

J. M. SYNGE'S PLAYS: THE CREATION OF IRISH CULTURAL IDENTITY

By

Asst. Instructor: Inas Abdul-
Munem Qaddus Al-Azzawi
Anbar University
College of Arts
English Dept.

Asst. Instructor: Nibras
Jawad Kadhem
Baghdad University
College of Education for Women
English Dept.

المدرس المساعد ايناس عبد المنعم

كلية الاداب / جامعة الانبار

المدرس المساعد نبراس جواد كاظم

كلية التربية للبنات / جامعة بغداد

Abstract:

Living with the peasants in the Aran Islands and eastern Ireland, the Anglo-Irish dramatist, John Millington Synge portrays different aspects of the Irish cultural identity through dramatizing the perils and sufferings, traditions and rituals of the Irish people. In doing so, he plays a major role in the preservation of the Irish identity that is almost disappearing. The research attempts to study Synge's portrayal of the Irish identity in **Riders to the Sea**, **The Shadow of the Glen** and **The Tinker's Wedding**. These plays are real representatives of the Irish peasants' lifestyle as they are based upon incidents and stories that Synge either witnesses or hears from the Irish peasants themselves.

Although sympathizing with the Irish Nationalists' cause and agreeing with the Movement of the Irish Literary Revival, the Anglo-Irish dramatist, John Millington Synge (1871-1909), does not adopt the very methods of Lady Augusta Gregory and William Butler Yeats, the founders of the Revival movement, in portraying the Irish identity. Yeats has planned to support the "cultural unity of his nation" through "dramati[s]ing Irish myths and legends and by their performance awakening heroic passions dormant to the racial memory"¹. Opposing not the end, Synge has chosen his own means and methods to express a distinguished Irish identity in *The Shadow of the Glen* (1903), *Riders to the Sea* (1904) and *The Tinker's Wedding* (was not produced).

Inspired by Yeats' idea,² Synge draws material for his plays from the life of the peasants in the Aran Islands and eastern Ireland. His works immortalise a lifestyle of a disappearing Gaelic culture.³ He depicts, with an eye of the honest observer, their suffering, perils

and traditions. As an artist, he believes that “[e]very life is a symphony, and the translation of this life into music, and from music back to literature ... is the real effort of the artist”⁴. He does translate the hard primitive peasantry Irish life into literature. He “brings to the audience’s mind the glory of the Irish peasantry, their hopes, dreams, despairs and joys by means of the language of their daily lives”⁵. He has lived with the peasants,⁶ observed their way of lives, attended their funerals, listened to their patterns of speech and learnt about their mannerism. Out of these careful observations, he has collected facts, events and stories as models for his plays.

Living with the peasants, Synge observes the dominating and powerful effect of nature and environment on their lives and realizes their guiding influences on their destinies. The prolonged storms, the heavy rains that may continue for a week and the rocky land clothe the Islands with a particular mode of life. Accordingly, environment and nature play an influential role in shaping the traditions of the inhabitants.

Noteworthy, one of the anthropologists believes that “cycles of nature” in countryside have an “important feature of magic and religious beliefs”. He adds that “[d]rought, storms and other natural perils of the farmer could have created a growing dependence on supernatural powers”⁷. Considering the peasants of Inishmann in the Aran Islands where Synge bases his *Riders to the Sea* this idea is true. The play adopts one of the peculiar superstitions of this community which says that the islanders “do not learn to swim” even if they will drown because man “must not take back what the sea has claimed.” They believe that an attempt at swimming and struggle will only “prolong suffering”⁸. The belief in this superstition costs Maurya, an old woman in *Riders*, the loss of her husband, father-in-law and six

sons in the sea. It sounds that the islanders have pagan beliefs although they are Catholic. They consider the sea as the giver and taker of life. Maurya feels powerless before the sea that provides her and at the same time devours her sons. She protests at the priest's prayer that Almighty God will save her last son, Bartley, saying: "it's little the like of him knows of the sea"⁹. Maurya's "the like of him" indicates an apparent incongruity of her Catholicism to superstitious beliefs.

