

THE CELTIC TEMPERAMENT  
AS REFLECTED IN THE WORKS OF  
JOHN MILLINGTON SYNGE

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NOV 11 1938

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1926

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Submitted to the Department of English  
Oklahoma Agricultural and Mechanical College  
In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements  
For the Degree of  
MASTER OF ARTS

1938

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## CONTENTS

	page
Introduction	1
I. Reflections of Impulsiveness	9
II. Reflections of Admiration of Beauty	31
III. Reflections of the Power of the Imagination	48
IV. Reflections of the Celt's Love of Country and Respect for Its Traditions	58
Bibliography	69

## Introduction

### An Analysis of the Celtic Temperament

Until recent years very few students of literature have given much time to the study of Irish literature. This is due to two evident facts: first, the Irishman with whom the general public was acquainted was the boisterous rowdy of the stage, from whom it was thought nothing of cultural value could be gained; second, the greatest of Irish literature was incased, as it were, from the reading public in the Gaelic language. Until Sir Douglas Hyde, Lady Gregory, and others of the Irish Renaissance made their translations of the Irish legends and folk-lore, the world remained ignorant of some of the oldest and choicest selections of European literature. In writing of early Irish literature, Sir Douglas Hyde says: "Of all the traces that man in his earliest period has left behind him, there is nothing except a few drilled stones or flint arrowheads that approaches the antiquity of these tales."<sup>1</sup>

It was by chance that William Butler Yeats, who was associated with Lady Gregory in the Irish National Theatre Society, met in Paris the unique Irish scholar who was to become the society's greatest dramatist. Yeats tells of the meeting in this manner:

Six years ago I was staying in a students' hotel in

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<sup>1</sup> Charles Welsh, Irish Literature, III, xviii.

the Latin Quarter, and somebody, whose name I can not recollect, introduced me to an Irishman, who even poorer than myself, had taken a room at the top of the house. It was J. M. Synge, and I, who thought I knew the name of every Irishman who was working at literature, had never heard of him. He was a graduate of Trinity College, Dublin, too, and Trinity College does not, as a rule, produce artistic minds. . . . He had wandered among people whose life was as picturesque as the middle ages, playing his fiddle to the Italian sailors, and listening to stories in Bavarian woods, but life had cast no light into his writings. He had learned Irish years ago, and had begun to forget it, for the only language that interested him was the conventional language of modern poetry which had begun to make us all weary. . . . I said, 'Give up Paris, you will never create anything by reading Racine, and Arthur Symons will always be a better critic of French literature. Go to the Arran Islands. Live there as if you were one of the people themselves; express a life that has never found expression.' I had just come from Arran, and my imagination was full of those grey islands where men must reap with knives because of the stones.<sup>2</sup>

So John Millington Synge, the wanderer, followed Yeats' advice. He went to Aran<sup>3</sup> and became a part of its life; he lived upon its crude fare of salt fish and eggs; he talked Irish mostly, but he listened to the beautiful English which had grown up in the Irish speaking districts, taking its vocabulary from the time of Mallory and of the translation of the Bible, but getting its idioms and its vivid metaphors from the Irish.

It was in the Aran Islands among the typical Celtic speaking people that Synge found his true self and his artis-

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2 W. B. Yeats, Cutting of an Agate, pp. 36-38.

3 Yeats and Synge did not agree on the spelling of some Irish names. Unless direct quotations are used in this thesis, preference will be given to Synge's manner of spelling.

tic medium and set out to help Lady Gregory "show that Ireland is not the home of buffoonery and of easy sentiment, as it has been represented, but the home of an ancient idealism."<sup>4</sup>

When we speak of the Celtic temperament which we find reflected in the works of John Millington Synge, we mean the sum of the intellectual and the emotional tendencies that mark the Celtic people of Ireland. In The New Larned History we find a distinction in regard to the ancient Celtic families:

The Celtic family, as far back as we can trace it into the darkness of antiquity, consisted of two groups or branches, with linguistic features of their own which marked them off from one another. To the one belonged the ancestors of the people who speak Gaelic in Ireland, the Isle of Man, and the Highlands of the North. . . . The other group is represented in the point of speech by the people of Wales and the Bretons.<sup>5</sup>

So it is the temperament of these Gaelic speaking people who came to Ireland sometime between 400 B. C. and 320 B. C. that we find reflected in the works of Synge. Our author began a special study of the Celtic temperament among the fishermen along the Irish coast from Kerry to Mayo and continued it nearer Dublin and over in the Aran Islands. It was while Synge was in the Aran Islands that he associated with the most nearly primitive people that could be found in, or near, Ireland at the close of the nineteenth century, and

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4 Lady Gregory, Our Irish Theatre, p. 9.

5 The New Larned History, II, 1479.

listened to their legends and folk-lore. During the last ten years of Synge's life, when he was not visiting the Aran Islands, Wicklow, or West Kerry, in his study of the primitive Irish and their language, he was acquainting himself still further with Irish tradition in his study of the ballads and legends of the Tuatha De Danann, of King Conchobor and Cuchulain, and of Finn. Synge realized that the best understanding of Irish history would be gained through a study of the early Irish literature. On this subject Justin McCarthy says:

The real history of most countries, probably of all countries, could be but little understood or appreciated, could indeed hardly be proved to have its claim to authenticity, if we did not take into account the teachings of myths and legends. This is especially to be borne in mind when we are dealing with the story of Ireland. Only by giving full attention to the legends and the poems, the memory of which has been preserved for us for days long before the period when the idea of authentic history came into men's minds, can we understand the character and temperament of the Irish race. The Gaelic populations have ever been deeply absorbed in legendary fancies and mythical creations, and only through the study of such prehistoric literature can we understand the true national character of these peoples. The mythical heroes which a race creates for itself, the aspirations which it embodies and illustrates, the sentiment which it immortalizes in story and in ballad, will help us to understand the real character of the race better than it could be expounded to us by any collection of the best authenticated statistics. . . . We can not understand the history of Ireland without studying the legends and poems which have preserved for our time the aspirations and the ideals of prehistoric Ireland.<sup>6</sup>

Now, what are these characteristics of the Celtic temperament which Synge, consciously or unconsciously, gave

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<sup>6</sup> Justin McCarthy, Irish Literature, I, vii.



to us in his few years of creative artistic activity?

Students of the Celtic speaking people of Ireland agree that impulsiveness is one of the basic characteristics of that people. They are capricious, spontaneously sociable, belligerent, and innately humorous. A second basic characteristic of the Irish is their great appreciation of beauty. This admiration of beauty is shown in their use of a beautiful language, in their appreciation of music, and in their love of nature. Another characteristic which is predominant in the Celtic temperament is a most vivid power of imagination. The last characteristic which we shall mention is the ardent patriotism which the Celt shows by his love for his country and his deep respect for his national traditions.

That students of the Celtic speaking people agree on the four basic characteristics of the Celtic temperament as we have presented them in the preceding paragraph is shown by the selections which we shall quote from eminent authorities.<sup>7</sup>

A. L. Cross gives us an interesting introduction to the Celt. He says:

These old Celts were a rude hardy folk, but hospitable and kind in their crude, boisterous way. Their serious occupation was war, and their diversions rough games and immoderate eating and drinking. . . . They worshipped the force of nature as gods; they created lesser divinities for particular locations, identifying each grove, stream, or spring with its appropriate guardian spirit, and peopled the land with fairies, dwarfs, and

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<sup>7</sup> The Italics are mine in the quotations which follow.

elves. . . . Their attitude toward these gods was one of wonder mingled with fear.<sup>8</sup>

Joseph I. C. Clark in The Glories of Ireland states:

Robustness of frame, vehemence of passion, elevated imagination, signalized this people. Robust, they became athletic and vigorous and excelled in the use of deadly weapons; passionate, they easily went from litigation to blows; imaginative, they leaned toward poetry and song and were strong for whatever religion they practiced. . . . Bravery was a sign of true manhood. . . . High character meant high pride, always ready to give account of itself and strike for its ideals. . . . 'Irritable and bold,' as one historian has it. They were jealous and quick to anger, but light-hearted laughter came easily to the lips of the ancient Irish.<sup>9</sup>

From Anthony S. Wood's article, Synge Stayed at Home by the Fireside, we have Daniel Corkery's estimate of Irish characteristics as he gave it in what Wood calls his magnificent and scholarly work, Synge and Anglo-Irish Literature. Wood quotes Corkery thus:

The three great forces which make up the Irish being are: firstly, the religious consciousness of the people; secondly, Irish nationalism; and thirdly, the land. These forces are ideals which have made Ireland the citadel of the Catholic faith in Northern Europe; have made her people intensely nationalistic, seething inwardly and outwardly against the domination of the English; have made her people lovers of their simple cots among the emerald hills and cobalt lakes of Ireland.<sup>10</sup>

Back in the dim ages of history we read of the Celtic love of country in one of the fifteen commandments of Eolus, leader of the Celtic race from 1368 B. C. to 1335 B. C.

<sup>8</sup> A. L. Cross, Shorter History of England and Great Britain, pp. 10-12.

<sup>9</sup> Joseph I. C. Clark, The Glories of Ireland, pp. 110-111.

<sup>10</sup> Anthony S. Wood, The Catholic World, April, 1935.

"Preserve the glory of thy race - die or live free," was the order of this ancient Celt to his people.

From The Americana we have another analysis of the Celtic temperament:

As for the character of the ancient Celts, we must remember that almost all of our information on the subject comes from the writings of their enemies. These all agree, however, in emphasizing their love of fighting, daring, and adventure; their contempt of death; their honor, devotion, and fickleness, withall; their vanity, self-consciousness, imagination, loquacity, and religiosity; and in this characterization they are corroborated by what we know from the lives of the Celtic people of our own times.<sup>11</sup>

Further substantiation of our analysis is found in another encyclopedia:

The very qualities which lend such charm to Celtic literature - intense poetical imagination, romantic fervor, rapid change of mood - made the Celtic peoples less fit to cope with the ruder but more practical and more resolute peoples that overwhelmed them and drove them irresistibly back toward the Atlantic.<sup>12</sup>

Of the devotion of the Irish to tradition Justin McCarthy says:

Nothing impresses a stranger in Ireland who takes an interest in studying the Irish people more often and more deeply than the manner in which poetic and prehistoric legend finds a home in the Irish mind. The sentiment of nationalism is also a pervading characteristic of Irish literature from prehistoric times down to the present day.<sup>13</sup>

Yeats tells us of the Irishman's love of beauty in the story of a conversation which he had with William Morris in

11 The Americana, VI, 186.

12 Compton's Pictured Encyclopedia, II, 674.

13 Irish Literature, I, vii.

Dublin during Yeats' boyhood days. He says:

William Morris came to Dublin when I was a boy. I had some talk with him about these old stories. . . . He spoke of the Irish account of the Battle of Clontarf and of the Norse account, and said that one saw the Norse and the Irish tempers in the two accounts. The Norseman was interested in the way things were done, but the Irish turned aside, evidently well pleased to be out of so dull a business, to describe beautiful supernatural events.<sup>14</sup>

With such an analysis of the Celtic temperament, substantiated by eminent authorities, we have set for ourselves the problem of showing that in Synge's six plays and in his stories about the Aran Islanders we find reflected these basic characteristics of the Celtic temperament: impulsiveness, admiration of beauty, vivid power of imagination, and an ardent patriotism, shown by the Celt's love for his country and his deep respect for his national traditions.

