J. M. SYNGE : HIS VISION OF LIFE : A CRITICAL STUDY

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C O N T E N T S

		Page
PREFACE	.. ..	I-III
CHAPTER I	: A SURVEY OF SYNGE CRITICISM.	1-14
CHAPTER II	: SYNGE THE MAN. ..	15-30
CHAPTER III	: THE ARAN ISLANDS AND J.M. SYNGE.	31-36
CHAPTER IV	: THE IRISH DRAMATIC MOVEMENT AND J.M. SYNGE. ..	37-45
CHAPTER V	: THE SUPERNATURAL WORLD AND J.M. SYNGE.	46-54
CHAPTER VI	: A STUDY OF J.M. SYNGE'S IMAGERY.	55-66
CHAPTER VII	: THE PLAYS:	
	i) The shadow of the Glen: a joyous hymn to life and liberty.	67-75
	ii) Riders to the Sea: a vision of the destiny of man.	76-84
	iii) Tinker's wedding : a vision of life: a ceremony.	85-93
	iv) The well of the Saints : a vision of poetic reality.	94-101
	v) The Playboy of the Western World: a vision of illusion and reality.	102-113
	vi) Deirdre of the Sorrows : a vision of youth, age and death.	114-123
BIBLIOGRAPHY	.. ..	124-130

P R E F A C E

John Millington Synge (1871-1909) poet, prose-writer, and aboveall, dramatist, who died a premature death at the age of thirtyeight, left behind only a small corpus of literary work. During his lifetime he could not earn that celebrity which in an era of drastic revaluation, posterity granted him posthumously. Now Synge has been indisputably recognised as one of the pioneering dramatists of modern Europe and the first among the Irish dramatists to receive international popularity. Robin Skelton has acclaimed him as "a world figure", "a shakespearean figure".[1]

The plays of Synge interested me so much that I began to think whether I could embark upon a full-length study about him. The vision of life embodied in his works fascinated me. And I found that besides some casual references to this particular aspect, no full-fledged study (as my first chapter, A Survey of Synge Criticism would indicate) had yet been pursued by any Synge scholar. Hence my decision to explore his vision of life.

A creative writer's world owes much to his varied experiences. These experiences leave an abiding impression on his mind while developing his vision of life. Unless we situate

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1. Robin Skelton, "Foreword", J.M.Synge : A Bibliography of Criticism, ed. Nelle Mikhail (London : The Macmillan Press Ltd., 1975), p. IX.

the writer in his background, his vision of life could not be properly understood and appreciated. Accordingly I have divided my thesis into seven chapters.

The first chapter surveys Synge criticism, focuses on the main trends in it, justifies and defines the orientation of the present study.

The second chapter is a study of the man. Unless we know the man who has given himself in his works, we could not get the perspective from which to appreciate his writings and understand the vision of life.

The third chapter is a study of the Aran Islands vis-a-vis Synge. Synge's vision of life was formulated when he came to the Aran Islands.

The fourth chapter is a study of the Irish Dramatic Movement and Synge's role in it. The literary ideas and ideals which motivated the Irish Dramatic Movement further widened Synge's vision of life which went a long way in fulfilling the cause of the Movement.

The fifth chapter shows how the external world informed Synge of the fundamental truths of life and gave him a mature life-vision.

The sixth chapter is an exploration of the imagery in Synge's plays as a key to his vision of life.

And finally in chapter seven the plays have been studied individually and a separate title has been given to the study of each play in the light of Synge's vision of life.

The textual quotations from the plays used in the thesis are taken from T.R.Henn's edition of The Plays and Poems of J.M. Synge. And for other textual quotations especially of the prose and poetry, I have depended on J.M.Synge : Collected Works, Volume I-V, General Editor Robin Skelton (Oxford University Press, 1962-8).

The M.L.A. Stylesheet has been followed throughout.

I should acknowledge my debt to my supervisor Dr. S.P. Sengupta, Ph.D. (London), formerly Senior Professor of English at the University of North Bengal. I remain thankful to the staff of the National Library, British Council Library and Calcutta University Library. I am also grateful to my own University Library.

Before I conclude this Preface, I should express my wholehearted gratitude to my departmental colleagues who have given me every encouragement and valuable suggestions to prepare this thesis.

CHAPTER - I

A Survey of Synge Criticism

In 1971 that marked the birth centenary year of Synge, it was noticed that Synge had commanded wide attention and studies on Synge continued "assuming greater proportions with each passing year" leaving behind "an unusually large output of material"[1]. In view of this immense popularity it is worthwhile delineating the heritage of Synge criticism.

After the posthumous publication of Synge's poems and translations of Petrach and Villon by the Cuala Press in 1909, his poetry evoked much enthusiasm among the public. In 1911 another edition of Synge's poems and translations was brought out by John W. Luce & Co. Maunsel and Co. Ltd., published in Dublin Synge's poems and translations in 1920. W.B.Yeats chose nine of Synge's poems and four of the translations in his anthology, The Oxford book of Modern verse. The trend in Synge criticism on poetry has been more or less the same, emphasising the subjective elements in his poetry. Synge's contemporaries (W.B.Yeats, Masefield, Maurice Bourgeois etc.) and later critics (Robin Skelton, T.R.Henn, Francis Warner, John Kelleworthy)

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1. E.H.Mikhail, "Preface", J.M.Synge : A Bibliography of Criticism (The Macmillan Press Ltd., 1975), p. XIII.

have viewed his poetry as the "self-revelation of Synge"[2]. They believe, "The poems are like the man speaking. They are so like him that to read them is to hear him"[3]. Of course Ellis Fermor has discussed Synge as "nature-poet" and "nature-mystic" and compared his poems with "those of the ancient poetry of his own race"[4].

Critics (like Ronald Peacock, T.R.Henn, Elizabeth Coxhead, F.L.Lucas, Robin Skelton, W.R.Rodgers, Edward Stephens and Nicholas Grene) have shown the special significance of both of Synge's prose-works, The Aran Islands (1907) and [illegible] in the making of Synge the artist and in the evolution of his vision of life. Ronald Peacock has felt that the Aran Islands "awoke the artist in him"[5]. W.R.Rodgers believes that "It was on Aran that Synge found a frame for his living imagination"[6].

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2. Maurice Bourgeois, John Millington Synge and the Irish Theatre (New York, 1965), p. 232.

3. John Masefield, J.M.Synge, A few personal recollections with biographical notes (Cuala Press, 1920), p. 20.

4. Una Ellis Fermor, The Irish Dramatic Movement (London, 1939), p. 172.

5. Ronald Peacock, The Poet in the Theatre (London, 1946), p. 105.

6. W.R.Rodgers, Irish Literary Portraits (British Broadcasting Corporation, 1972), p. 100.

And Robin Skelton holds the view that "In the Aran Islands he found his vision of human nature and human predicament".[7]

Synge's Autobiography at the same time has been considered "as a document of social history and as a biographical essay of first-rate importance to readers of Synge's works and of the works of his contemporaries".[8]

Apart from these studies on the Aran Islands and Synge's Autobiography we have a study by T.R.Henn on Synge's prose which has provided "the phraseology of many of the plays".[9]

And finally we review the criticism of Synge's dramas. Though many of the Synge editors have excluded his maiden work When the Moon has set we cannot ignore the importance of the play. Ann Saddlemyer has retained it in her edition of Synge's plays (Vol. III, 1968) and explained that this maiden work "provides perhaps the most important clue to his transition from apprentice to playwright".[10]

Besides When the Moon has set Synge wrote six plays, excepting his last one, Deirdre of the Sorrows (Synge could

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7. Robin Skelton, J.M.Synge & his World (London : Thames and Hudson, 1971), p. 37.

8. Denis M. Synge, 'The Autobiography of J.M.Synge', Sunshine and the Moon's Delight : Synge 1871-1909, ed. S.B. Bushrui (Beirut, 1972), p. 40.