The villagers' response to death can be attributed as primitive or pagan more than as Christian. Synge's dramatization of the rituals of death in *The shadow* and *Riders* is one of his realistic touches. The rituals include keening, the wake and the burial. The ceremony of the wake is one of the pagan activities in *The Shadow*¹⁰. As a realist, the playwright has used the techniques that helped him to enact the rituals of death on the stage as he has witnessed them. His demand for realism inspires him to make an old woman from Galway teach his actresses keening¹¹. As Bartley's body is carried in, old women follow with red petticoats over their heads "keening softly and swaying themselves with a slow movement." (RS, 105) In *Riders*, which is based on a real event as *The Aran Islands*¹² has imparted, keening the dead sons has become the song of Maurya's life. She keens her son, Michael, for nine days until his body is found in the far north. Moreover, passionate wails would rise violently to a high pitch then lower and fall to change into ordinary everyday life speech. The extraordinary with this is not in the passionate rage but in the change from violent passion to "talking of anything and joking of anything"¹³ as Synge himself has observed. Nora, the youngest daughter, wonders how her mother has become "quiet" and "easy" the moment Bartley's body is brought laid on a

plank while “the day Michael was drowned [one] could hear her crying out from this to the spring well” (RS, 106). The elder sister, Cathleen, who understands her mother’s reaction justifies:

An old woman will be soon tired with anything she will do, and isn’t it nine days herself is after crying and keening, and making great sorrow in the house? (RS,106)

The anthropologist, Anthony Wallace, analyses these rituals of grief as “rites of rebellion, which provide a form of ‘rituali[s]ed catharsis’ that contributes to order and stability by allowing people to vent their frustrations”¹⁴. Keening, lamentations, cries and wails are the peasants’ helpless means of expressing their rebellion against the sea.

Maurya’s conflict with the sea focuses on saving her last son, Bartley, from drowning. Therefore, nine days of keening and crying are not in sorrow for losing Michael but in fear of losing Bartley. The proof is in the old man’s “wonder” that Maurya has bought “fine white boards” for Michael’s coffin but forgot the nails “and all the coffins she’s seen made already” (RS, 106) . She forgets to buy the nails because all her anxiety and uneasiness are directed to the last living man in the house. Maurya’s dread, as she complains, is that

It’s hard set we’ll be surely the day [Bartley is] drowned with the rest. What way will I live and the girls with me, and I an old woman looking for the grave? (RS, 98)

Michael has got “a clean burial” (RS, 96) and his coffin becomes Bartley’s now. With the latter’s death, Maurya’s conflict

with the sea dissolves into complete resignation: “No man at all can be living for ever and we must be satisfied” (RS, 106). All tension and worry are released and vented with Bartley’s death and by accepting defeat Maurya gets relief and peace:

Sleeping in the long nights after Samhain, if it’s only a bit of wet flour we do have to eat, and may be a fish that would be stinking. (RS, 105)

Maurya’s relief is her victory over the sea as she says: “They’re all gone now, and there isn’t anything more the sea can do to me” (RS,105).

Reading *Riders to the Sea* carefully one feels that Synge has been intent on emphasizing the significance of the activities of burials for the peasants. Expensive coffins and deep graves are signs of expressing their respect and love for the dead. Maurya’s consolation is in “giving a big price for the finest white board ... in Connemara,” (RS, 98) and in letting her dead son have “a deep grave surely” (RS, 106).

Saying holy blessings for the living as well as the dead and answering these expressions are considered as an inherent custom by the islanders. Entering a house, a guest or visitor will say “God bless the house,” and the eldest replies: “And you too”¹⁵. “God speed you” (RS, 100) is said for a departing person and “God rest his soul” and “May the Almighty God have mercy on his soul” (RS, 106) are said when someone mentions or remembers a dead one. Cathleen blames her mother for not giving Bartley her blessings as he is leaving considering it as a bad omen:

Isn’t it sorrow enough is on every one in this house without sending him out with an unlucky

word behind him, and a hard word in his ear?
(RS,99)

The blend of pagan with Christian is the consequence of the peasants' circumstances of poverty and uneducation and not only of the destructive effect of the environment. An anthropologist states, in agreement with this justification, that "religious practices and beliefs vary in part as a result of the level of social structure in a given society"¹⁶.

Synge dramatizes a different side of the Irish identity in *The Shadow of the Glen* which he sets in an isolated cottage in county Wicklow. The play records that conventional loveless marriages "arranged by matchmakers, dowry balanced against land and cattle"¹⁷ are customary in the eastern rural parts of Ireland. The predicament of the young heroine, Nora Burke, is typical of the situation of the Irish peasant women who are condemned to a hard, monotonous and lonely conjugal life. Incompatibility in marriage springs from the inability or unwillingness of Irish men for marriage until they are in their sixties and almost sterile¹⁸. Nora has no power to choose her partner. She has to accept the husband who, like Dan Burke, "has a bit of farm with cows on it, and sheep on the back hills" (SG, 90). Nora's strife is in her inability to compromise her emotional needs to her need for material security. To fulfill the second need she suffers an insipid, cold and lonely conjugal life with Dan who is "always cold" (SG, 83). He has done little for her except providing her with the bare means of existence and does not appreciate her sensitive, imaginative temperament. Having no children, Nora's isolation becomes intense when added to the desolate landscape. She describes her quiet, lonely barren life saying:

... you do be sitting, looking out from a door ... seeing nothing but the mists rolling down the bog, the mists again, and they rolling up the bog, and hearing nothing but the wind crying out in the bits of broken trees were left from the great storm, and the streams roaring with the rain.(SG, 90)

“Quiet” is a key word in *The Shadow* as a metaphor of Nora’s emotional and imaginative starvation.