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14 Cutting of an Agate, p. 4.

## Chapter One

### Reflections of Impulsiveness

The impulsive nature of the Celt is shown by his capriciousness, his spontaneous sociability, his sudden outbursts of belligerency, and his keen natural sense of humor. When we speak of the Celt's capriciousness, we mean his quickly changing mood. He may be in the depths of despair at one moment and in an ecstasy of delight at the next. He has a dual personality. That the Celt is inherently sociable can not be denied. One of his old proverbs, "It is better to be quarreling than to be lonely,"<sup>1</sup> is proof of his natural sociable nature. If he had not been belligerent by nature, circumstances would have made him belligerent. The history of Ireland has been that of one long struggle from the time of Ireland's first settlement until the Irish Free State came into existence in 1922. Ireland has never fought for conquest, only for freedom. From the time of early Roman history there was almost constant warfare waged by empires to subjugate Ireland; and there was an eternal resistance made by the Irish that they might be free. Throughout the eternal struggle against invaders, the Irish race held fast to its natural sense of humor, that attribute of the Celtic spirit which allows its possessor to appreciate the ludicrous elements in a situation, yet at the same time to have

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<sup>1</sup> W. B. Yeats, Modern Irish Poetry, in Irish Literature, III, vii.

a kindly sympathy for human nature. The impulsiveness of the Irish is well pictured by George Moore in one line, "Erin, the tear and the smile in thine eye."<sup>2</sup>

Synge shows to us very clearly the rapid changes of mood which characterize the Irish in The Tinker's Wedding, the most light-hearted of his six plays. Here we find the wild, care-free life of three tinkers who cunningly outwit a priest who thinks more of the money he will receive than he does of helping Michael Byrne and Sarah Casey to live a legalized married life. The mixture of the petty fault-finding and the imaginative in the character of the old drunken reprobate, Mary Byrne, gives charm to the play. First comes the tirade of Mary when she sees Sarah dressed for her wedding to the man with whom she has lived for years:

That's fine things you have on, Sarah Casey; and it's a great stir you're making this day, washing your face. I'm that used to the hammer, I wouldn't hear it at all, but washing is a rare thing, and you're after waking me up, and I having a great sleep in the sun.<sup>3</sup>

Then she bursts into such beautiful lyric as:

That's a sweet tongue you have, Sarah Casey; but if sleep's a grand thing, it's a grand thing to be waking up a day the like of this when there is a warm sun in it, and a kind air, and you'll hear the cuckoos singing and crying out on the top of the hills.<sup>4</sup>

Almost in the same breath she lapses into a complaining mood again in:

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<sup>2</sup> Charles L. Graves, Irish Wit and Humor, in The Glories of Ireland, p. 299.

<sup>3</sup> The Tinker's Wedding, p. 34.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., pp. 34-35.

God help our spirits, Michael; there she is again rousing cranky from the break of dawn. Oh! isn't she a terror since the moon did change (she gets up slowly)? And I'd best be going forward to sell the gallon can.<sup>5</sup>

Again this quick change of mood is found when Sarah, who has set her heart upon a legalized marriage, helps Michael tie the priest in the sack to keep him from telling the peelers about the petty thefts she and Michael have committed. When the peelers have passed on, she makes the priest swear he will leave them to their care-free life before he can be freed from the sack in which he is tied. Then she says, putting what was to have been her wedding ring on the priest's finger:

There's the ring, holy father, to keep you minding of your oath until the end of time; for my heart's scalded with your fooling; and it'll be a long day till I go making talk of marriage or the like of that.<sup>6</sup>

And the tinkers, who were intending to spend all their savings to get the priest to marry them, go with Mary Byrne, declaring that they will spend their gold for something to drink "with the trampers on the green of Clash."

The tinkers show a quick outburst of belligerency when the priest threatens to tell the peelers of their thefts. The tinkers, who have been imploring the priest to perform the marriage ceremony, indignantly set upon him, threaten to whip him with the donkey's reins, gag him, tie him up in dirty sacking, and threaten to pitch him head first into the

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5 Ibid., p. 35.

6 Ibid., p. 51.

bog hole beyond the ditch.

Crude humor is found in the scene where Michael is reluctantly making the wedding ring for Sarah. He complains that "it's the divil's job making a ring," and Sarah answers, "If it's the divil's job, let you mind it, and leave your speeches that would choke a fool."<sup>7</sup> A touch of sarcasm is shown by Michael when Sarah tells him the priest will soon be passing by and they may see him. Michael, with grim humor, answers, "That will be a sacred and sainted joy." There are probably more humorous situations in The Tinker's Wedding than in any other of Synge's plays.

Some of the best reflections of the capriciousness of the Irish people are found in The Playboy of the Western World, the play which caused riots both in Ireland and America when it was first presented. The young Christy Mahon, who comes to the shebeen of Michael James and creates so much interest in and admiration for himself because of the reputed murder of his own father, is the hero of the hour. He is courted by a widow and several young girls; he is employed by Michael James to help his daughter, Pegeen Mike, in the shebeen; he is invited to enter the contests on the village green and carries off the honors of the day; but he loses his popularity instantly when his father, whom he had left for dead, comes seeking his son, whom he describes:

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<sup>7</sup> The Tinker's Wedding, pp. 13-14.



. . . and wasn't he the laughing joke of every female woman where four baronies met, the way the girls would stop their weeding if they seen him coming the road to let a roar at him, and call him the looney of Mahon's.<sup>8</sup>

When Christy sees his father, he again seizes a weapon and strikes his father down. Here we see the quick change of mood when the people, who an hour ago had been Christy's most ardent admirers, now put a rope around his neck and are ready to hang him. He is saved from their impulsiveness by Old Mahon's second recovery. He, too, has had a change of heart; he looks upon his son now with pride and demands his release, saying:

. . . but my son and myself will be going our own way, and we'll have great times from this out telling stories of the villainy of Mayo, and the fools is here.<sup>9</sup>

There has been a great change, too, in Christy, the boy who had run away from home because his father wished him to marry a woman old enough to be his mother; in a frenzy of fear he had run into the shebeen to hide from officers who he thought were pursuing him for striking his father and leaving him for dead; he has been made a hero and he has become, in his own eyes, a hero instead of a frightened runaway; the beautiful Pegeen Mike is in love with him; he has gained so much confidence in himself that he leaves the shebeen in a happy, confident mood, saying:

Ten thousand blessings upon all that's here, for you've turned me a likely gaffer in the end of all,

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<sup>8</sup> The Playboy of the Western World, p. 69.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., p. 110.

the way I'll go romancing through a romping lifetime from this hour to the dawning of the judgment day.<sup>10</sup>

When Christy Mahon, a stranger, whom Shawn introduces as the queer dying fellow who's come up to steal the hens, enters the shebeen, he is greeted with the hospitable remarks of Michael, "Let you come up to the fire. You're looking famished with the cold."<sup>11</sup> Although Christy shows that he fears the policemen are following him, he is given a hearty welcome. Pegeen provides milk and bread for him, has him bathe his blistered feet, and then prepares a comfortable bed for him on the settle. All the while she is talking with him as if he were an acquaintance of long standing. Further sociability is shown by the four village girls who bring Christy a brace of duck's eggs, a pat of butter, a little cut of cake, and a little laying pullet already boiled. The Widow Quin is of a sociable nature too. She joins Christy and the girls and together they eat of the girls' offerings and drink a toast with their arms linked together. Christy is then invited to take part in the games and contests of skill on the village green.

Throughout The Playboy we find reflections of sudden outbursts of belligerency, and in many of these accounts we find the admiration of the Irish for his countrymen's show of belligerency. An amusing illustration of such reflections

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10 Ibid., p. 111.

11 Ibid., p. 19.

is found in Pegeen's answer to Shawn, who has complacently remarked that his townsmen are as good as any other people.

Pegeen says:

As good, is it? Where now will you meet the like of Daneen Sullivan knocked the eye from a peeler, or Marcus Quin, God rest him, got six months for maiming ewes, and he a great warrant to tell stories of holy Ireland till he'd have the old women shedding down tears about their feet. Where will you find the like of them, I'm saying?<sup>12</sup>

When Christy had finished his story, which had been of great interest to Michael, Pegeen, and their friends in the shebeen, they showed their admiration of his belligerent actions in their different ways. Jimmy expressed his admiration in these words: "Bravery's a treasure in a lonesome place, and a lad would kill his father, I'm thinking would face a foxy divil with a pitchpike on the flags of hell."<sup>13</sup> Michael showed his appreciation of Christy's belligerency by employing him as pot-boy with the promise to give him good wages and not to destroy him "with the weight of work." The belligerent spirit shines in Pegeen's actions throughout the play. She resents the smug complacency of Shawn who is "only waiting these days on Father Reilly's dispensation from the bishop" so that he may marry Pegeen. She resents the Widow Quin's interest in Christy, as well as the interest shown by the four village girls, and she joins the mob in planning to hang Christy, even though she has loved him.

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid., p. 12.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., p. 26.

There is no better reflection of sudden outbursts of belligerency than is shown in the actions of the mob. Each one of Christy's new acquaintances, from Shawn, "the soberest of all that was there," to Pegeen, who lifts a lighted sod to scorch Christy's leg, is bent on hanging the unfortunate Christy, who cries out to Shawn:

If I do lay my hands on you, it's the way you'll be at the fall of night, hanging as a scarecrow for the fowls of hell.<sup>14</sup>

Reflections of humor are found in almost every situation in The Playboy. The light, witty chatter of Pegeen, the rude jests of Michael and his friends, the banter of the village girls, and the boasting of Christy all portray the humorous side of the Celtic temperament.

The Well of the Saints, another of Synge's comedies, gives a vivid reflection of the impulsive nature of the Irish in the characters of Mary and Martin Doul, two blind beggars. They have been blind for so long that they do not know that they are ugly and weather-beaten old creatures. Martin is not quite convinced, though, that Mary could be as lovely as his friends have represented her to be and yet possess the queer cracked voice he hears when Mary speaks to him. Martin thinks it would be better if they could see themselves for one hour, or even a minute, that they might know they were "the finest man and the finest woman of the seven counties of the east." Mary doesn't agree with him.

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14 Ibid., p. 108.