9. Thomas Rice Henn (ed.), T.R.Henn's Last Essays (Colin Smythe Ltd., 1976), p. 191.

10. Ann Saddlemyer, "Introduction", III, ed., J.M.Synge. Collected Works (Oxford University Press, 1968), p. xxi.

finish it for his premature death) all the five plays were produced at the Abbey Theatre and published in his lifetime. He received both fame and infamy for these plays. The stark realism of some of them, The Shadow of the Glen, The Tinker's Wedding and The Playboy of the Western World in particular - provoked a sharp response from the audience as well as from the critics. Some of the hostility was quite undeserved.

The first significant criticism on Synge's plays is Ireland and the Irish Theatre (1913) by Maurice Bourgeois. Both Bourgeois and Synge's contemporaries like W.B. Yeats, Lady Gregory, John Masefield and William Fay have looked at the subjective elements in Synge's plays.

A more critical insight into Synge's plays was noticed in the 1930s when he was being viewed more and more against the background of the Irish dramatic movement and Anglo-Irish literature. Three very important works of this decade are D. Corkery's Synge and Anglo-Irish Literature (1931), Ellis Fermor's The Irish Dramatic Movement (1939) and The Sources of Synge (1939) by A.E. Malone.

In the forties, Synge critics were more or less concerned with the plays themselves. L.A.G. Strong in John Millington Synge (1941) studied Synge's The Playboy of the Western World from quite a new angle and described the playboy as a poet and a man of imagination. Now Synge was being viewed as a poet in

the theatre. Ronald Peacock stressed the "imaginative vitality" of the artist in The Poet in the Theatre (1945). His study of The Riders to the Sea is of inestimable value.

The sixties and the seventies have been remarkable in respect of Synge criticism. During this period he was widely explored and a valuable critical literature produced about him. In 1963 T.R. Henn edited The Plays and Poems of J.M. Synge with a very illuminating introduction. Allan Price in Synge and Anglo-Irish Drama (1963), studied Synge in relation not only to Irish life and drama but also to the backdrop of English, rather European literature. E.V. Lucas's book, The Drama of Chekhov, Synge, Yeats and Pirandello (1963) should be mentioned in this connection. Here we get an insight into Synge's plays, the Aran Islands and Synge the man. The Elements of Drama (1960), J.L. Styan highlighted the qualities of Synge and discussed him along with Shakespeare, Ibsen and Chekhov. Styan believes that Synge's dramatic practice can enable a critic to formulate a serious theory of drama. In his The Dark Comedy : the development of Modern Comic Tragedy (1963), Styan especially considers the works of Synge and Sean O'Casey and shows how these two dramatists "were quick to strike the fantastic note and through our willing imagination try to undermine our self-satisfaction"[11]. Elizabeth Coxhead studied both Synge

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11. J.L.Styan, The Dark Comedy : the development of modern comic tragedy (Cambridge University Press, 1962), p. 174.

and Lady Gregory in J.M.Synge and Lady Gregory (1962), which is indeed the first full-length study of Synge and one of his contemporaries. Dona Gerstenberger had shown in John Millington Synge (1964), the universal patterns in Synge's works. These criticisms show us more fully than before, the various aspects of Synge studies. T.R. Henn in The Harvest of Tragedy has assessed the best of Synge's works as tragedy "reduced to its simplest elements"[12] and further examined "certain facts, theories and assumptions regarding the nature of the form which we term, loosely Tragedy"[13]. In J.M. Synge and Modern Comedy (1968), Ann Saddlemyer has brought out the conflicts between dream and actuality in Synge's works while believing that for Synge's characters, "imagination becomes a refuge"[14].

1970 being the centenary year of Synge, has been prolific so far as Synge criticism is concerned. Besides the publications of two centenary volumes : J.M.Synge centenary papers 1971 (Dublin 1971) and Sunshine and the Moon's Delight : J.M.Synge 1871-1901 (Beirut, 1971) edited by Herman Maurice and S.B.

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12. T.R.Henn, The Harvest of Tragedy (London, 1966), p. 201.

13. Henn, "Introduction", The Harvest of Tragedy, p. xi.

14. Ann Saddlemyer, J.M.Synge & Modern Comedy (Dublin, 1968), pp. 17-18.

Bushrui respectively, there are some significant works on Synge. Robin Skelton in The Writings of J.M.Synge (1971) and J.M.Synge and his world (1971) has traced the background of Synge's life and life's experiences which Skelton believes, Synge has translated into his works. Robert O'Driscoll's book Theatre and Nationalism in 20th century Ireland (1971), is a new approach to the study of 20th century Irish drama. He holds that "great moments of theatrical achievement have often coincided with moments of national excitement and tension" and "theatre is the form of literature which makes the most direct impact on the people" and "becomes ultimately the means by which the deeper life of the people"[15] is expressed. Ann Saddlemyer edited (1971) Synge's letters written to Maire O'Neill while enabling us for the first time "to observe the wholeman"[16]. An important biographical study on Synge entitled, My Uncle John : Edward Stephens's life of J.M.Synge was published in 1974 edited by Andrew Carpenter. Since Synge was an enigma to his contemporaries, few could know what Synge was during his lifetime. Such

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15. Robert O'Driscoll, "Introduction", Theatre and nationalism in 20th century Ireland (London : Oxford University Press, 1971).

16. Ann Saddlemyer, "Introduction", John Millington Synge to Maire O'Neill 1906-1909 ed. Saddlemyer (Cambridge : Massachusetts, 1971), p. xiii.

a study therefore deserves special mention. Of course, Edward Stephens and Grene were pioneers in this field. In 1959, they published, J.M.Synge 1871-1909 which inspired others to undertake similar task so that more information could be gathered about Synge the man. Weldon Thornton has studied the religious milieu of Synge's youth and the religious concerns of his family in J.M.Synge and the Western Mind (1974). Nicholas Grene has made a very significant study both of Synge and his plays in Synge : critical study of the plays (1975). James Flannery's book, W.B.Yeats and the idea of a Theatre (1976) though aimed at explicating W.B.Yeat's ideas on theatre, had made an important observation on J.M.Synge who had dramatised the theme of individuality triumphing over social constraints in The Well of the Saints, The Tinker's Wedding and his masterpiece, The Playboy of the Western World"[17]. New attempts have been made to reveal Synge through the eyes of his contemporaries in the way of interviews and recollections. W.R.Rodgers's Irish Literary Portraits (1972), and A.N.Mikhail's J.M.Synge:Interviews and Recollections (1972), are books of this kind.

Synge criticism did not confine itself to Synge alone. A new perspective emerged. The Irish Drama of Auberon from Yeats

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17. James W. Flannery, W.B.Yeats & the idea of a theatre (Yale University Press, 1976), p. 335.

to Beckett (1978) by Katherine Worth has shown, how from the thematic point of view, Synge's plays stand very close to those of Maeterlinck's. Moreover "on the visual side too, Synge has strong affinities with Maeterlinck, Yeats and the French Static School"[18].

In the 80s, we have Eugene Benson's book, J.M.Synge (1982), and T.O.Brien's Synge : the medieval and the Grotesque (1982). Benson has studied the life and works of Synge. And his discussion on the major plays of the playwright is indeed, stimulating. Since the book is a recent publication, the writer is privileged to be familiar with the hitherto published criticism on Synge. This familiarity has added much importance to this work. O.Brien has shown, how Synge's peasant or folk dramas have presented, against the background of nature, the themes which are of universal concern . Synge has created men and women and invested them with passion, poetry and brutality while fusing the tragic and comic patterns.

Synge criticism is not restricted to these critical works alone. Many articles have been published from time to time in different periodicals and Journals especially in Modern Drama, P.M.L.A., Times Literary Supplement, The Review of English Studies, Scrutiny, Essays in criticism , and Southern Humanities

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18. Katherine Worth, The Irish Drama of Europe from Yeats to Beckett (The Athlone Press of the University of London, 1978), p. 125.

Review, to explore the domain of Synge literature.