Befriending Michael Dara, a mercenary, unimaginative young herd, Nora anticipates no change. Her misery is not the consequence of her frustration in marriage merely. She is obsessed by the fact that her youth will fade in old age and regards Mary Brien and Peggy Cavanagh as symbols of the time that awaits her:

... look on Peggy Cavanagh, who had the lightest hand at milking a cow that wouldn’t be easy, or turning a cake, and there she is now walking round on the roads, or sitting in a dirty old house, with no teeth in her mouth, and no sense, and no more hair you’d see on a bit of hill and they after burning the furze from it. (SG, 90-1)

She decides eventually to forsake her life with Dan and go off with the Tramp. Although aware of the drawbacks of roaming in the land, she chooses to follow him: “You’ve a fine bit of talk stranger, and it’s with yourself I’ll go” (SG, 94). She is “impressed by the account of the life they may enjoy together [feeling] that she is taking the more tolerable course”¹⁹.

By portraying the Tramp, Synge presents another aspect of the Irish cultural identity. The dramatist observes that “[t]he tramp in Ireland is little troubled by the laws, and lives in out-of-door conditions that keep him in good humour and fine bodily health”²⁰. For Synge, the Tramp is a perfect representation of the imaginative

life since he suggests romance and liberation from the frustrated life of the Irish islands. He is a “wanderer” who appreciates free life and nature. Although rootless, he understands all the moods of rural culture²¹.

Maurya’s horror of old age, Nora Burke’s and now Sarah Casey’s, a grand beautiful young tinker woman and Mary Byrne’s, an old tinker woman²², are symbolic of the frustration and horror of peasant Irish women. Unlike Nora Burke, Sarah’s frustration does not spring from her frustrated emotional needs for she has been living happily with the tinker, Michael Byrne, for several years and has born him children. Her dissatisfaction with the tinker’s way of life comes from the horror of the passing of her beauty in old age (*TW*, 116). She believes that the bond of marriage will save her from this fate and enable her to lead a respectable life:

... from this day [when married] there will no one have a right to call me a dirty name, and I selling cans in Wicklow or Wexford or the city of Dublin itself.(*TW*, 122)

By “fooling at marriage” (*TW*, 112), Sarah tries to impose an alien custom on the traditions of the tinkers’ community. Mary, her mother-in-law, a woman of insight and broad knowledge of the world, opposes her whimsical desire for marriage advising her against it and showing her its futility for a tinker woman:

... what good will it do? Is it putting that ring on your finger will keep you from getting an aged woman and losing the fine face you have, or be easing your pains ... that do pass any woman with their share of torment in the hour of birth.(*TW*, 123)

Again, by portraying the Irish tinkers, Synge presents a new and different aspect of the Irish identity. As nomads, the tinkers live an unsettled, unsophisticated (the researcher would choose uncultured and socially disorganized) and rambling way of life²³. Therefore, they do not feel any need for a social institution like marriage. For them it is the business of the “grand ladies” in “silk dresses.” (TW, 123)

Mary accuses the priest whom Sarah bargains to marry her to Michael of interfering in their lives:

... what did you want meddling with the like of us, when it's a long time we are going our own ways—father and son, and his son after him, or mother and daughter, and her own daughter again; and it's little need we never had of going up into a church and swearing—I'm told there's swearing with it—a word no man would believe, or with drawing rings on our fingers, would be cutting our skins maybe when we'd be taking the ass from the shafts, and pulling the straps the time they'd be slippy with going around beneath the heavens in rains falling.(TW, 128)

Mary's speech reveals one of the motives of Irish nationalists' cause for gaining independence from the British occupation. Synge says, on the mouth of Mary, that the attempt of imposing an alien culture on any community and erasing and uprooting the original one will certainly create chaos then end in failure. T. R. Henn analyses Synge's works as “non-political”²⁴. However, Mary's speech shows that Synge is political in his own way.

Synge's realism is shaped by the presentation of “a fragment of life”²⁵, and his greatness is derived from his portrayal of “common interests of life”²⁶. His justification for dramatizing the “vices” and

“wilderness” of Irish peasantry²⁷ and which has displeased many Irish nationalists is written in *The Aran Islands*:

All art that is not conceived by a soul in harmony with some mood of the earth is without value, and unless we are able to produce a myth more beautiful than nature ... it is better to be silent.²⁸

Synge’s drama is rich with various “mood[s] of the earth”. He neither glorifies nor scorns the Irish peasant. But he is honest in dramatizing this community that was, like an outcast, isolated from the outside world. By doing this, he preserves a way of life that was almost disappearing.