She says:

. . . they're a bad lot those that have their sight and they do have great joy, the time they do be seeing a grand thing, to let on they don't see it at all, and to be telling fool's lies, the like of what Molly Byrne was telling to yourself.<sup>15</sup>

. . . Ah, there's a power of villainy walking the world, Martin Doul, among them that do be gadding around with their gaping eyes, and their sweet words, and they with no sense in them at all.<sup>16</sup>

As soon, however, as Timmy, the middle-aged smith, tells Mary about the magic water that will restore her sight, she changes completely, and says eagerly:

Maybe we could send us a young lad to bring us the water. I could wash a naggin bottle in the morning, and I'm thinking Patch Ruadh would go for it, if we gave him a good drink, and the bit of money we have hid in the thatch.<sup>17</sup>

Timmy tells Mary that she will not have to send for the water as "a fine holy man will bring it, a saint of the Almighty God." Mary is eager now to have their sight restored. She wishes Martin to see her as the beautiful woman she thinks herself to be. "Maybe," she says, "I'd have time to walk down and get the big shawl I have below, for I do look my best, I have heard them say, when I'm dressed up with that thing on my head."<sup>18</sup> The miracle is performed, and Martin and Mary see each other as they really are: Mary, "a wrinkled wizened hag"; Martin, "with the fat legs on him, and the

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15 The Well of the Saints, p. 18.

16 Ibid., p. 19.

17 Ibid., p. 23.

18 Ibid., p. 26.

little neck like a ram." Again their moods are changed. Disappointment in the appearance of each other makes them wish they had never regained their sight. From two happy, carefree old beggars they have been changed into two discontented old people who must now work for a living. Disappointment in each other and in their new mode of life causes them to hate each other and finally to separate. Martin leads a dreary life working for Timmy and dodging Mary, who he is conceited enough to think is following him. Molly Byrne, a fine-looking girl with fair hair, is Martin's ideal of a woman. He makes love to her and is repulsed in Molly's own crude way. Timmy, who is going to marry Molly, joins Molly in abusing Martin. He orders Martin to leave the shop, which has been Martin's home since his separation from Mary. Martin again loses his sight and turns back to Mary for comfort. She too is blind. They hear the saint ringing his bell as he approaches them, and they hide to keep from having their sight again restored. Mary's renewal of pride in her Martin is shown in her words to him when he is seeking a hiding place and says he fears he will not be able to find a safe place. She says:

You'd find the way surely. You're a grand man the world knows at finding your way, winter or summer, if there was deep snow in it itself, or thick grass and leaves, maybe, growing from the earth.<sup>19</sup>

Reflections of belligerency are found throughout The Well of the Saints. Martin and Mary Doull well illustrate

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid., p. 76.

the Celtic adage: "It is better to be quarreling than to be lonely." They were impatient with each other and with their associates, their impatience mounting often to anger that led to blows; yet they preferred this hectic life rather than a life of solitude. Martin quarrels with Timmy when he comes to tell them of the magic water; Timmy is going away without telling his story, but is stopped by Mary, who can disguise her feelings better than Martin can. She takes Timmy by the coat and says, "You're not huffy with myself, and let you tell me the whole story and don't be fooling me more."<sup>20</sup> Timmy, easily mollified, tells them about the Saint. When Martin and Mary first see each other, a vivid reflection of belligerency is exhibited. Martin cries out:

Your hair and your big eyes, is it? . . . I'm telling you there isn't a wisp on any gray mare on the ridge of the world isn't finer than the dirty twist on your head. There isn't two eyes in any starving sow isn't finer than the eyes you were calling blue like the sea.<sup>21</sup>

Mary responds with:

It's the devil cured you this day with your talking of sows; it's the devil cured you this day, I'm saying, and drove you crazy with lies.<sup>22</sup>

They continue their quarrel until it reaches a climax in

Mary's cry:

Maybe if I hit you a strong blow you'd be blind again, and having what you want. . . <sup>23</sup>

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., pp. 24-25.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., p. 41.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., p. 41.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., p. 42.

Let you keep off from me now if you wouldn't have me strike out the little handful of brains you have about on the road.<sup>24</sup>

When they are interrupted by Timmy, Martin says:

Let me hit her one good one, for the love of the Almighty God, and I'll be quiet after till I die.<sup>25</sup>

Martin and Timmy are constantly bickering while Martin is working at Timmy's forge. Timmy controls his anger and drives Martin away without carrying out his threat of beating him when Martin makes love to Molly Byrne. Another vivid expression of belligerency is found after Martin strikes the can of magic water with his stick and it is spilled on the ground. The people throw stones at Martin and tell him to go on from that place lest the Lord send storms and droughts upon them to punish him. Martin picks up a stone and cries:

Keep off now, the yelping lot of you, or it's more than one maybe will get a bloody head on him with the pitch of my stone.<sup>26</sup>

Crude humor and pathos are exhibited when Martin comes from the church after having his sight restored and mistakes Molly Byrne for Mary. The people laugh heartily at him as he goes from girl to girl thinking each one is Mary, who he has been led to believe is a beautiful woman. The scene is pathetic when Martin sees Mary, the poor old wizened hag, and realizes that the people have deceived him. One's sympathy

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid., p. 42.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., pp. 42-43.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., p. 89.



goes out to both of the old beggars when Mary sees Martin and says:

It's on your two knees you should be thanking the Lord God that you're not looking on yourself, for if it was yourself you seen, you'd be running round in a short while like the old screeching mad-woman is running round in the glen.<sup>27</sup>

Some splendid reflections of the Celt's impulsiveness are shown in a short one-act play, The Shadow of the Glen. In this play the principal character, Nora Burke, makes a pathetic fight against the loneliness of her life with Dan, her aged husband, in the last cottage at the head of a long glen in County Wicklow. Nora is just a solitary woman, whose human instinct craves freedom and companionship with the young. She invites a tramp who is seeking shelter from the rain into her humble home. He is startled when he sees a corpse lying on the bed. Nora explains that her husband died at "the time the shadow was going up through the glen," and she has notified no one of his death because it is too late for a lone woman to be out in the glen. Nora is of a sociable nature and talks with the tramp of her lonely life in this place. She gives him her husband's pipe to smoke, saying:

I've no pipes saving his own, stranger, but they're sweet pipes to smoke.<sup>28</sup>

The tramp describes her as "a grand woman to talk." While Nora is away on an errand, the tramp finds that Dan is

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., p. 40.

<sup>28</sup> In the Shadow of the Glen, p. 11.

feigning death to test his wife's feelings toward him. She returns and is entertaining Micheal, a young herd, in the same room with the tramp and the supposed corpse. Here we find some splendid reflections of capriciousness. Nora and Micheal are counting Dan's money and planning to be married as soon as "himself will be quiet awhile in the Seven Churches." Much to the surprise and alarm of Nora and Micheal, Dan springs from his bed and threatens Micheal with a big stick. Micheal instantly changes from the ardent lover to a frightened herd, saying:

Get me out of it, Nora, for the love of God. He always did what you bid him, and I'm thinking he would do it now.<sup>29</sup>

Dan orders Nora from his house and threatens to beat the herd with his stick. His mood changes, though, when Nora goes out into the stormy night with the tramp, and he sits down in a friendly mood and bids Micheal drink with him. The capriciousness of the Irish is well reflected in last scene in the play. Nora had expected to marry a young man who had promised her:

. . . it's a fine life you'll have now with a young man, a fine life surely. . .<sup>30</sup>

Instead of marrying him, she goes out into the storm with the tramp. As she leaves her door, she says to the tramp:

. . . but you've a fine bit of talk, stranger, and it's with yourself I'll go.<sup>31</sup>

29 Ibid., p. 33.

30 Ibid., p. 33.

31 Ibid., pp. 38-39.

Micheal just as easily turns away from Nora and sits down to drink with Dan, who says:

I was thinking to strike you, Micheal Dara, but you're a quiet man, God help you, and I don't mind you at all.<sup>32</sup>

As Dan drinks to Micheal's good health, Micheal responds with:

God reward you, Daniel Burke, and may you have a long life, and a quiet life, and good health with it.<sup>33</sup>

Dan and Nora show a spirit of belligerency: Dan when he springs out of bed with his stick, intending to give Micheal a beating; Nora, in her angry retorts to Dan when she is driven from her home. Anger radiates from her as she says to Dan:

For it's bad you are living, and it's bad you'll be when you're dead.<sup>34</sup>

A fine bit of ironical humor is expressed when Nora goes out into the storm and Dan sits down with her one-time lover to drink a glass of whisky.

While Synge has given us many interesting reflections of the impulsiveness of the Celts in the four plays which we have already discussed, we must go to his account of his life in the Aran Islands for our most vivid reflections of the Celtic temperament. It was to the Aran Islands that Synge went to learn from the most primitive Celts in Europe their language and their mysteriously attractive folk-lore. It is to the middle island of Inishmaan that we owe Synge's great

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32 Ibid., p. 40.

33 Ibid., p. 40.

34 Ibid., p. 35.

tragedy which we shall discuss in another chapter of this thesis. The story was here told to him which formed the germ of this great island tragedy, Riders to the Sea. It was here also that he heard the story which gave him the idea for In the Shadow of the Glen. Synge wrote in his foreword to The Aran Islands that he had given a direct account of his life on the islands and of what he met with among the people, inventing nothing and changing nothing that was essential to a true picture of the inhabitants and their environment. Synge settled himself in these desolate islands, adapted himself to the crude conditions of life, took the people as he found them, gained their confidence, and from such association gave us his reflections of the Celtic temperament.

While our author was in Aranmor, or the Island of Inishmore, he sat over a turf fire and listened to the murmur of Gaelic that came from a little public house under his room. The old woman of the house secured for him a teacher of the Gaelic language, and it is from this old blind man that we get some of our best reflections of impulsiveness. Mr. Synge says of him:

As we talked he sat huddled over the fire, shaking and blind, yet his face was indescribably pliant, lighting up with an ecstasy of humour when he told me anything that had a point of wit or malice, and growing sombre and desolate again when he spoke of religion or the fairies.<sup>35</sup>

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35 The Aran Islands, p. 23.

One one occasion Synge and his teacher were exploring one of the ancient beehive dwellings of Inishmore that were still in perfect preservation. They had to crawl into the dwelling on their hands and knees. The old guide made a crude, humorous remark; then in the next instant he sat down in the middle of the floor and recited old Irish poetry, with such an excellent purity of intonation that it brought tears to Synge's eyes, although he understood little of the meaning of the poetry.

On his first visit to the islands, Synge stayed in Aranmor only a short while, then moved on to Inishmaan, where he said he found Gaelic more generally used, and the life the most primitive that was left in Europe. It seems that the climatic conditions in this island were as changeable as the temperament of the people. Synge says:

When we set off it was a brilliant morning of April, and the green, glittering waves seemed to toss the canoe among themselves, yet as we drew near this island a sudden thunderstorm broke out behind the rocks we were approaching, and lent a momentary tumult to this still vein of the Atlantic.<sup>36</sup>

Synge was struck with the courtesy of the old woman of the house where he stayed in Aranmor. He could understand little that she said, but he noticed her grace as she motioned her visitors to their chairs or stools, according to their ages, as they crowded in to see the stranger who had come among them. The people were noticeably sociable. War

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36 Ibid., p. 35.

seemed to be the favorite topic of conversation among the men - another vivid reflection of the belligerency of the Celt.