This present survey shows that since Synge's own time, Synge criticism has been making a consistent and continuous evaluation of Synge so that "this uncouth, arrogant figure, with the soul of a poet and the instincts of a truant"[19] could be brought to the public image and be established quite reasonably "as a classic"[20]. Nevertheless there is room for further studies on this literary artist. This present study on Synge's vision of life is uptill now an unexplored area. When we use the word 'vision', we do not use it in a spiritual or metaphysical connotation. By vision, we mean how Synge was looking at life and presenting his observation in terms of his literary works. There is no writer without a vision of life and "every writer's vision is unique and the most successful criticism is that which studies dramatists and even plays individually in order to present their way of looking at the world"[21]. This has been the reason why I have concentrated on Synge's vision of life. It is true, to every [illegible]

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19. Denis Johnston, John Millington Synge (New York and London: Columbia University Press, 1965), p. 4.

20. Alan Price, "A Survey of recent works on J.M.Synge", Sunshine and the Moon's Delight, ed. Sushrut, p. 295.

21. Ronald Gaskell, Drama and Reality : the European theatre since Ibsen, (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1972), p. 12. (Italics mine)

of experience one to seem important, those he illustrates, others he leaves in shadow or excludes completely"[22]. Even Shakespeare who "affirms the whole range of our experience - sensual, emotional, moral, intellectual, spiritual"[23] is no exception to this. But with Shakespeare, what he excludes "seems to enlarge rather than limit our experience"[24]. Synge's text was the living world. He primarily looked at life from the vantage ground of the Aran Islands. Of course, before coming to the Aran Islands, he explored life on his own and then through literature. His Aran visits further enlarged and deepened his vision of life. Here he got "a vision of men naked to the natural forces that surround them, who live in a country where the twilights are filled with 'vague and inarticulate anguish' and the sunlit glens with unearthly vitality"[25]. Synge was both a poet and a playwright like Yeats. They possessed the dual qualities of introspection and were endowed with "lyric instinct" as well as "histrionic temperament". While the former was responsible for the growth of Yeats and Synge as poets, the latter gave them the expression of dramatists. Synge had the

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22. Ibid., p. 4.

23. Ibid., p. 4.

24. Ibid., p. 4.

25. Skelton, Writings of Synge, p. 110.

poetic impulse and "the right dramatic perception of life's growth and becoming"[26]. To Yeats drama is not an independent form of art. It is closely allied to poetry and its business is to make use of poetry for expressing the essence, spirit and reality of life. As dramatist W.B.Yeats was always in favour of imagination and poetry against the realism and naturalism of prose drama. In W.B. Yeats's plays, we get two lifevisions. In the first place this lifevision arises out of the Gaelic legends and myths (which he interpreted in his own way). And secondly this vision of life has manifested itself in certain unexplored laws of nature (psychic phenomena) and latent powers in man such as the spiritual body taking control of the physical body. Yeats's knowledge of the spiritual essence of life which frees man from earthly bondage while ensuring 'Nirvana', in which the lower self is dead, is, indeed, a very enlightened realization. Synge's atheism perhaps stood in his way in matters of undertaking this metaphysical search for the human psyche. Synge plunged deep into the life of the peasantry which gave him the real knowledge of the fundamental truths of life while enlarging and deepening his lifevision. Synge saw drama "as emanating from the observable realities of known life, rather

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26. Maurice Bourgeois, J.M.S and the Irish Theatre, p. 42. (Italics mine)

than as Yeats saw it from the life of Aran"[27]. Synge's is a "vision of universal significance"[28]. For he "entered into human nature in all its diversity"[29]. In the seasonal changes and the play of light and shade, Synge wove the tragic and comic patterns of his plays and presented his vision of life which is poetic and subject to earthly reality of "getting and spending". The poetic vision has embodied the imaginative aspects of life to be found in love, passionate life and lingering for freedom. And in the vision of the surface reality is found "the living world", and "the naked realities of material existence"[30], where youth and age, life and mortality, illusion and reality face each other and go hand in hand. And Synge was successful to unite the contraries "which for Yeats were at the core of all great art"[31].

I have been specially interested in Synge's vision of life because of the co-existence in it of the poetic and surface

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27. Sean O'Tuama, "Synge & the idea of a National Theatre", J.M.Synge : centenary papers, ed. Herman, p. 2. (Italics mine).

28. Robin Skelton, The Writings of J.M.Synge, p. 40 (Italics mine)

29. Elizabeth Coxhead, Lady Gregory : A Literary Portrait (Macmillan, 1961), p. 112.

30. Robert O'Driscoll, Yeats's conception of Synge", Sunshine and the Moon's Delight, ed. Bushrui, p. 165.

31. Ibid, p. 165.

aspects of life. All creative artists more or less have enshrined in their works two lifevisions. What is indeed striking in Synge is that all the principal characters are governed by a wonderful zest for life which gives the lie to life's negative aspects like mutability and mortality. While living among the Aran people, Synge got a new vision which moved him. Himself being a dying man, he chose the living world for his text. And his characters set a positive force against "the grim negatives" of life, proclaiming the poetic aspects which can redeem life from the pangs of physical suffering and death. And now Synge is "not merely of one country or one age, but for all mankind".[32]

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32. Alan Price, "A Survey of Recent work on J.M.Synge", Sunshine and the Moon's Delight ed. Bushrui, p. 295.

CHAPTER - II

Synge the man : a biographical study

"And here's John Synge himself, that rooted man, 'Forgetting human words', a grave deep face".

W.B. Yeats, "The Municipal Gallery Revisited", Stanza, vii.

"In exploring the character of Synge we are indeed exploring a crucial aspect central to the nature of the creative process and also observing, not for the first time, that the man of genius always remains both to his contemporaries and the successors something of an enigma".

Robin Skelton, "Foreword", J.M. Synge : Interviews and Recollections, ed. E.H. Mikhail (The Macmillan Press Ltd., 1977).

The creative being in Synge owes much to Synge the man who "wrote using his whole life as his material",[1] John Millington

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1. Andrew Carpenter (ed.), My Uncle John : Edward Stephens's life of J.M. Synge (London, 1974), p. 213.

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Synge was born in a family which enjoyed an illustrious heritage[2]. Synge came from an Anglo-Irish Protestant family. His mother was the daughter of a Northern clergyman, and herself a strongly evangelical member of the Church of Ireland. Synge's father was a barrister and land owner, and a member of the Protestant Anglo-Irish class. He lost his father at an early age. His mother afterwards became the guardian of the boy and Synge's "formative years were powerfully influenced by his mother"[3] who strictly adhered to the traditional values and religious beliefs. "While still very young", the idea of "Hell" entered his mind through his mother and "took a tearful hold on"[4] him. In the wake of hell, came also the thoughts of death. When one of Synge's aunts died, his mother spoke to him about death. A little boy of six, did not realise "what death meant". But "in reality death impressed him with "a sort of awe and wonder"[5]. The concept of "hell" and the idea of "death" had their impact upon his "quiet" "pensive" "sensitive" and "meditative" nature. As a result, a kind of estrangement began to overpower him from his very childhood days.

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2. "The Synges were a well-known Wicklow family ... and anywhere in Wicklow he mentioned his name, Synge would have been placed". Nicholas Grene, Synge : a critical study of the plays (The Macmillan Press Ltd., 1975), p. 7.

3. Eugene Benson, J.M.Synge, (The Macmillan Press Ltd., 1982), p. 2.

4. J.M. Synge, "Autobiography" J.M.Synge : Collected works, II, ed., Alan Price (Oxford University Press, 1966), p. 4.

5. Ibid., p. 7.

His ill-health was also responsible for his isolation. For he was always sick, and his "childhood was a long series of coughs and colds"[6]. His "ill-health", prevented him from going to school for six months at a stretch. During this time he suffered from "headaches". Naturally morbidity began to tell heavily upon his body and mind. In the family environment, Synge found nothing which could give him real joy and deliver him from the agony of ill-health. It further "stifled" his mind. He could not be sympathetic to his mother's evangelical teachings and was sinking more and more into a lonely temperament. For "ever and always" he was "a sad and lonely man"[7] and, "even in company he was essentially alone"[8]. Yeats celebrates him as the "solitary man". Synge's early life indicates, how "he passed a crisis in his development as man and artist"[9]. Now Synge "sought for a belief or a cause in which there might be some form of self-fulfilment"[10]. And "became more interested in definite life"[11]. For him that "definite life"

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6. Ibid., p. 4.

