteriorate and also to avoid exhaustion and gnawing boredom. Closing shows prematurely, and quietly going away for a rest could not possibly bring to him the stimulation that his nature consistently required. This constant reviving of his energy and talent was usually accomplished by extensive travel. Typically, Coward was stimulated by the act of moving quickly from place to place and during his lifetime circled the world many times. Vacation travel really became periods of feverish creativity and many of his best known works were written in exotic places far from his home in England. *Private Lives*, for instance, was conceived in Tokyo and written in Shanghai.¹⁵¹ *The Marquise* was written in White Sulphur Springs, Virginia,¹⁵² and *Design for Living* on a Norwegian freighter travelling north from Panama to Los Angeles.¹⁵³ But, perhaps another of his well-known creations is a better example of the startling effect that travel had on Sir Noel and his work. The delightful "Mad Dogs and Englishmen," the witty and satirical song about British colonialism, was composed in 1930 during a five-day trip overland between Hanoi and Saigon, in what is now known as Vietnam.¹⁵⁴

For devotees of Coward, no greater satisfaction could have come to them than the event which occurred in January, 1969, when Noel Coward at the age of 70 became Sir Noel, a knight of the realm.¹⁵⁵ Few men could have been more moved by this honor than Coward, for he was always faithful to the concept of British royalty and loved the English reigning monarchs from Queen Victoria to Queen Elizabeth II. He never directed any satire or caustic witticisms toward royalty, but only toward the middle classes and largely toward the members of this group who were generally flip and shallow. This final act honoring

¹⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 408.

¹⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p. 185.

¹⁵² *Ibid.*, p. 151.

¹⁵³ *Ibid.*, p. 216.

¹⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 187.

¹⁵⁵ *The National Observer*, April 7, 1973. p. 5.

Coward and his genius reveals the adulation and appreciation his queen and his countrymen had for him.

Although some of his works were nearly bizarre and many of his critics accused him of immorality in his plays, Sir Noel's genius is undeniable. Most of the theatre world, actors, critics, patrons, now join with the masses who loved Coward through the years and share with them this understanding of a man whose wit and humor, energy and drive, talent and ambition will undoubtedly keep us laughing indefinitely.

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