A splendid reflection of impulsiveness is shown in Synge's description of the loading of cattle which were shipped to the mainland to a fair. All of the inhabitants of the village were at the pier a little after dawn. Troops of cattle were driven, mostly by women, from all directions. The pier was crowded by a great number of people who enjoyed watching the loading of the cattle. The owners of the cattle with their wives and sisters, who went with them to prevent the men from being too extravagant in Galway, were packed as tightly as they could stand on the boats with the cattle. The loading was a dangerous undertaking; but while it was going on, crowds of girls and women collected at the edge of the cliff and shouted down a confused babble of praise and satire. Soon after the loading of the cattle took place, a rickety old boat from Connemara came up and began unloading. The men of Inishmore sat along the edge of the pier and made gibes about the rottenness of the boat's timber until the owners grew wild with rage.

A beautiful description of a week of sweeping fogs followed by a day of sunshine is given, and then Synge writes:

On the low rocks to the east I see a number of red and grey figures hurrying about their work. The continual passing in this island between the misery of last night and the splendor of to-day, seems to create an affinity between the moods of these people and the moods of varying rapture and dismay that are frequent in artists, and in certain forms of aliena-

tion. Yet it is only in the intonation of a few sentences or some old fragment of melody that I catch the real spirit of the island, for in general the men sit together and talk with endless iteration of the tides and fish, and of the price of kelp in Connemara.<sup>37</sup>

Another vivid reflection of impulsiveness is found in Synge's description of a funeral and burial in Inishmaan. The old woman who was buried had lived in a cottage next to that occupied by the author. All the evening before he had heard the strokes of a hammer in the yard, where a group of idlers had collected to watch the old woman's nearest of kin make her coffin. Just before the funeral poteen was served to the men who stood about upon the road, and a portion was served to Synge in his room. The coffin was sewn in sail cloth, and carried by three cross-poles lashed to the top. Nearly all the men and all of the oldest women joined in the procession. While the grave was being opened, the women began the customary wild keen, or mourning for the dead. Again nature showed her changeable moods. When the funeral procession started, the morning was full of sunshine; but as the coffin was lowered into the grave, the sound of thunder was heard and hail stones began to fall. As soon as the grave was covered, the women who had been engaged in the keening, and who were still shaken with sobs, began to talk of the trivial affairs of their daily life. The whole group walked back to the village, talking and joking as if they were merely coming from the pier.

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid., pp. 62-63.

Synge found that the island women were more sociable with him when they were not accompanied by the men. He writes:

The women and girls, when they have no men with them, tried to make fun with me. . . . Quiet as these women are on ordinary occasions, when two or three of them are gathered together in their holiday petticoats and shawls, they are as wild and capricious as the women who live in towns.<sup>38</sup>

Our author shows the changeable temperament of the Irish men in a vivid description of the unloading of ships on the dangerous rocky coasts of the islands. He describes the process in these words:

When the steamer is within a mile of the slip, the curaghs are put out and range themselves - there are usually from four to a dozen - in two lines at some distance from the shore.

The moment she comes in among them there is a short but desperate struggle for good places at her side. The men are lolling on their oars talking with the dreamy tone which comes with the rocking of the waves. The steamer lies to, and in an instant their faces become distorted with passion, while the oars bend and quiver with the strain. For one minute they seem utterly indifferent to their own safety and that of their friends and brothers. Then the sequence is decided, and they begin to talk again with the dreamy tone that is habitual to them, while they make fast and clamber up into the steamer.<sup>39</sup>

On one of his trips to the island Synge carried his violin along so he could play for the young people to dance. One evening as he was carrying his violin down to the schoolmaster's house where the young folk were to gather, he heard a man and woman quarreling fiercely. Crowds had collected

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<sup>38</sup> Ibid., pp. 76-77.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., p. 95.



to listen to the quarrel. A woman told Synge that the people, who had now begun to fight, were near relatives who lived side by side and often fought over the most trivial affairs, yet they were as good friends as ever the next day. The fight lasted for four hours, and the man who brought the news of its ending to the dance said:

They have been at it for four hours, and now they're tired. Indeed it's time they were, for you'd rather be listening to a man killing a pig than to the noise they were letting out of them.<sup>40</sup>

The keen sense of humor which is often reflected in Synge's works is best shown in The Aran Islands in the stories told by the old men. With one of the most humorous of these we shall conclude our discussion of Synge's reflections of the impulsive nature of the Celts. Our author relates:

I remember old Pat Dirane used to be telling us he was once out on the cliffs, and saw a big rabbit sitting down in a hole under a flagstone. He called a man who was with him, and they put a hook on the end of a stick and ran it down into the hole. Then a voice called up to them —

'Ah, Phaddrick, don't hurt me with the hook!'

'Pat was a great rogue,' said the old man. 'Maybe you remember the bits of horns he had like handles on the end of his sticks? Well, one day there was a priest over and he said to Pat —

'Is it the devil's horns you have on your sticks, Pat?'

'I don't rightly know,' said Pat, 'but if it is, it's the devil's milk you've been drinking, since you were able to drink, and the devil's flesh you've

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40 Ibid., pp. 188-189.

been eating and the devil's butter you've been putting on your bread, for I've seen the like of them horns on every old cow through the country.<sup>41</sup>

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41 Ibid., pp. 189-190.

## Chapter Two

### Reflections of Admiration of Beauty

When Synge began writing for the Irish stage, he felt that people had grown tired of the false joy of the musical comedy and the unreality of the intellectual modern drama. He believed that a rich joy could be found only in what is superb and wild in reality. When he was tramping through Europe, he found that superb wildness, but it was in Ireland and on the Aran Islands that he found the most superb wildness in nature and the perfect medium with which to present this joy of reality on the stage. Maurice Bourgeois, one of the best of Synge's biographers, tells us that our author was not a true-born Irishman although he was born in Ireland. His parents were Anglo-Irish. Bourgeois says, however, that, owing to Ireland's capacity for assimilating foreign elements, the English who go to Ireland often become "more Irish than the Irish themselves." So it is not surprising to find that Synge was Irish in his admiration of beauty, although he had to come back to Ireland to find himself. It was here that he discovered in the people and the scenery all that lay concealed within his own soul.

As a boy John M. Synge was much given to solitary wanderings. He explored the Wicklow mountains near his boyhood home, learned about the native birds, flowers, and trees, and picked up a knowledge of Irish from the peasantry. Of this time in his life he writes:

I knew the stars, the flowers, and the birds,  
 The grey and wintry sides of many glens,  
 And did but half remember human words,  
 In converse with the mountains, moors, and fens.<sup>1</sup>

He also in his youthful days showed a passionate love for music; he taught himself to play the flute and studied piano and violin. Is it any wonder then that a man who had such an appreciation and knowledge of the beautiful in life and nature should bring to the stage characters who reflected this same intense admiration of beauty?

Synge believed that every speech in his plays must be "as fully flavored as nut or apple," and it was the English language as spoken by the primitive Aran Islanders which he used to flavor his writings. It is the rich, rounded speech of the Irish countryman. Synge said he had never, or hardly ever, used a phrase in his writings which he had not heard used by the Irish peasantry. From his boyhood days he had been a student of many languages, but the most attractive of all to him was the Irish as spoken by the people of the Aran Islands. In the words of L. A. G. Strong, "This language has a flexibility that no English dialect can approach."<sup>2</sup> It freely omits the relative, as shown in the following extracts from The Playboy of the Western World.

It should have been great and bitter torments did

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1 Francis Bickley, J. M. Synge and the Irish Dramatic Movement, p. 10.

2 L. A. G. Strong, Living Age, Sept. 9, 1922.

rouse your spirits to a deed of blood.<sup>3</sup>

Wait till you lay eyes on her leaky thatch is growing more pasture for her buck goat than her square of fields. . . 4

The auxiliary is often omitted, as:

There was a young man with a drift of mountain ewes, and he running after them this way and that.<sup>5</sup>

They're coming now carrying things in their hands, and they walking as easy as you'd see a child walk who'd have a dozen eggs hid in her bib.<sup>6</sup>

The compound personal pronoun is frequently used instead of the personal:

And what is it herself has, making sounds in her hands?<sup>7</sup>

It's the will of God, I'm thinking, himself should be seeing to you now.<sup>8</sup>

Bickley says of the language used by the Aran Islanders:

He (Synge) found the English of these people, whose proper speech is Gaelic, a 'curiously simple yet dignified language' spoken with a 'delicate exotic intonation that was full of charm'; and these qualities of simplicity and dignity, rhythm, delicacy, and strangeness are the qualities of his prose.<sup>9</sup>

The Irishman's love of his language is surpassed only by his love of nature and of music. Perhaps nothing brings

<sup>3</sup> The Playboy of the Western World, p. 37.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., p. 39.

<sup>5</sup> In the Shadow of the Glen, p. 16.

<sup>6</sup> The Well of the Saints, p. 26.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., p. 28.

<sup>8</sup> The Playboy of the Western World, p. 15.

<sup>9</sup> J. M. Synge and the Irish Dramatic Movement, pp. 27-28.

home so strikingly to us Ireland's love of music as the fact that the harp is emblazoned on the national arms. Pope wrote of Ireland as "the mother of sweet singers." W. H. Grattan Flood in The Glories of Ireland states that Ireland can proudly point to a musical history of over two thousand years. Synge uses language in his plays which seems to pass into music. In writing a criticism of The Shadow of the Glen, Maurice Bourgeois stated:

Dramatic composition, in this and subsequent plays of his, becomes closely akin to the art of the symphony; the very scenario strikes one as the work of a musical composer; drama at this stage seems to compare with a beautiful organ voluntary. To begin with, there is an extremely elaborate symphony and antiphony of sound in the very dialect spoken by his characters.<sup>10</sup>

A splendid example of such an impression as Bourgeois described is found in Nora Burke's conversation with Micheal Dara. One could not fail to see the beauty of language in this selection:

I do be thinking in the long nights it was a big fool I was that time, Micheal Dara, for what good is a bit of a farm with cows on it, and sheep on the back hills, when you do be sitting looking out from a door the like of that door, and seeing nothing but the mists rolling down the bog, and 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.<sup>11</sup>

Despite the fact that Nora is unhappy and in a complaining mood, she has given us a beautiful description of nature.

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<sup>10</sup> John Millington Synge and the Irish Theatre, pp. 153-154.

<sup>11</sup> The Shadow of the Glen, p. 29.

And again what better reflection of admiration of beauty can we find than the tramp's speech to Nora Burke as he goes out into the stormy night with her - the young wife driven by a jealous old man from her humble home in the lonesome glen?