7. "Preface", E. M. Mikhail, Synge : Interviews and Recollections.

8. Herbert Howarth, The Irish writers 1880-1940 (Salisbury Square, London, 1958), p. 218.

9. Carpenter (ed.), Stephens's life of J.M.Synge, p. 34.

10. Robin Skelton, J.M.Synge and his World (London : Thames & Hudson, 1971), p. 19.

11. Synge, "Autobiography", Collected Works, II, ed., Price, p. 7.

was awaiting "amidst strange mountain fogs and sunshine"[12]. The external world "where there was always variety - the alteration of day and night, the passing of the seasons" became for him "a symbol of inspired life and the house as a symbol of dull method"[13]. Synge used to explore the woods surrounding Rathfarnham Castle and collect birds' eggs with Florence Ross, his cousin. In his leisure hours, he studied books of natural history and ornithology. Sometimes Synge was seen sitting alone on the cliffs and watching the birds and "listening to the sound of the waves, to the cry of the gulls and to the chatter of the choughs"[14]. He would often "hide in bushes to watch with amorous fellowship the pure movements of the birds"[15] and would take "very long walks among the Dublin mountains"[16]. He "felt a strange sense of enchantment and delight"[17]. Synge had the Wordsworthian temperament at core of his heart and believed that "the beauty of nature

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12. Ibid., p. 12.
13. Carpenter (ed.), Stephens's life of J. Synge, p. 38.
14. Ibid., p. 118.
15. Synge, "Autobiography", Collected Works ed. Price, p. 7.
16. Ibid., p. 9.
17. Ibid., p. 12.

influenced him more than ever[18]. He became a "pilgrim to the sun" and arranged his "excursions to reach a certain corner where there was a fine outlook of hill and sky"[19].

While nature inspired him so much, Synge was, on the other hand, inspired emotionally by Cherrie Matheson, the daughter of a leader of the "Plymouth brethern". Cherrie Matheson was a girl of his own age and Synge met her at Castle Kelvin. Later on she became Synge's neighbour. His cousin, Florence Ross moved him emotionally in his adolescence. Now when he was ten, in the company of Cherrie Matheson, Synge's "real appreciations and imagination acted together"[20]. In fact, this friendship with her was a significant experience at a formative period of his life. Unfortunately this love did not mature. It lasted till 1896. However, the orthodox training of Synge's mother was not in keeping with his temperament. He was not responsive to the religious instincts. This was the reason why Cherrie Matheson had forsaken him. For she "could not bring herself to think of marrying an atheist"[21]. In this way, Synge's early love received a serious

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18. Ibid., p. 9.

19. Ibid., p. 13.

20. Ibid., p. 6.

21. Skelton, Synge and his world, p. 29.

setback. On their separation, Synge passed through a period of terrible mental crisis leading to an isolation which became more and more intense.

The poetic temperament in Synge absorbed "this unhappy love affair, together with other less certainly known, relationships". Afterwards Synge turned these into print in his Vitavecchia, which was his first attempt "at a poetic opus of any size"[22]. In his fourteenth year, soon after this unhappy love affair, Synge read Darwin's book on Evolution. This book "reinforced his growing agnosticism"[23] and by it he "laid a chasm between his present and" his "past and between" himself, "and" his "kindred and friends"[24]. During this period, he took the vow of celibacy, "I am unhealthy, and if I marry I will have unhealthy children. But I will never create beings to suffer as I am suffering"[25]. So he decided not to marry. And this decision caused him "horrible misery"[26].

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22. Robin Skelton, "Introduction", J.M. Synge : Collected Works, I, ed., Robin Skelton (Oxford University Press, 1962), p. xii.

23. Benson, Synge, p. 3.

24. Synge, "Autobiography", p. 11.

25. Ibid., p. 9.

26. Ibid., p. 9.

When Synge was sixteen everything changed. He finally rejected Christianity and took to the violin. He began to study "literature with wild excitement" and "lost almost completely his interest in natural science although the beauty of nature influenced him more than ever"[27]. He went off on his "bicycle among the loneliest hollows of the hills in vain hopes of an adventure"[28].

Gradually he was turning to music. Synge had an extraordinary passion for music. He devoted eight of his best years [probably between 1886 and 1874] to music and it played a major part in the development of his artistic talents.

Before Synge went to Germany to become a professional musician and composer, he spent from 1888 to 1892 in Dublin as a student of Trinity College. He studied the Gaelic language in Trinity and took considerable interest "in the kingdom of Ireland. ... Everything Irish became sacred ... and had a charm that was neither quite human nor divine, rather perhaps as if he had fallen in love with a Goddess"[29].

Synge read the Gaelic texts of The Children of Lir, and of Diarmuid and Grania. During the years when he was studying

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27. Ibid., p. 9.

28. Ibid., p. 12.

29. Ibid., p. 13.

languages at Trinity, he was also enrolled as a student at the Royal Irish Academy of Music. He also became a member of the Dublin Naturalists' Field Club. After his graduation from Trinity College, Synge went to Germany accompanied by Mary Synge, his mother's cousin and herself a musician. The very disquietude of mind which was always with him, couldnot give him any definite purpose of life. Synge spent less than a year in Germany before he was convinced that he should give up music for a literary career. His ambition was boundless. He wished "to be at once Shakespeare, Beethoven and Darwin"[30]. During his stay in Germany, Synge began to write verses and compose music. It was in the spring of 1894 that he tried to sketch ideas for plays. During this period, Synge "had felt the agony of belief and the agony of doubt and had seen how religious conviction may lead to emotional deprivation and despair"[31].

Before he finally left Germany, Synge went to Munich and Berlin. There he studied the works of Heine and the modern German and Austrian dramas. The real turning point of Synge's life was marked by his decision to go to Paris. Synge acquired fairly good knowledge of French during his stay at Trinity. He was acquainted with the French authors and newspapers. When he came

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30. Ibid., p. 12.

31. Robin Skelton, The Writings of J.M.Synge (London, 1971), p. 16.

to Paris, he wished to become an interpreter of French thought and literature for the English speaking world and began to be acquainted with the works of the master writers of European literature. He read Villon, Petrarch, Rabelais, Ronsard, Moliere, Racine, Nashe, Cervantes, Herrick, Burns and translated into Anglo-Irish the French poets Villon, Marot, Colin, Musset. The modern French writers whom he either reviewed or mentioned in his notebooks, include Baudelaire, Mallarme, Zola, Huysmen, Pierre Loti, Anatole France and Maeterlinck. He knew a great deal of Balzac. He was a constant reader of Flaubert and Maupassant. He was specially fond of the writings of Petrarch, Villon, Cervantes, Moliere and Racine. Synge had an unusual interest in the Elizabethan and Jacobean literature. He was perhaps the only Irish writer who was endowed with such a refined European culture. This wide reading "equipped Synge with a vastness of perceptions"[32], developed his style, nourished his own view of life and, further enlarged his vision as an artist.

Synge's literary output written between 1895 and 1899 was marked by a strain of morbidity. In Vita Vecchia and Etude Morbide, the first two "fictionalised and morbid autobiographical sketches", we get a record of his "experiences and yearnings"[33].

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32. Maurice Bourgeois, J.M.S. and the Irish Theatre, p. 64.