Notes

¹W. A. Armstrong, ed., “Introduction” to *Classic Irish Drama* (London: Penguin Books, 1979), p. 7.

²Yeats urged Synge to live in the Aran Islands and employ his artistic genius in portraying its primitive life in his plays.

³Christina Michener, "The Importance of J. M. Synge," (*Irish Literature* 2004. URL:<http://www2.smumn.edu/FacPages/~mgmay/essays/Importance of Synge.pdf>) April 21, 2005.

⁴Alan Price, ed., *J. M. Synge: Collected Works*, vol. II (London: Oxford Univ. Press, 1966), p. 3.

⁵Michener, (*Irish Literature* 2004).

⁶Synge's first visit to the Aran Islands was in 1898.

⁷Arthur C. Lehmann and James E. Myers, *Magic, Witchcraft, and Religion: An Anthropological Study of the Supernatural* (London: Mayfield Publishing Company, 1985), p. 2.

⁸T. R. Henn, ed., "Introduction" to *The Plays and Poems of J. M. Synge* (London: Methuen and Co. Ltd., 1963), p. 34.

⁹*Ibid.*, p. 103. All subsequent references to Synge's *Riders to the Sea*, *In the Shadow of the Glen* and *The Tinker's Wedding* are to this edition and will be incorporated subsequently within the text with page number as follows : (RS,page no.), (SG,page no), (TW,page no).

¹⁰For detailed information see Henn, p. 29.

¹¹"J. M. Synge's The Aran Islands in the context of the Irish Literary Revival," (Syngeweb.URL:<http://www.rackwitz.users4.50megs.com/synge.html>) April 21, 2005.

¹²*The Aran Islands* is a prose work in which Synge records his experience in these islands and narrates the villagers' customs, sufferings and folk tales. Critics study it as a base for understanding Synge's plays.

¹³"J. M. Synge's The Aran Islands" (Syngeweb).

¹⁴Lehmann and Myers, p. 40.

¹⁵Henn, "Introduction," p. 9.

¹⁶Lehmann and Myers, p. 3.

¹⁷Henn, "Introduction," p. 23.

¹⁸P. C. David, *The Tragic View in the Plays of J. M. Synge* (Bareilly: Prakash Book Depot, 1988), p. 24.

¹⁹Alan Price, *Synge and Anglo-Irish Drama* (London: Methuen and Co. Ltd., 1961), pp. 119-20.

²⁰Quoted in Price, ed., *J. M. Synge: Collected Works*, p. 122.

²¹David, p. 28.

²²Sarah Casey and her mother-in-law are characters in *The Tinker's Wedding*.

²³David, p. 50.

²⁴Henn, p. 6.

²⁵Quoted in Price, *Synge and Anglo-Irish Drama*, p. 218.

²⁶Quoted in Armstrong, p. 72.

²⁷*Ibid.*, p. 37.

²⁸Quoted in Nicholas Greene, *Synge: A Critical Study of his Plays* (London: Macmillan, 1979), p. 35.

Bibliography

Armstrong, W. A. ed. "Introduction" to *Classic Irish Drama*.
London: Penguin Books, 1979.

David, P. C. *The Tragic View in the Plays of J. M. Synge*. Bareilly: Prakash Book depot, 1988.

Green, Nicholas. *Synge: A Critical Study of His Plays*. London: Macmillan, 1979.

Henn, T. R. ed. *The Plays and Poems of J. M. Synge*. London: Methuen and Co. Ltd., 1963.

“J. M. Synge’s The Aran Islands in the Context of the Irish Literary Revival.” Synge web.URL:<http://www.rackwitz.users4.50megs.com/Synge.html>. Retrieved April 21, 2005.

Lehmann, Arthur C. and J. E. Myers. *Magic, Witchcraft, and Religion: An Anthropological Study of the Supernatural*. London: Mayfield Publishing Company, 1985.

Michener, Christina. “The Influence and Importance of J. M. Synge.” *Irish Literature* 2004. URL:[http://www2.smumn.edu/FacPages/~mgmay/essays/Importance of Synge. pdf](http://www2.smumn.edu/FacPages/~mgmay/essays/Importance%20of%20Synge.pdf). Retrieved April 21, 2005.

Price, Alan. *Synge and Anglo-Irish Drama*. London: Methuen and Co. Ltd., 1961.

————— ed. *J. M. Synge: Collected Works* vol. II . London: Oxford Univ. Press, 1966.