Come along with me now, lady of the house, and it's not my blather you'll be hearing only, but you'll be hearing the herons crying out over the black lakes, and you'll be hearing the grouse and the owls with them, and the larks and the big thrushes when the days are warm, and it's not from the like of them you'll be hearing a talk of getting old like Peggy Cavanagh, and losing the hair off you, and the light of your eyes, but it's fine songs you'll be hearing when the sun goes up, and there'll be no old fellow wheezing, the like of a sick sheep, close to your ear.<sup>12</sup>

In his reply to Mary Doul's complaint about Molly Byrne, old Martin shows his admiration for beauty in the following selection:

If it's lies she does be telling she's a sweet, beautiful voice you'd never tire to be hearing, if it's only the pig she'd be calling, or crying out in the long grass, maybe, after her hens. It should be a fine, soft, rounded woman, I'm thinking, would have a voice the like of that.<sup>13</sup>

Even though Martin is a dark, ragged beggar, his language is poetic, and his mind's eye gives him a vivid picture of a beautiful woman with a sweet voice of which he could never tire. And again Martin grows poetic when he regains his sight and ecstatically cries:

Oh, glory be to God, I see now surely . . . I see the walls of the church, and the green bits of fern

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., p. 38.

<sup>13</sup> The Well of the Saints, p. 18.

in them, and yourself, holy father, and the great width of sky.<sup>14</sup>

When Martin sees Molly Byrne and thinks she is his wife, he shows his love of beauty in another poetic outburst:

The blessing of God on this day, and them that brought me the Saint, for it's grand hair you have, and soft skin, and eyes would make the saints, if they were dark awhile and seeing again, fall down out of the sky.<sup>15</sup>

Michael is not alone in his appreciation of beauty, for Mary, his ugly old companion, shows her appreciation of the beauties of nature in these words to Michael:

There's the sound of one of them twittering yellow birds do be coming in the spring-time from beyond the sea, and there'll be a fine warmth now in the sun, and a sweetness in the air, the way it'll be a grand thing to be sitting here quiet and easy smelling the things growing up, and budding from the earth.<sup>16</sup>

Martin answers:

I'm smelling the furze a while back sprouting on the hill, and if you'd hold your tongue you'd hear the lambs of Grianan, though it's near drowned their crying is with the full river making noises in the glen.<sup>17</sup>

When Martin again loses his sight, he finds beauty in nature with his other senses. In his beautiful lyrical language he says:

Ah, it's ourselves had finer sights than the like of them, I'm telling you, when we were sitting awhile back hearing the birds and bees humming in every weed of the ditch, or when we'd be smelling the sweet,

14 Ibid., pp. 36-37.

15 Ibid., pp. 37-38.

16 Ibid., p. 74.

17 Ibid., pp. 74-75.



beautiful smell does be rising in the warm nights, when you do hear the swift flying things racing in the air, till we'd be looking up in our own minds into a grand sky, and seeing lakes, and big rivers, and fine hills for taking the plough.<sup>18</sup>

In the following beautiful love scene from The Playboy Synge uses the Gaelic-English idiom as a perfect instrument of poetic speech. One cannot fail to notice the rhythm and accent of musical utterance, colored and emphasized by the Gaelic-English idiom, in the expressions of Christy and Pegeen Mike:

Christy. Starting from you, is it? I will not, then, and when the airs is warming in four months, or five, it's then yourself and me should be pacing Neifin in the dews of night, the times sweet smells do be rising, and you'd see a little shiny new moon, maybe sinking on the hills.

Pegeen. And it's that kind of a poacher's love you'd make, Christy Mahon, on the sides of Neifin, when the night is down?

Christy. It's little you'll think if my love's a poacher's, or an earl's itself, when you'll feel my two hands stretched around you, and I squeezing kisses on your puckered lips, till I'd feel a kind of pity for the Lord God is all ages sitting lonesome in his golden chair.

Pegeen. That'll be right fun, Christy Mahon, and any girl would walk her heart out before she'd meet a young man was your like for eloquence, or talk, at all.

Christy. Let you wait, to hear me talking, till we're astray in Erris, when Good Friday's by, drinking a sup from a well, and making mighty kisses with our wetted mouths, or gaming in a gap or sunshine, with yourself stretched back unto your necklace, in the flowers of the earth.

Pegeen. I'd be nice so, is it?

Christy. If the mitred bishops seen you that time,

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid., pp. 82-83.

they'd be the like of the holy prophets, I'm thinking, do be straining the bars of Paradise to lay eyes on the Lady Helen of Troy, and she abroad, pacing back and forward, with a nosegay in her golden shawl.

Pegeen. And what is it I have, Christy Mahon, to make me fitting entertainment for the like of you, that has such poet's talking, and such bravery of heart?

Christy. Isn't there the light of seven heavens in your heart alone, the way you'll be an angel's lamp to me from this out, and I abroad in the darkness, spearing salmons in the Owen, or the Carrowmore?

Pegeen. If I was your wife, I'd be along with you, Christy Mahon, the way you'd see I was a great hand at coaxing bailiffs, or coining funny nick-names for the stars of night.

Christy. You, is it? Taking your death in the hailstones, or in the fogs of dawn.

Pegeen. Yourself and me would shelter easy in a narrow bush, but we're only talking, maybe, for this would be a poor, thatched place to hold a fine lad is the like of you.

Christy. If I wasn't a good Christian, it's on my naked knees I'd be saying my prayers and paters to every jackstraw you have roofing your head, and every stony pebble is paving the laneway to your door.

Pegeen. If that's the truth, I'll be burning candles from this out to the miracles of God that have brought you from the south to-day, and I, with my gowns bought ready, the way that I can wed you, and not wait at all.<sup>19</sup>

In the preface to a volume of his poems, Synge wrote: "In these days poetry is usually a flower of evil or good; but it is the timber of poetry that wears most, and there is no timber that has not its roots among the clay and worms." It was to the clay and worms then - the profound and common interests of the Aran Island people - that our

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19 The Playboy of the Western World, pp. 89-91.

author turned for the timber that wears most. It was there that he found some of his best instances of Irish love of beauty in language, music, and nature. When Synge first went to the Aran Islands, he was impressed with the language used by the simple island folk. Although of a reticent disposition when among his friends in England or on the continent, our author was perfectly at ease in conversation with his friends of the islands. He tells of meeting two little girls near Killeany, and of drawing them into conversation. He says:

They spoke with a delicate exotic intonation that was full of charm, and told me with a sort of chant how they guide 'ladies and gintlemins' in the summer to all that is worth seeing in their neighborhood, and sell them pampooties and maidenhair ferns, which are common among the rocks.<sup>20</sup>

On his first visit to the islands Synge found that many of the natives spoke English with a slight foreign accent that differed a great deal from the brogue of Galway. Many used the Gaelic language, and the author was surprised at the abundance and fluency of the foreign tongue.

Between his visits to the islands a branch of the Gaelic league was organized in Inishmaan, and our author, upon his next visit, found three little girls walking through the village each Sunday afternoon, ringing a shrill hand bell to call the women and girls down to the school house. Here he found these women spending their only afternoon of freedom in laborious study of ancient Gaelic for no reason except

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<sup>20</sup> The Aran Islands, p. 27.

reverence for the Gaelic language. In the cottage where Synge stayed, he heard no English from the women except when they were speaking to the pigs or dogs, or were reading a letter written in English. Many of the inhabitants used two languages, the Gaelic and the English. Once when Mr. Synge met a former guide, he addressed the author in this manner: "Bh-fuill tu go maith? (Are you well?) Where is your bag?"<sup>21</sup>

In speaking of the boatmen of Inishmaan, the author said that their ancient Gaelic seemed so full of divine simplicity that he would have liked to turn the prow to the west and row with them forever.

An old man of the sea, when asked by Synge his opinion of the Gaelic language, said:

It can never die out because there's no family in the place can live without a bit of field for potatoes, and they have only the Irish words for all that they do in the fields. They sail their new boats - their hookers - in English, but they sail a curagh oftener in Irish, and in the fields they have the Irish alone. It can never die out, and when the people begin to see it fallen very low, it will rise up again like the phoenix from its own ashes.<sup>22</sup>

The temperamental nature of our author was aroused by the wild and superb music of the islands - the music that comes from the heart of the simple folk. It even haunted Synge in his dreams. With musical language he tells of one particular dream:

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21 Ibid., p. 143.

22 Ibid., p. 182.

Some dreams I have had in this cottage seem to give strength to the opinion that there is a psychic memory attached to certain neighborhoods. Last night, after walking in a dream among buildings with strangely intense light on them, I heard a faint rhythm of music beginning far away on some stringed instrument. It came closer to me, gradually increasing in quickness and volume with an irresistibly definite progression. When it was quite near the sound began to move in my nerves and blood, and to urge me to dance with them. I knew that if I yielded I would be carried away to some moment of terrible agony, so I struggled to remain quiet, holding my knees together with my hands. The music increased continually, sounding like the strings of harps, tuned to a forgotten scale, and having a resonance as searching as the strings of a 'cello. Then the luring excitement became more powerful than my will, and my limbs moved in spite of me. In a moment I was swept away in a whirlwind of notes. My breath and my thoughts and every impulse of my body, became a form of the dance, till I could not distinguish between the instruments and the rhythm and my own person or consciousness. For awhile it seemed an ecstasy where all existence was lost in a vortex of movement. I could not think there had ever been a life beyond the whirling of the dance. Then with a shock the ecstasy turned to an agony and rage. I struggled to free myself, but seemed only to increase the passion of the steps I moved to. When I shrieked I could only echo the notes of the rhythm. At last with a moment of uncontrollable frenzy I broke back to consciousness and awoke. I dragged myself trembling to the window of the cottage and looked out. The moon was glittering across the bay, and there was no sound anywhere on the island.<sup>23</sup>

Synge shows his own love of natural beauty in his stories of the Aran Islands. He tells us that he used to lie on the stone walls of an old fort for hours and watch the clouds, the sea, and the red clothed figures moving about the cottages, sending up an occasional fragment of conversation or of island melodies. One can not fail to see the beauty of the island and its bays in the poetic descriptions which follow:

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23 Ibid., pp. 103-104.

The bay was shrouded in the greys of coming rain, yet the thinness of the cloud threw a silvery light on the sea, and an unusual depth of blue to the mountains of Connemara.<sup>24</sup>

It has cleared, and the sun is shining with a luminous warmth that makes the whole island glisten with the splendor of a gem, and fills the sky and sea with a radiance of blue light.<sup>25</sup>

Many of the birds display themselves before me with the vanity of barbarians, performing in strange evolutions as long as I am in sight, and returning to their ledge of rock when I am gone. Some are wonderfully expert, and cut graceful figures for an inconceivable time without a flap of their wings, growing so absorbed in their own dexterity that they often collide with one another in their flight, an incident always followed by a wild outburst of abuse. Their language is easier than Gaelic, and I seem to understand the greater part of their cries, though I am not able to answer. There is one plaintive note which they take up in the middle of their usual babble with extraordinary effect, and pass on from one to another along the cliff with a sort of an inarticulate wail, as if they remembered for an instant the horror of the mist.<sup>26</sup>

The islands evidently brought to light all the artistic and poetic feelings of Synge, and he lays bare his very soul in the following vivid descriptions:

A strange tranquility has come over the island this morning, as happens sometimes on Sunday, filling the two circles of sea and sky with the quiet of a church. The one landscape that is here lends itself with singular power to this suggestion of grey luminous cloud. There is no wind, and no definite light. Aranmor seems to sleep upon a mirror, and the hills of Connemara look so near that I am troubled by the width of the bay that lies before them, touched this morning with individual expression one sees sometime in a lake.<sup>27</sup>

A superb evening light was lying over the island, which made me rejoice at our delay. Looking back

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24 Ibid., p. 53.