33. Skelton, "Introduction", Synge : Collected Works, I, p. xii.

During these years his interest in Irish culture and the Irish language deepened. He attended Professor H. d' Arbois de Jubainville's lectures on Celtic civilisation. Prof. de Jubainville was the finest holder of the chair of celtic languages and literature at the College de France, and he taught Synge Old English. Later on Synge reviewed The Irish Mythological cycle and Celtic Mythology which his friend, R.I. Best had translated. However, Synge's literary works during this period could not usher in any promise of a great artist. W.B. Yeats came upon Synge's life as a Messiah. The rare gifts awaiting their manifestation, were enkindled when in 1896, W.B. Yeats met J.M. Synge in a Paris Hotel. He found Synge wasting his energies, fiddling in an orchestra and writing reviews of French books for English and French publishers. He perceived at the same time how Synge had given himself to the artificialities of French life and poetry. He discouraged Synge to read either Racine or Arthur Symons and moreover urged Synge, "to go to the Aran Islands. Live there as if you were one of the people themselves; express a life that has never found expression"[34]. Synge faithfully adhered to Yeats's advice and made his journey to Aran in 1898. When Synge went there, his "ear, eye, brain and heart were vividly awake"[35], and,

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34. W.B. Yeats, Essays and Introductions (Macmillan, 1961), p. 299.

35. F.L. Lucas, The drama of Chekhov, Synge, Yeats and Pirandello (London, Cassell, 1963), p. 161.

he brought with him a linguistic equipment and an insight sharpened by his knowledge of continental celticism"[36]. This knowledge of language aided by a subtle sensibility enabled Synge to delve deep into the life of these primitive people. He saw in their life a wonderful intermingling of life and death, birth and decay and a "continued struggle for life and livelihood"[37]. He experienced the joy and the pain, and the profound monotony of the Irish peasant life and the loneliness of the farmstead in the west and Wicklow Glens. And in the Aran Islands Synge "found his vision of human nature and human predicament"[38]. Now began actually Synge's career as a literary artist. The period of apprenticeship was over.

To Aran Synge went five times in all, once in each year from 1898 to 1902. He spent a total of four and half months on the island. In the Aran Islands he found his dialect and the materials for his plays. In fact, in the life story of the Aran Islanders Synge discovered himself and "chose a technique which

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36. David H. Greene & Edward M. Stephens, J.M.Synge 1871-1909 (New York, 1959), p. 65.

37. Greene, Synge : a critical study of the Plays, p. 37.

38. Skelton, Synge and his world, p. 57.

would reveal the outer life [illegible] of the artist's inner life"[39]. Before the Summer of 1902 which heralded the beginning of Synge's career as a dramatist, Synge wrote The Aran Islands which he considered to be his first serious work. "In writing out the talk of the people and their stories in this book, and in a certain number of articles on the Wicklow peasantry which I have not yet collected, I learned to write the peasant dialogue and dialogue which I use in my plays. The Aran Islands threw a good deal of light on my plays"[40].

Synge's career as a dramatist lasted only for seven years. It began in the Summer of 1902 and came to an end in 1909. Synge's mother hired a small house in Wicklow, known as the Tomirlan's House. During the Summer of 1902 he wrote In the Shadow of the Glen, Riders to the Sea and also made the first draft of the Tinker's Wedding. In these plays Synge had discovered his metier and genius. John Masefield, Arthur Symons and G.K. Chesterton all praised his works. Yeats and Lady Gregory drew him closer into their literary schemes. During this time the Irish Dramatic Movement was at the height of its glory resulting in the foundation of the Abbey Theatre in 1904. It was the Abbey which brought the genius of Synge before the public and presented

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39. Ann Saddlemyer, "Art, Nature and the prepared personality" Sunshine and the Moon's Delight : J.M.Synge 1871-1909 ed. S.B.Bushrui (Beirut, 1972), p. 115.

40. Quoted in Synge : Collected Works, II, ed. Alan Price, p. 47.

him as a key figure of the movement. W.B. Yeats welcomed him as a "national writer". For he had expressed "his own inmost emotions in those curious ironical plays of his, where, for all that, by the illusion of admirable art, everyone seems to be thinking and feeling as only countrymen could think and feel"[41]. Synge's plays began to be written at a time when the Abbey Theatre needed them most. In spite of the hostilities which the candid realism of Synge's plays roused, he became a celebrity. When Synge became so intimate with the Abbey Theatre, a strange thing happened in his life in 1906. He fell in love with Molly Allgood, a beautiful actress, popularly known as Maire O'Neill. The vow of celibacy which he had taken in his adolescence, now took a different turn in this intimacy.

It was at Molly's request that Synge dreamt of publishing some of his poems. Unfortunately this love affair did not get the approval either of Synge's family or of his friends. Apart from their two different backgrounds, there remained between the two, a difference in age. W.B. Yeats and Lady Gregory were much in opposition to Synge. And, for Molly, Synge became alienated from his family. However Synge's love was something unique. In a letter to Molly written on 10 December, 1907, Synge addressed her as his "child", "little life", "good angel" and "greatest

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41. W.B. Yeats (ed.), Samhain, 1933, p. 161.

friend" "all in one" "I don't believe there has been a woman in Ireland loved the way I love you for a thousand years"[42].

Synge's love particularly at this hour when he was suffering from Hodgkin's disease and obsessed "with sickness and death" or pains that in Molly he found "the excitement of life"[43]. In his letter on 30th August, 1906, Synge wrote, "I am afraid I'm spoiling you by writing to you everyday"[44]. Synge loved Molly "indescribably", "so utterly", "as the very breath" of his "soul". Molly was for Synge his "dearest treasure" and a 'whole world' to him. She was just like "the little shiney new moon, and the flowers of the earth"[45]. Synge wanted to marry Molly, and his mother, who at first objected to the idea, at last yielded to it. This idea of marriage gave Synge the joy of living. In 1907 he was operated on. In order to allay Molly's anxiety, Synge was always cheering her up and in his letters he never expressed that he felt unwell, "I feel wonderfully gay. ... My spirits are going up and up, and up"[46]. But the fear whether

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42. Saddlemyer (ed.), Letters to Molly : Synge to Maire O'Neill 1906-1909, p. 215.

43. Saddlemyer, "Introduction", Synge to Maire O'Neill 1906-1909, p. xiv.

44. Ibid., p. 19.

45. Ibid., p. 87.

46. Ibid., p. 150.

he would be all right was always with him and the letter written on 21st August, 1907 referred to that operation. That the chance of his being "all right" was a remote possibility, had been indicated in the note of exclamation [!!!!!!!!!!] of the letter. In Synge's life there was always an interplay of life and death and this interplay is found in the heart of his works, "... the odour of death permeates Synge's work even when he is playing with it"[47].

When Synge learnt from Dr. Pearson's report that the condition of his health was "much more unsatisfactory"[48], he wrote to Molly addressing her as his "dearest love", "This is a mere line for you, my poor child, in case anything goes wrong with me tomorrow to bid you good-bye and ask you to be brave and good, and not to forget the good times we had and the beautiful thing we've seen together"[49]. Before he died, Synge "reserved" his "last strength for Deirdre" and was "determined to finish it" before his death. But "before the last writing was accomplished, Synge laid aside the pen and resigned himself to death"[50]. At the hour of death, Synge requested his nurse Miss Kitty Clinch who attended upon him all through his illness in the hospital, to

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47. John R. Moore, "Synge's Deirdre and the Sorrows of Mortality", Centenary Papers, ed. Harmon, p. 99.

48. Saddlemyer (ed.), Letters to Molly, p. 309.

49. Ibid., p. 317.

50. George Moore, "Synge", J.M. Synge : Interviews and Recollections ed. E.H. Mikhail (The Macmillan Press Ltd., 1977), p. 103.

kindly take him to a room from where he could see the Wicklow mountains, the hills where he used to go for long solitary walks. But unfortunately he could not see the mountains. "To see them it was necessary to stand up and Synge could not stand or sit up in his bed, so his last wish remained ungratified, and he died with tears in his eyes"[51] at 5.30 in the morning of 24 March, 1909. What Villon, Herrick and Burns had done in using their "life and experience" in their poetry, Synge wished to do on the stage. Thus we see that life, love and death which have characterised Synge's works, have been the dominant "moods" in his own life. As a result of it "all his work was subjective"[52]. Therefore every minor or major information of his life is important for a full study of both the man and his works. For, "literature is always personal, always one man's vision of the world, one man's experience, and it can be popular when men are ready to welcome the visions of others"[53].

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51. Ibid., p. 104.

52. Padraic Colum, "My memories of John Synge", Synge : Interviews and Recollections, ed., Mikhail, p. 68.

53. W.B. Yeats, Samhain 1903, p. 116.

CHAPTER - III

The Aran Islands and J.M. Synge

> "... John Synge, I and Augusta Gregory, thought
> All that we did, all that we said or sang
> Must come from contact with the soil. from that
> contact everything Antaeus-like grew strong..."
>
> W.B. Yeats, "The Municipal Gallery Revisited",
> Stanza, VI (Italics mine)
>
> "That dying sings the living world for text".
>
> W.B. Yeats, "In Memory of Major Robert Gregory",
> Stanza, IV (Italics mine).

The Aran Islands whose geography "is very simple", "may need a word to itself. There are three islands, Aranmor, the north island, about nine miles long, Inishmaan, the middle island, about three miles and a half across, and nearly round in form; and the South island, Inisheer. They lie about thirty miles from Galway, up the centre of the bay, but they are not far from the cliffs of country clare on the South or the corner of Connemara on the north"[1].

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1. J.M.Synge, "Introduction", "The Aran Islands", The Plays, Poems and Prose of J.M.Synge (Everyman's Library: London J.M.Dent & Sons Ltd., 1961), p. 247.

And Synge's visit to Aran in 1898 was "a true renascence, a spiritual rebirth"[2]. For the Aran Islands went into the making of Synge "even more than Cumberland was the making of Wordsworth"[3]. On his return from Aran, Synge said to C.H.Houghton, "Oh, I wish you go there, you would like the island people"[4]. Wordsworth chose the "humble and rustic life" because he felt that "in that situation the essential passions of the heart find a better soil in which they can attain their maturity"[5]. Synge was drawn to that life because "their minds have been coloured by endless suggestions from the sea and sky and seem to form a unity in which all kinds of emotion match one another like the leaves or petals of flower"[6]. Their life and their talk which was "far more poetic than much so-called poetry"[7] fascinated him. Their language expressed both imagination and poetry. Synge believed as Wordsworth did, that this "is a more permanent and far more

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2. Elizabeth Coxhead, J.M.Synge and Lady Gregory (Longmans, 1962), p. 10.

3. Lucas, The drama of Chekhov, Synge, Yeats and Pirandello, p. 151.

4. C. Houghton, "John Synge as I knew him", J.M.Synge : Interviews and Recollections, ed. Mikhail, p. 5.

5. William Wordsworth, Preface to the Lyrical Ballads, eds. R.L. Brett & A.R.Jones (Methuen & Co. Ltd., University Paperbacks, 1968), p. 245.

6. Quoted in Synge : Collected Works, II, ed., Price, p. 86.

7. Lucas, The drama of Chekhov, Synge, Yeats and Pirandello, p. 151.

philosophical language" because it arose "out of repeated experience and regular feeling"[8]. In the Aran Islands, Synge got the materials, characters and the language for his plays. Above all, the Aran Islands awakened his "living imagination"[9] and gave him a new perspective to look at the life of the Aran people. As he knew the dialect of the [Aran] people, he could easily live as "one of the people themselves"[10] and thus chose "the living world for text"[11]. And Synge's vision of life springs from the "relation between the natural environment and the people who live in it"[12]. Apparently it may seem that his vision of life is provincial or local. For his characters are the peasants of the East or the West of Ireland. In reality this is not true. Synge knew how to move "from the particular to the universal"[13]. In the Irish peasants, shopkeeper, priest, tinker, fisherman, he found "a heightened sense of drama and a supreme sense of comedy"[14].

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8. Wordsworth, Preface to the Lyrical Ballads, eds. Brett & Jones, p. 24.

9. W.R. Rodgers, Irish Literary Portraits (British Broadcasting Corporation, 1972), p. 100.

10. Yeats, Essays and Introductions, p. 299.

11. Yeats, "In Memory of Major Gregory", Stanza, IV.

12. Greene, Synge : A critical study of the plays, p. 14.

13. Robin Skelton, The Writings of J.M. Synge (London, 1971), p. 23.

14. Rodgers, Irish Literary Portraits, p. 101.

In these [Aran people] Synge found "a vision of human awareness of temporality"[15] as well as "a vision of the interplay of death and life"[16]. Though the Aran Islands were a small region, here against the background of the rocky island, Synge got a universal vision of "human nature and of the human predicament"[17]. Synge is not merely a chronicler of a particular race or region, recording "the profound mysteries of life", the "contrary impulses", the "grim negatives", Synge entered "into human nature in all its diversity"[18]. That is why, Synge's "work is, in any serious sense of the word, international, for he tackled fundamental crises of the human spirit"[19].

Synge noticed how, "in wild jests and laughter" the island people expressed "their loneliness and desolation. They had an unusual apprehension for the sea"[20]. They believed that "a man who is not afraid of the sea will soon be drowned" and "do only be drowned now and again"[21]. Synge could not help

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15. Skelton, The Writings of J.M.Synge, p. 62.

16. Ellis Fermor, The Irish Dramatic Movement (London, 1939), pp. 184-85.

17. Robin Skelton, J.M.Synge and his world (London : Thames and Hudson, 1971), p. 37.

18. Elizabeth Coxhead, Lady Gregory : A Literary Portrait (Macmillan, 1961), p. 112.

19. Skelton, The Writings of J.M.Synge, p. 173.

20. Synge, Collected works, II, ed. Price, p. 245.

21. Ibid., p. 117.

feeling "that he was talking with men who were under a judgement of death". He knew that "everyone of them would be drowned in the sea in a few years and battered naked on the rocks, or would die in his own cottage and be buried with another fearful scene in the grave-yard"[22].

Further he wrote, "Everyone is used in Ireland to the tragedy that is bound up with the lives of farmers and fishing people"[23]. Throughout the islands, Synge found the human spectacle against the background of the "solitude of rocks and sea"[24]. As Synge's primary "interest was in people, the way they lived and talked and looked at life"[25], he listened to "the talk in Mayo public house", experienced "the love-making of women" and heard "the cringing of beggars"[26]. In their "melancholy and violence, drunkenness, exaltation, poverty and cruelty"[27], Synge found "the

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22. Ibid., p. 162.

23. Ibid., p. 230.

24. Ibid., p. 252.

25. David H. Greene, "J.M.Synge : A centenary Appraisal", Synge, Centenary Papers ed. Harmon, p. 194.

26. Lucas, The drama of Chekhov, Synge, Yeats and Pirandello, p. 77.

27. Ibid., p. 80.

complex mode of frustration and wild fantasy, vicarious exuberance and farcical despair"[28] and "saw the primitive response to the tragedy of human existence"[29]. In Wicklow, West Kerry and the Aran Islands, Synge practically found "a new corner of the world to write of, and worded his writing in a style both new and bewitching"[30]. Moreover, Synge's narrative became powerful because while expressing their emotions and passions, he was actually translating his own feelings and responses into print. Synge's inner being which was attuned to the primal reality of these people, got its wonderful manifestation in the lives of these people. He could hear in them the voice of his own soul and see in them the spectre of his own death. The poets took the Aran Islands for an "objective correlative" for the artist. For "In those images paraded all the desires of his heart"[31]. Being endowed with a rich vision of life that mingled with the universal patterns, Synge now sought earnestly to transmute both "humanity and this mysterious external world"[32] "into the impersonality of art"[33].

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28. David Krause, "Sean O'Casey and the Higher Nationalism", ed. Robert G. Griffoll, Theatre and Nationalism in 20th Century Ireland (Oxford University Press, 1971), pp. 121-23.

29. Nicholas Grene, Synge : A critical study, p. 37.

30. F.L. Lucas, The Drama of Chekhov, Synge, Yeats and Pirandello, pp. 136-37.

31. W.B. Yeats, 'First meeting with Synge, 'Synge : Interviews and Recollections, ed. Mikhail, p. 10.

32. Synge, Collected Works, II, ed. Price, p. 341.

33. Skelton, The Writings of Synge, p. 46.

CHAPTER - IV

The Irish Dramatic Movement and J.M. SYNGE

"We have now several dramatists who have taken to drama as their most serious business, and we claim that a school of Irish drama exists, and that is founded upon sincere observation and experience.