25 Ibid., p. 61.

26 Ibid., p. 62.

27 Ibid., p. 75.

there was a golden haze behind the sharp edges of the rock, and a long wake from the sun, which was making jewels of the bubbling left by the oars.<sup>28</sup>

About the sunset the clouds broke and the storm turned to a hurricane. Bars of purple cloud stretched across the sound where immense waves were rolling from the west, wreathed with snowy phantasies of spray. Then there was the bay full of green delirium, and the Twelve Pins touched with mauve and scarlet in the east. The suggestion from this world of inarticulate power was immense, and now at midnight, when the wind is abating, I am still trembling and flushed with exultation.<sup>29</sup>

Deirdre of the Sorrows was the last of Synge's plays, and was unfinished when he died. Lady Gregory and Yeats had it published as Synge left it. Although this great tragedy is based on the old and often retold story of King Conchubor, Naisi, and Deirdre, our author has told it in a more charming manner than any other story teller or poet has done. He gives universality to the play by making Deirdre the eternal victim of love, the woman who resigns herself to the inevitable passing away of what she holds dearest in life.

Many vivid reflections of the Celt's admiration of beauty are found in Deirdre. Could there be a greater appreciation of the beauties of nature than is shown in the words of Lavarcham, Deirdre's nurse, as she talks with Conchubor? She says:

I'm after serving you two score of years, and I'll tell you this night, Conchubor, she's little call to

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28 Ibid., p. 77.

29 Ibid., p. 114.

mind an old woman when she has the birds to school her, and the pools in the rivers where she goes bathing in the sun. I'll tell you if you seen her that time, with her white skin, and her red lips, and the blue water, and the ferns about her, you'd know, maybe, and you greedy itself, it wasn't for your like she was born at all.<sup>30</sup>

Conchubor has been scolding Lavarcham because she has allowed Deirdre to spend her time in the glen gathering flowers and nuts instead of training her to meet the duties of the queen he expected to make her. When Deirdre comes into Conchubor's presence, carrying a bag of nuts and an armful of twigs for the fire, he shows his displeasure and tells her she isn't acquiring the manners that will fit her to be his queen. Deirdre has no desire to be his queen. She answers his words with:

A girl born the way I'm born is more likely to wish for a mate who'd be her likeness. . . . A man with hair like the raven, maybe, and his skin like the snow and his lips like blood spilt on it.<sup>31</sup>

Conchubor leaves to go to Emain and tells Deirdre that, despite her wishes, she will be brought to Emain within a few days to be his queen. Soon after he leaves, Naisi and his brothers come to Lavarcham's home. When Naisi sees Deirdre, he recognizes in her the girl he has seen in the glen, and he shows his admiration of beauty by exclaiming:

And it is you who go around in the woods making the thrushes bear a brudge against the heavens for the sweetness of your voice singing.<sup>32</sup>

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30 Deirdre of the Sorrows, p. 20.

31 Ibid., pp. 22-23.

32 Ibid., p. 37.



Naisi marries Deirdre and, accompanied by his two brothers, takes her to Alban, where they live happily for seven years. Conchubor discovers their place of residence and sends messengers of peace, asking Deirdre and Naisi to return to Emain. For some time Deirdre has feared old age and a cessation of this beautiful, wild life which she and Naisi are enjoying. She discovers that Naisi is also fearful of her growing old and his losing interest in her. This makes her decide to return to Emain in answer to Conchubor's summons. To Deirdre old age means only death now. In her beautiful language she says to Naisi:

With the tide in a little while we will be journeying again, or it is our own blood maybe will be running away. The dawn and the evening are a little while, the winter and summer pass quickly, and what way would you and I, Naisi, have joy forever? . . . . There's no place to stay always. . . It's a long time we've had, pressing the lips together, going up and down, resting in our arms, Naisi, waking with the smell of June in the tops of the grasses, and listening to the birds in the branches that are highest. . . . It's a long time we've had, but the end has come, surely. . . . There's reason all times for an end that's come. And I'm well pleased, Naisi, we're going forward in the winter the time the sun has a low place, and the moon has her mastery in a dark sky, for it's you and I are well lodged our last day, where there is a light behind the clear tress, and the berries on the thorns are a red wall.<sup>33</sup>

They return to Ireland only to find that Conchubor has treacherously called them home that he may kill Naisi and make Deirdre his queen. Naisi and his brothers are slain and put into the grave which was prepared for them before

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33 Ibid., pp. 58-59.

their return. Deirdre spurns Conchubor's offer to make her queen over a house that was not equaled by that of any queen in the east. Conchubor is called away by the soldiers. When he returns a few minutes later, he finds Deirdre throwing clay on Naisi and his brothers. Another beautiful reflection of the love of nature inherent in the Celt is in her words:

There is Naisi was the best of three, the choicest of the choice of many. It was a clean death was your share, Naisi; and it is not I will quit your head, when it's many a dark night among the snipe and plover that you and I were whispering together. It's not I will quit your head, Naisi, when it's many a night we saw the stars among the clear trees of Gled da Ruadh, or the moon pausing to rest her on the edges of the hills.<sup>34</sup>

When Conchubor commands Deirdre to come with him, she answers:

I have a little key to unlock the prison of Naisi you'd shut upon his youth forever. Keep back, Conchubor; for the High King who is your master has put his hands between us. It was sorrows were foretold, but great joys were my share always; yet it is a cold place I must go to be with you, Naisi; and it's cold your arms will be this night that were warm about my neck so often. . . . It's a pitiful thing, Conchubor, you have done this night in Emain; yet a thing will be a joy and triumph to the ends of life and time.<sup>35</sup>

Deirdre then presses Naisi's knife into her heart and sinks into the grave beside Naisi. Lavarcham, beside the grave, utters a farewell couched in terms of Celtic beauty and force:

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34 Ibid., p. 87.

35 Ibid., pp. 91-92.

Deirdre is dead, and Naisi is dead; and if the oaks and stars could die for sorrow, it's a dark sky and a hard and naked earth we'd have this night in Emain.<sup>36</sup>

We can sense Synge's consciousness of his approaching death and his separation from his betrothed in the beautiful and pathetic expression of Deirdre when she says: "It should be a sweet thing to have what is best and richest, if it's for a short space only."<sup>37</sup>

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36 Ibid., p. 93.

37 Ibid., p. 40.

### Chapter Three

#### Reflections of the Power of the Imagination

In discussing the works of John M. Synge, Francis Bickley says:

It has been claimed for him that he is the greatest imaginative dramatist who has written English since Shakespeare, or at least since the Puritans closed the theatres in 1642.<sup>1</sup>

This is only another evidence of the fact that Synge possessed the characteristics of the Irish, especially their great power of imagination, and was able in most beautiful language to present characters who in turn show their vivid power of imagination. Maurice Bourgeois says:

The first and pre-eminently Irish feature of the plays is the way in which they bring out the Gael's native imaginativeness. The Irish peasant, because of the ardour of his unsatisfied cravings, finds his most joyful moods, his most poignant griefs, in the life beyond actuality, the life of the imagination - which in an Irish mind, is apt to become the more real life of the two.<sup>2</sup>

The fundamental theme common to all of Synge's plays is the conflict between the actual world of his characters and the world of their imagination. It is the preoccupation of his characters with their dreams that gives his plays their beautiful drifting movement, their emotional subtlety. Pleasure and grief are more poignantly experienced by his

1 Francis Bickley, J. M. Synge and the Irish Dramatic Movement, p. 19.

2 Maurice Bourgeois, John Millington Synge and the Irish Theatre, p. 220.

characters in the foreknowledge of the inevitable than in the actual happening itself.

Many vivid examples of the power of imagination are found in The Well of the Saints. Mary Doul, the ugly old blind beggar, finds much happiness in thinking of herself as the beautiful woman her friends have portrayed her. She shows this in her conversation with Martin when she says:

I've heard tell there isn't anything like the wet south wind does be blowing upon us for keeping a white beautiful skin - the like of my skin - on your neck and on your brows, and there isn't anything at all like a fine skin for putting splendour on a woman.<sup>3</sup>

Let you not be making the like of that talk when you've heard Timmy the smith, and Mat Simon, and Patch Ruadh, and a power besides saying fine things of my face, and you know rightly it was the beautiful dark woman they did call me in Ballinatone.<sup>4</sup>

In her imagination Mary was a beautiful woman and Martin a handsome man; but when she regained her sight, disillusionment makes her miserable. While she and Martin are blind, they replace reality by dreams and physical sight by imaginative visions. Martin pictures Mary as the most beautiful woman in the world as he says to Timmy:

I've heard tell her yellow hair, and her white skin, and her big eyes are a wonder surely.<sup>5</sup>

Again Martin's great power of imagination is shown in his

<sup>3</sup> The Well of the Saints, p. 16.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., pp. 16-17.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., p. 31.

conversation with Molly Byrne. His lyrical outburst is such "queer talk" to Molly that she intimates he has been drinking by asking if it was at the still he had been the night before. Martin answers:

It was not, Molly Byrne, but lying down in a little rickety shed. . . Lying down across a sop of straw, and I thinking I was seeing you walk, and hearing the sound of your step on a dry road, and hearing you again, and you laughing and making great talk in a high room with dry timber lining the roof. For it's a fine sound your voice has that time, and it's better I am, I'm thinking, lying down, the way a blind man does be lying, than to be sitting here in the gray light taking hard words of Timmy the smith.<sup>6</sup>

Martin had lived for such a long time in the bright land of his imagination that he could not accept the disappointing land of reality. The unhappiness which the two old beggars experienced during the short space of time in which they were able to see made them accept their fate readily when their sight again failed them. They even found much happiness in picturing themselves as a handsome old man and a beautiful old woman. In Mary's imagination is a picture which she portrays to us:

. . . For when I seen myself in them pools, I seen my hair would be gray or white, maybe, in a short while, and I seen with it that I'd a face would be a great wonder when it'll have soft white hair falling around it, the way when I'm an old woman there won't be the like of me surely in the seven counties of the east.<sup>7</sup>

Martin, not to be outdone by Mary in her imaginary picture, says:

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., p. 56.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., pp. 71-72.