Mr. Synge alone has written of the peasant as he is to all the ages; of the folk imagination as it has been shaped by centuries of life among fields or on fishing grounds. His people talk a highly coloured musical language, and one never hears from them a thought that is of today and not of yesterday".

W.B. Yeats, Samhain, pp. 182-83
(Italics mine)

The Irish Literary Movement was in the beginning, the Irish National Movement. The spirit of liberation enkindled the spirit of nationalism which resuscitated the glorious cultural heritage of Ireland. The untapped store house of Irish legends, sagas and folk tales were revived and given a fresh lease of life. Unfortunately no Irish writer had previously made use of these home-spun literary sources in his writings. In the wake of the national movement, there came the cultural movement in Ireland.

A country's liberation movement aimed at attaining not only political freedom but cultural freedom as well.

Before the cultural movement was launched, the Irish literature was truly a foreign literature and the type of dramas which were produced on the Irish stage, were the so-called realistic dramas of Ibsen and his school which dealt with the "sooty problems of modern life". It was at this hour that the literary movement wanted to direct its attention to the country's dramatic resources which remained unutilised so long. The fighters of the literary movement earnestly felt that if the resources were properly utilized, they would give birth to the tradition of a new dramatic genre in Ireland. Thus, the Irish National Movement was responsible for the upsurge of the Irish Literary Movement which finally became the Irish Dramatic Movement.

During the period of the country's national resurgence, J. M. Synge was away from his own country and living in Paris. It would be improper to think that he was not at all aware of what was going on in his country. After he had renounced christianity at the age of sixteen or seventeen, Synge was taking real interest in Ireland. Naturally even living at a distance, he kept a watchful eye on the activities of his country. Fortunately for him, in Paris he noticed "the growing interest in Celtic culture and archaeology".[1] As mentioned in Chapter I, while

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1. T. R. Henn, "Introduction", The Plays and poems of J. M. Synge ed., T.R. Henn (Methuen & Co. Ltd., 1963), p. 2.

he was in Paris, he attended Professor H. d'Arbois de Jubainville's lectures on Celtic civilization and reviewed The Irish Mythological cycle and celtic Mythology. During the years of his stay in Paris, his interest in Irish culture and the Irish language really deepened. And there in 1890 he met W.B. Yeats in a Paris hotel. This meeting, indeed proved prophetic for Synge and made him for the Irish Dramatic Movement an inevitable figure. While the Aran Islands moulded the artistic being of Synge and gave him a true vision of life about humanity, the Irish Dramatic Movement on the other hand paved the way for the artist in Synge to come into the limelight. "It was the rise and development of the Irish drama which gave Synge his chance of distinguishing himself"[2]. Therefore, a study of the Irish Dramatic Movement in relation to Synge is important.

From Paris, Synge went to the Aran Islands. He lived there and drank that life to the lees. The experience he gathered during his visits, stirred his imagination and heralded the birth of a new literary artist in Synge. The members of the movement for a long time felt the urgency of setting up a theatre house of their own. In 1904 the famous Abbey Theatre came into existence.

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2. D.J.O. Donoghue, "John M. Synge : A personal appreciation", Synge : Interviews and Recollections, ed. Mikhail, p. 19.

Its purpose was to propagate that "The Irish Literary Drama will appeal rather to the intellect and spirit than to the senses. It will eventually, it is hoped, furnish a vehicle for the literary expression of the national thought and ideas of Ireland such as has not hitherto been in existence"[3] while bringing "back to the English theatre the poetry that is missed in Ibsen"[4]. J.M. Synge wished to bring what he discovered in the Aran and its neighbouring Islands to Dublin, where it seemed that "the popular mind had grown harsh and ugly"[5]. W.B. Yeats advocated in Samhain that the plays of his school would be of two kinds, "plays of (a) peasant life and plays of a romantic and (b) heroic life, such as one finds in the folk tales"[6]. Synge fulfilled the very dream of Yeats by establishing a national drama founded upon sympathetic observations and experiences of life. In his claim that J.M. Synge was the product of the Irish Dramatic Movement, W.B. Yeats perhaps hinted that the ideals of the Irish Literary Movement inspired and nourished Synge and moulded his writings in the direction the Irish Dramatic Movement was destined to attain. J.M. Synge could not accept the type of Dramas which "are far away from the profound and common interest of life"[7].

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3. Quoted in Ellis Fermor, The Irish Dramatic Movement, p. 37.

4. Ibid., p. 7.

5. Ibid, p. 80.

6. W.B. Yeats (ed), Samhain 1903, p. 194.

7. Synge, "Preface", "The playboy of the western world", Plays and Poems of Synge, ed. Henn, p. 174.

Synge was an advocate of "humour" in the drama. It was his conviction that "of the things which nourish the imagination humour is one of the most needful"[8]. Unfortunately "in these days the play house is too often stocked with the drugs of many seedy problems, or with the absinthe or vermouth of the last musical comedy"[9]. As its result, "the intellectual modern drama has failed, and people have grown sick of the false joy of the musical comedy, that has been given them in place of the rich joy found only in what is superb and wild in reality"[10]. J.M. Synge brought on the Irish stage both reality, and joy which are "founded on the experience or personal observation of the writer"[11]. The Irish Dramatic Movement became really a practical success when the Abbey Theatre was established. It became the living organism of the movement. W.B. Yeats, Lady Gregory, J.M. Synge and other playwrights now got their own play house to present, before the Irish audience, the type of drama which they had not come across before and which at the same time became the most powerful agents

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8. Synge, "Preface", "The Tinker's Wedding", Plays and Poems of J.M. Synge, ed. Hone, p. 108.

9. Ibid., p. 108.

10. Synge, "Preface", "The Playboy of the Western World", p. 174.

11. Lady Gregory, Our Irish Theatre (New York & London, 1914), pp. 100-2.

to focus the aims and ideals of the movement. For "in times of acute national consciousness the theatre is the form of literature which makes the most direct impact on the people, becoming at times a means for propaganda, but ultimately the means by which the deeper life of the people is expressed"[12].

But it was not an easy task to present on the stage the deeper life of the people "founded upon sincere observation and experience". And it was difficult to present on the stage some plays of Synge. No play in recent history created such an uproar at the theatre as did Synge's The Playboy of the Western World. Even Lady Gregory could not approve of Synge's playboy theme. In a letter written to Molly Allgood, Synge had referred to the reactions and their impact produced by the playboy on him, "I had a dreadful turn of despair over the playboy last Night — it seemed hopeless, ... it is too bad but I must get done with the thing or it will kill me"[13]. Walter Starkie in his article, "An exciting Experience" had recorded his own experiences of the Abbey riot, and how it worked on Synge[14]. One should remember that The

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12. Robert O'Driscoll, "Introduction", Theatre and Nationalism in 20th century Ireland ed., Robert O'Driscoll (Oxford University Press, 1971), p. 11.

13. Saddlemyer (ed.), Letters to Molly, p. 44.

14. "When I saw him on the night of the Abbey riot his face was pale and sunken, and he looked like a ghost of the sun-tanned wanderer. ... I watched him closely as he sat motionless through the dumb-show of his play, amidst the rioting and insults of the mob, but not a trace of emotion could I discern in his pale mask like face that gazed unseeing at the raging auditorium". E.H. Mikhail (ed.), J.M. Synge : Interviews and Recollections. (The Macmillan Press Ltd., 1977), p. 47.

Playboy of the Western World was written at a time when Synge was really ill. And the hostility which the play had to face, aggravated his illness. But that "hullaballoo" was indirectly a blessing in disguise for Synge. For it was with this play that he was able to achieve a landmark in the Irish literary history. With this play, W.B. Yeats had seen "the rise in his country of a new thought, the new opinion that the country had long needed"[15]. The riots kindled the imagination of the people and poetry which is a precious life blood of every great drama was brought back on the stage. Language which is the soul of drama was given a magnificent poetical expression. W.B. Yeats who had foreseen in Synge "the greatest dramatic genius of Ireland"[16] and predicted "a European reputation"[17] for Synge, gave him the protection and strength he needed at that hour. Mary Colum, a girl student who was present at the Abbey Theatre wrote, "I never witnessed a human being fight as Yeats fought that night, nor knew another with so many weapons in his armoury"[18].