I've this to say, Mary Doul, I'll be letting my beard grow in a short while, a beautiful, long, white, silken, streamy beard, you wouldn't see the like of in the eastern world. . . . Ah, a white beard's a grand thing on an old man, a grand thing for making the quality stop and be stretching out their hands with good silver or gold, and a beard's a thing you'll never have, so you may be holding your tongue.<sup>8</sup>

And we leave the beggars in the happiness of their imaginary world with Mary cheerfully saying:

Well, we're a great pair, surely, and it's great times we'll have yet, maybe, and great talking before we die.<sup>9</sup>

In The Tinker's Wedding Sarah experiences much pleasure in the power of her imagination, and she causes Michael much unhappiness as he imagines her living the life she pictures to him should he fail to get her wedding ring and the priest's fee ready for her marriage ceremony. Their conversation portrays both the happiness and the dismay that was caused by their power of imagination. Sarah says:

It's at the dawn of day I do be thinking I'd have a right to be going off to the rich tinker's do be travelling from Tibbradden to the Tara Hill; for it'd be a fine life to be driving with young Jaunting Jim, where there wouldn't be any big hills to break the back of you, with walking up and walking down.<sup>10</sup>

Michael, with dismay, answers, "It's the like of that you do be thinking!"<sup>11</sup> He is so much disturbed with the picture of Sarah's going away with the rich young tinker that

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8 Ibid., pp. 73-74.

9 Ibid., p. 74.

10 The Tinker's Wedding, pp. 14-15.

11 Ibid., p. 15.

he hastens to finish the wedding ring and to make the tin can which is to be the fee for the marriage ceremony.

Christy Mahon, the hero of The Playboy of the Western World, suffers more in his imaginary world than in reality. When he comes, tired, frightened, and hungry, into the shebeen of Michael James, he is suffering because in his imagination he has seen the police following him from his father's home to the shebeen. He thinks he has really killed his father, and he pictures himself paying the penalty in a horrible manner. For eleven "wild days" he has been walking, and "waking fearful" in the night. His feet are blistered and bleeding, and as Pegeen said, his whole skin needed washing like a Wicklow sheep's, and all of this suffering was caused by a vivid imagination.

In the shebeen mirror the next morning Christy studies his reflection and sees himself in his imagination as he will be after he has worked indoors for awhile. He pictures himself a handsome young man with a soft lovely skin unlike that of the clumsy young fellows who "do be ploughing at all times in the earth." When Pegeen comes in from milking and finds Christy surrounded by the Widow Quin and the village girls, she angrily sends them out and orders Christy to go about his work. She causes him much misery by telling him of a half-page story in the papers about a man who was hanged for murder. As she paints the word picture, Christy sees himself "swaying and swigging at the butt of a rope."



Since he has a fine, stout neck, he sees himself in a long half-hour of great anguish before death can come to release him. He is suffering in his imagination more than he could have suffered in reality. When Christy's father, with a bandaged head, comes to the shebeen seeking his son, Christy suffers again, for he feels that Pegeen will turn from him. He says in despair and grief:

Amn't I after seeing the love-light of the star of knowledge shining from her brow, and hearing words would put you thinking on the holy Brigid speaking to the infant saints, and now she'll be turning again, and speaking hard words to me, like an old woman with a spavindy ass she'd have urging on a hill.<sup>12</sup>

The Widow Quin comes to his rescue and sends the old father in the wrong direction to find his son. Christy then enters the contests on the village green and wins all the honors. In the meantime Old Mahon has returned to the shebeen in time to see Christy proclaimed the champion of the sports. The Widow Quin persuades Old Mahon that he is not really seeing his son but a creature of his imagination. She tells him his head injury is causing him to think he is seeing Christy. In this way she persuades him to go down to the union beyond. Then follows Christy's poetically imaginative love-making, followed quickly by Old Mahon's reappearance and Christy's again striking him with a loy and leaving him, as he again thinks, dead. When the mob sets upon Christy, he suffers all the terrors of death and separation

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<sup>12</sup> The Playboy of the Western World, pp. 71-72.

from Pegeen. When he is about to be hanged, Old Mahon comes creeping in on all fours, having again recovered consciousness, and goes proudly away with Christy, leaving Pegeen looking into the future to her unhappy fate as she realizes she has lost "the only Playboy of the Western World."

The power of her imagination causes Deirdre to leave her carefree, happy life in the forests of Alban after having spent several years with Naisi and his brothers, she as their ideal queen and they as her most loyal lover and protectors. She sees herself becoming an old woman, and she fears Naisi will lose his interest in her. Old age means only death for Deirdre, and in her plaintive words we feel that our author is letting her voice his own despair in the presentiment that death was soon to rob him also of love and fame. Is it not Synge's own soul crying out:

With the tide in a little while we will be journeying again, or is it our own blood maybe will be running away. The dawn and the evening are a little while, the winter and summer pass quickly, and what way would you and I, Naisi, have joy forever?<sup>13</sup>

Deirdre's fear of old age and separation from Naisi is of such great intensity that she insists upon going back to Emain, announcing her intention in a pathetic yet beautiful manner:

There are as many ways to wither love as there are stars in a night of Samhain; but there is no way to keep life, or love with it, a short space only. . . . It is for that there's nothing lonesome like a love

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13 Deirdre, p. 58.

is watching out the time most lovers do be sleeping.  
 . . . It's for that we're setting out for Emain Macha  
 when the tide turns on the sand.<sup>14</sup>

Without doubt Synge reached the height of his dramatic power when he wrote his shortest play, Riders to the Sea. An incident which occurred during one of his visits to the Aran Islands gave him the idea from which evolved this play, a dramatic summary of the Aran Islands. Maurya, who has given a husband, a father-in-law, and six fine sons to the sea, becomes a symbolic figure as she personifies the grief of the inhabitants of the bleak islands in the face of their common enemy, the sea.

Maurya suffers more in the world of her imagination than she does when she has to face the cruel facts of reality. As she sits mourning for Michael, a son whom she believes to have been drowned, she lets her last son, Bartley, go to sea in an approaching storm without giving him her blessing. When she realizes that he has gone, she sees herself bereft of her six sons, and in her anguish cries out:

He's gone now, God spare us, and we'll not see him again. He's gone now, and when the black night is falling I'll have no son left me in the world.<sup>15</sup>

For nine long days Maurya has watched for Michael's body to be washed ashore. The uncertainty of his fate and

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14 Ibid., p. 60.

15 Riders to the Sea, p. 26.

the constant watch she has kept for news of the finding of his body has almost unsettled her mind.

Maurya's daughters are distressed because Bartley has left without their mother's blessing. They insist that Maurya carry the cake which they have baked to the spring well and give it with her blessing to Bartley as he passes on his way to the boat. Maurya takes the cane which Michael had brought from Connemara and hobbles away with the cake. Within an incredibly short time Maurya returns, bringing the cake and looking even more desolate than before. As she begins to keen softly, the girls ask if she has seen Bartley and why she has not given him the bread. That she is living and suffering in the land of her imagination is shown by her answer:

I've seen the fearfulest thing any person has seen, since the day Bride Dara seen the dead man with a child in his arms. . . . I went down to the spring well, and I stood there saying a prayer to myself. Then Bartley came along, and he riding on the red mare with the gray pony behind him. . . . The Son of God spare us, Nora! . . . I seen Michael himself. . . . I am after seeing him this day, and he riding and galloping. Bartley came first on the red mare; and I tried to say, 'God speed you,' but something choked the words in my throat. He went by quickly; and 'the blessing of God on you,' says he, and I could say nothing. I looked up then, and I crying, at the gray pony, and there was Michael upon it - with fine clothes on him, and new shoes on his feet.<sup>16</sup>

The girls tell Maurya that Michael's body has been found in the Far North, and they show her his clothes, which

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16 Ibid., pp. 36-37.

the priest has brought to them for identification. While Maurya is examining them, Bartley's body is brought in. The women who follow the bearers of the body into the room tell Maurya that the gray pony has knocked Bartley into the sea and he has been washed out where there is a great surf on the rocks.

Maurya is composed now. Her sojourn in the land of her imagination for the past nine days has brought her more poignant grief than the actual happenings are now bringing to her. With quiet resignation, in the spirit of the Aran Islanders who give their sons and husbands to the sea, she says:

They're all gone now, and there isn't any more the sea can do to me. . . . Michael has a clean burial in the Far North, by the grace of the Almighty God. Bartley will have a fine coffin out of the white boards, and a deep grave surely. What more can we want than that? No man at all can be living forever, and we must be satisfied.<sup>17</sup>

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17 Ibid., pp. 42-45.

## Chapter Four

### Reflections of the Celt's Love of Country and Respect for Its Traditions

Probably there has never been another writer better prepared to give us vivid reflections of the Celt's love for his country and his respect for the traditions of that country than John M. Synge. He was a loyal Irishman, and in his heart there was a deep love for his country and an interest in his countryman. It is true that he enjoyed his wanderings on the continent, but it was always to Ireland that he returned, and it was in Ireland that he died with tears in his eyes because he was unable to see the sun set upon his favorite mountain during his dying moments. With the exception of Deirdre, it is difficult for one to point to an exact line in Synge's plays as an example of a reflection of patriotism; however, one senses the Irishman's love of his country in each play and in The Aran Islands. The actual writing of the plays is a beautiful expression of patriotism on the part of their author. Synge gladly spent his entire period of literary productivity in helping Lady Gregory and her other associates to turn the attention of the literary world to Ireland and her wealth of ancient literature.

From early childhood days Synge's mind was filled with legendary fancies and mythical creations of the Celt. He was reared in a land that claims the oldest, most numerous,

and most diversified folk and fairy tales in the world. He spent his mature years wandering among the most primitive Celts to be found anywhere, listening to their versions of Irish hero stories and their charming fairy tales; so it was with both material and native ability that our author began his short period of literary productivity.

The Irish peasant is profoundly religious. He loves his church, his allegiance to which is put before any other love. This is one phase of our author's life which he has not made clear to us in his writings. We know that he was reared in a Protestant home, but all we know about his ideas of religion is that he was tolerant in his treatment of all religious views. In an unbiased manner he portrayed for us the Christian views of the peasant, intermingled as they are with the pagan views. His only aim seemed to be to bring to us the Celtic peasant as he saw him in the country regions of Ireland and in the Aran Islands. Maurice Bourgeois says:

Like all who truly express themselves, he expressed his country, he expressed mankind; but being a certain type of Irishman, and a certain type of man, he expressed Ireland and mankind only as he saw them, or saw himself reflected in them.<sup>1</sup>

The Irish peasant has much reverence for the stories of Irish heroes of the far past and of mythical creatures who inhabit the Celtic air. The Celtic people have ever been deeply absorbed in fanciful legends and mythical creations.

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<sup>1</sup> John M. Synge and the Irish Theatre, p. 247.

There is hardly a bay, a plain, or a hill in Ireland or on the Aran Islands around which romance has not woven some tale or legend. The Aran Islands contains a wealth of fairy tales which Synge relates just as they were told to him by the people of the islands. In writing this chapter, it has been difficult to select the few choice extracts space permits us to use from such a wealth of material.

On his first visit to Aranmor Synge's blind teacher of the island told him many stories of the fairies, who are as real to the island people as their own flesh and blood. He first gave the Catholic theory of the fairies:

When Lucifer saw himself in the glass he thought himself equal to God. Then the Lord threw him out of heaven, and all the angels that belonged to him. While He was 'chucking them out,' an archangel asked Him to spare some of them, and those that were falling are in the air still, and have power to wreck ships, and to work evil in the world.<sup>2</sup>

While our author and his guide were wandering over the island one day, they sat down to rest near the ruins of a house. Two boys came up and the guide asked them why the house was in ruins, and who had lived in it. One of them replied: "A rich farmer built it awhile since, but after two years he was driven away by the fairy host."<sup>3</sup>

A story of great interest to me was one told to Synge by Maurteen, the old blind teacher. It is the story of the death of one of his children.

<sup>2</sup> The Aran Islands, p. 30.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., p. 29.



One day a neighbor was passing, and she said, when she saw it on the road, 'That's a fine child.' Its mother tried to say, 'God bless it,' but something choked the words in her throat. A while later they found a wound on its neck, and for three nights the house was filled with noises. 'I never wear a shirt at night,' he said, 'but I got up out of bed, all naked as I was, when I heard the noises in the house, and lighted a light, but there was nothing in it.' Then a dummy came and made signs of hammering nails in a coffin. The next day the seed potatoes were full of blood, and the child told the mother that he was going to America. That night it died, and 'Believe me,' said the old man, 'the fairies were in it.'<sup>4</sup>

Pat Dirane gives his experiences with the fairies and tells our author how to protect himself from them:

He has seen a good many of them, he says, in the different parts of the island, especially in the sandy districts north of the slip. They are about a yard high with caps like the 'peelers' pulled down over their faces. On one occasion he saw them playing ball in the evening just above the slip, and he says I must avoid that place in the morning or after nightfall for fear they might do me mischief. . . . Another night he heard a voice crying out in Irish, 'mhathair ta me marbh' ('O mother, I'm killed'), and in the morning there was blood on the wall of his house, and a child in a house not far off was dead. Yesterday he took me aside, and said he would tell me a secret he had never yet told to any person in the world. 'Take a sharp needle,' he said, 'and stick it under the collar of your coat, and not one of them will be able to have power on you.' Iron is a common talisman with barbarians, but in this case the idea of exquisite sharpness was probably present also, and, perhaps, some feeling for the sanctity for the instrument of toil, a folk-belief that is common in Brittany.<sup>5</sup>

Synge tells us that the people think the fairies are more numerous in Mayo than in any other county, though they are fond of certain districts in Galway, where the following story is said to have taken place:

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4 Ibid., p. 24.

5 Ibid., p. 73.

A farmer was in great distress as his crops had failed, and his cow had died on him. One night he told his wife to make him a fine new sack for flour before the next morning; and when it was finished he started off with it before dawn. At that time there was a gentleman who had been taken by the fairies, and made an officer among them, and it was often people would see him and her riding on a white horse at dawn and in the evening. The poor man went down to the place where they used to see the officer, and when he came by on his horse, he asked the loan of two hundred and a half of flour, for he was in great want. The officer called the fairies out of a hole in the rocks where they stored their wheat, and told them to give the poor man what he was asking. Then he told him to come back and pay him in a year, and rode away. When the poor man got home he wrote down the day on a piece of paper, and that day year he came back and paid the officer. When he had ended his story the old man told me that the fairies have a tenth of all the produce of the country, and make stores of it in the rocks.<sup>6</sup>

When the old men of the islands were telling Synge their stories, large groups of people would gather round and listen to them. Although they had heard the same old stories over and over, they always enjoyed them as keenly as children of our country enjoy fanciful tales. On one occasion an old woman had been listening to stories told by the men and, when they had finished, she told this one:

'There are people who say they don't believe in these things,' said the old woman, 'but there are strange things, let them say what they will. There was a woman went to bed at the lower village a while ago, and her child along with her. For a time they did not sleep, and then something came to the window, and they heard a voice and this is what it said - "It is time to sleep from this out." In the morning the child was dead, and indeed it is many get their death that way on the island.'<sup>7</sup>

We are reminded here of a statement made by Charles

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6 Ibid., p. 74.

7 Ibid., p. 197.

Welsh, the author of Irish Fairy and Folk Tales. He said:

With the highly sensitive organism of their race it is not wonderful that the people live habitually under the shadow and dread of invisible powers which, whether working for good or evil, are awful and mysterious to the uncultured mind that sees only the strange results produced by certain forces, but knows nothing of the approximate causes.<sup>8</sup>

Along with the Celt's strong belief in fairies is his fear of evil omens. Synge asked one of the Aran Islanders if he feared the howling of a dog. The man answered:

We don't like it . . . you will often see them on the top of the rocks looking up into the heavens, and they crying. We don't like it at all, and we don't like a cock or hen to break anything in the house, for we know then someone will be going away. A while before the man who used to live in that cottage below died in the winter, the cock belonging to his wife began to fight with another cock. The two of them flew up on the dresser and knocked the glass of the lamp off it, and it fell on the floor and was broken. The woman caught her cock after that and killed it, but she could not kill the other cock, for it was belonging to the man who lived in the next house. Then himself got a sickness and died after that.<sup>9</sup>

Our author tells us of a baby whom the old woman of the house where he stayed had adopted to console herself for the loss of her own sons. He says that the child was sometimes slapped when he misbehaved, but more often the old woman kept him in order with stories of the "long toothed hag" that lived in Dun and gobbled up children who were not good.

Many beautiful reflections of the Celt's devotion to

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<sup>8</sup> Irish Fairy and Folk Tales, in Irish Literature, III, xxiii.

<sup>9</sup> The Aran Islands, p. 205.

religion are found in The Aran Islands. Along with these reflections we find an interesting story of the islanders' conversion to the true God:

Long ago we used all to be pagans, and the saints used to be coming to teach us about God and the creation of the world. The people on the middle island were the last to keep a hold on the fire-worshipping, or whatever it was they had in those days, but in the long run a saint got in among them and they began listening to him, though they would often say in the evening they believed, and then say the morning after that, they did not believe. In the end the saint gained them over and they began building a church, and the saint had tools that were in use with them for working with the stones. When the church was halfway up the people held a kind of meeting one night among themselves, when the saint was asleep in his bed, to see if they did really believe and no mistake in it.

The leading man got up, and this is what he said: that they should go down and throw their tools over the cliff, and if there was such a man as God, and if the saint was as well known to Him as he said, then he would be as well able to bring up the tools out of the sea as they were to throw them in. They went down and threw their tools over the cliff. When the saint came down to the church in the morning the workmen were all sitting on the stones and no work doing. 'For what cause are you idle?' asked the saint. 'We have no tools,' said the men, and then they told him the story of what they had done. He knelt and prayed God that the tools might come up out of the sea, and after that he prayed that no other people might ever be as great fools as the people on the middle island, and that God might preserve their dark minds of folly to them till the end of the world. And that is why no man out of that island can tell you a whole story without stammering, or bring any work to end without a fault in it.<sup>10</sup>

Although the Celt's ideas of religion are colored by pagan influences, Synge was deeply impressed by the Celt's devotion to his church. It was a devotion which Synge himself seemed unable to approach. He says:

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid., pp. 225-226.

When I got up this morning I found that the people had gone to Mass and latched the kitchen door from the outside, so that I could not open it to give myself light. I sat for nearly an hour beside the fire with a curious feeling that I should be quite alone in this little cottage. I am so used to sitting here with the people that I have never felt the room before as a place where any man might live and work by himself. After a while as I waited, with just light enough from the chimney to let me see the rafters and the greyness of the walls, I became indescribably mournful, for I felt that this little corner on the face of the world, and the people who live in it, have a peace and dignity from which we are shut for ever.<sup>11</sup>

Turning now to Synge's plays, we find that four of them are based upon stories that were told to him in the Aran Islands. Our author has transformed these simple tales into plays whose characters, as he has pictured them, are simple Irish peasants, yet they are so alive that they will always live in the memories of those who read or see the plays. L. A. G. Strong says:

The outstanding quality of Synge's work is its intensity. The characters in his plays, during the short while they are before us, make the supreme gesture of their lives. They are their own epitome. All their past life, everything that has happened to them, but leads up to the time that we see them, when in a few significant words and actions they reach their consummation.<sup>12</sup>

The Celt's love of his land is very vividly reflected in Deirdre, Synge's only play of remote and legendary characters. When Fergus comes to Alban to persuade Deirdre and Naisi to return to Emain, he gives voice to the Celtic love of land in his words to Deirdre:

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11 Ibid., pp. 200-201.

12 L. A. G. Strong, Living Age, Sept. 9, 1922.

When I was a young man we'd have given a lifetime to be in Ireland a score of weeks; and to this day the old men have nothing so heavy as knowing it's in a short while they'll lose the high skies are over Ireland, and the lonesome mornings with the birds crying on the bogs. Let you come this day, for there's no place but Ireland where the Gael can have peace always.<sup>13</sup>

When Naisi hesitates to accept Conchubor's treacherous invitation, Fergus again appeals to Naisi's love of country as he says:

It's little joy wandering till age is on you and your youth is gone away, so you'd best come this night, for you'd have great pleasure putting out your foot and saying, 'I'm in Ireland, surely.'<sup>14</sup>

In all of Synge's plays we see reflections of the Catholic belief. We have the wakes, the priests, and the fear of the curse of God. Intermingled with these beliefs we find many reflections of pagan beliefs. Deirdre is in itself a reflection of the Celt's love for his native legends and his belief in the power of fate. When Deirdre was only a child, it was foretold that she would be the ruin of the Sons of Usna. Throughout the play this thread of fate directs its course. Although Conchubor had Deirdre hidden away from the world, fate led the Sons of Usna to her, and it was Deirdre who led them to their deaths. Throughout the play we feel the power of the gods over the action of the characters, and near the close of the play Deirdre brings her highest god of fate before us as she says

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<sup>13</sup> Deirdre, p. 53.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., p. 54.

just before she takes her life: "Keep back, Conchubar; for the High King who is your master has put his hand between us."<sup>15</sup>

In Riders to the Sea we have Maurya's belief in the supernatural, and we see the effect of this same belief on the mind of her daughter in the following intensely dramatic selection from the play. Maurya has just returned from the spring well where she went to give Bartley her blessing before he went to sea. She is keening softly, her white hair falling about her face. In answer to her daughter's inquiries about what ails her, she says:

I've seen the fearfulest thing any person has seen since the day Bridg Dara was seen with the dead child in his arms.<sup>16</sup>

Then she tells of seeing Michael on the grey pony coming behind Bartley on the red mare. When she tells her daughters this, they feel that she has seen Michael in spirit, for they know that his body has already been washed ashore in the far north. Cathleen begins to keen, saying:

It's destroyed we are from this day. It's destroyed, surely.<sup>17</sup>

Maurya also brings us a splendid reflection of her resignation to fate and her belief in God as she puts Michael's clothes beside the body of Bartley, sprinkles them with

15 Ibid., p. 92.

16 Riders to the Sea, p. 36.

17 Ibid., p. 37.

Holy Water, lays her hands together on Bartley's body and says:

They're all together this time, and the end is come. May the Almighty God have mercy on Bartley's soul, and on Michael's soul, and on the souls of Sheamus and Patch, and Stephen and Shawn, and may he have mercy on my soul, Nora, and on the soul of everyone is left living in the world.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid., pp. 44-45.



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