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15. W.B. Yeats (ed.), Samhain, p. 227.

16. W.B. Yeats, Autobiographies (London, 1955), p. 206.

17. Alan Wade (ed.), The Letters of W.B. Yeats (London: Rupert Hart Davis, 1954), p. 461.

18. Quoted in Lucas, The Drama of Chekhov, Synge and Pirandello, p. 206.

All the six plays of Synge were performed at the Abbey. Synge's Riders to the Sea and his last unfinished play Deirdre of the Sorrows were not assailed by the audiences.

It is heartening to note that Synge's own relatives did not attend any play of Synge produced at the Abbey. This indifference of his relatives to his plays caused him much mental suffering. Synge had to move amidst this inhospitable atmosphere of his family on the one hand and the world outside on the other. In spite of these heavy odds which came upon Synge's life, he did not lose heart. Rather, through trials and misfortune, Synge got "the tragic ecstasy" leading to the unification of "joy and sorrow"[19]. In the creative world of Synge both joy and sorrow are wedded together while the imaginative reality which is a far deeper reality than the surface reality of our day to day life, constitutes joy, the surface reality with "the relentless stride of time the ceaseless advance of age"[20] and death, produces sorrow. And Synge advocates the poetic reality. In his last play, Deirdre of the Sorrows, despite its tragic undertone, it speaks of "a joy and triumph to the ends of life and time"[21].

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19. Robert O' Driscoll, "Yeats's conception of Synge", Sunshine and Moon's Delight, ed. Bushrui, p. 185. (Italics mine).

20. Lucas, The drama of Chekhov, Synge, Yeats and Pirandello, p. 174. (Italics mines).

21. Synge, "Deirdre of the Sorrows", p. 272. (Italics mine).

Synge's major contribution to the Irish Dramatic Movement was that he presented in his plays a vision of life which was commensurate with the ideals of the Movement. He had left "to the world the type of play that has since become the prototype of Irish folk drama"[22] and "a glorious heritage to make the theatre a Synge theatre"[23].

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22. Denis Johnston, John Millington Synge (New York & London, Columbia University Press, 1965), p. 3.

23. Robert Hogan and Michael J O'Neill (eds), Joseph Holloway's Abbey Theatre, (Carbondale, 1967), p. 172.

CHAPTER - V

The external World and Synge

"My wish was that nature should be untouched by man". Synge, Collected Works, Vol. II ed. Price, p. 12.

The two significant prose works of Synge are his Autobiography and the Aran Islands. These two prose works along with his poems enable us to catch a glimpse of Synge's vision of life which later on found a full expression in his plays. In his prose and poetry, Synge has explored the external world (the world of nature)" to express subjective moods"[1].

Synge's Autobiography is a sick man's diary, recording his passion and emotion, love and suffering, ambition and depression. The boy who was born sick, and had continual sufferings, developed a kind of morbidity. He wanted to liberate his mind from the despair of death and oppression of ill-health. In nature, he found a real "recipe". The woods, mountains, the stream and the birds had their very positive and powerful impact on his mind. With Florence Ross, his cousin, Synge used to hide in bushes, collect the birds' eggs and felt a kind of magical spell in every

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1. Lento M. Synge, "The autobiography of Synge", Sunshine and the Moon's Delight, ed. Sushrui, pp. 167-68.

nook and corner of nature, "In my childhood the presence of furze bushes and rocks and flooded streams and strange mountain fogs and sunshine gave me a strange sense of enchantment and delight"[2].

When Synge came to the Aran Islands, he noticed how the minds of the Islanders had been coloured by "endless suggestions from the sea and sky, and seem to form a unity in which all kinds of emotion match one another like the leaves or petals of flowers"[3].

Synge, while walking round the island nearly everyday, "occasionally passed a lonely chapel", could "see the sea on nearly every side, stretching away to distant ranges of mountains on the north and south"[4]. He had seen nothing so "desolate" as the islands before, but felt "a natural link between the people and the world that is about them"[5]. He saw them "in the face of a universe that wars on them with winds and seas"[6]. They all "are wearied of the sea" and "the horror of the mist". They "live in continual danger on the sea"[7]. And "in wild jest and laughter

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2. Synge, Collected Works, ed., Price, II, p. 12.
3. Ibid., p. 86.
4. Ibid., p. 70.
5. Ibid., p. 59.
6. Ibid., p. 75
7. Ibid., p. 108.

that they can express their loneliness and desolation"[8]. Synge had never "heard talk so simple and so attractive as the talk of these people"[9] who were always "under a judgement of death"[10]. The "solitude of rocks and sea", "the utter loneliness and desolation of the place" have "given these people their finest qualities"[11]. When summer and spring approach, "every leaf sparkles with peculiar lustre" and "air, foliage and water are filled with life". With the seasonal changes with "odour and colour" on the one hand and "splendour and decay" on the other, these people "unite in a rude way the old passions of the earth"[12]. While they are plagued by the horror of death, they are at the same time governed by the passions of the earth. These two realities which are both physical and poetic go hand in hand in Synge's works. From the external nature, Synge got this lesson and found the same truths in human life as well.

Both Wordsworth and Synge introduced nature, and men living close to nature in their creative works and had shown how

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8. Ibid., p. 140.
9. Ibid., p. 144.
10. Ibid., p. 162.
11. Ibid., p. 256.
12. Ibid., p. 199.

nature had influenced their lives and governed their beings. Wordsworth's association with nature began in his early childhood when he was living in Cumberland. Similarly Synge's love for nature grew from his familiarity with the mountainious region of Wicklow. Wordsworth's characters had drawn their vitality from nature which had given them their vision of life. Wordsworth's Michael, The Old Cumberland Beggar, Leech Gatherer and the Lucy poems testify to that. To study Synge and Wordsworth in relation to their vision of life is quite interesting. The difference between them lies in the fact that while Wordsworth idealised nature, Synge gave us a vision of the stark reality of the external nature. Both the positive and the negative aspects of nature found their expression in Synge's works.

In sunshines, in the songs of the birds, in the beauty of the woods, streams and mountains, we get "that blessed mood". In the roaring of the waves, in the storm and tempest, in mists, we get just a contrary image, where the part played by nature is almost like a Nemesis, that plays a wanton game with the innocent lives, and casts on the mind a dark, gloomy and quite a tragic spell of mortality and waste. Synge who was "a worshipper of nature"[13], wrote his early poems (1892-1893), Keeping his eye on "a mountain flower", "sun, moon, sea", "Cloud-vesture drains",

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13. Synge, "Prelude", Plays and Poems by Synge, ed. Henn, p. 217.

"all the seasons", "winds and rain", "furze", "golden mist" "thrushes" and "solitude". He had his own Prelude like Wordsworth, and travelled "South" and "West and South again" "through Wicklow from the morning till the night/and far from cities, and the sites of men" , and "lived with the sunshine and the moon's delight".[14] Synge was responsive to nature, and "knew the stars, the flowers and the birds/The grey and wintry sides of many Glens" [Lexicon] Wordsworth's realization that "Nature never did betray the heart that loved her" [Tintern Abbey] dawned upon him during the period he composed his early poems. And he wished that "nature should be untouched by man"[15].

Though Synge became a pilgrim to the sun and moon, and enlivened the world of nature, he was never forgetful about the reality of life around him. His Aran visits gave him the vision of reality, a reality he found in the contrary aspects of life where youth and age, life and death go hand in hand. And "Synge was able to unite the contraries which for Yeats are at the core of all great art"[16]. In the poems written between 1896 Synge was "leaning out" more and more" to reality". The language of his play, "It's a pitiful thing to be getting old ... it's a

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14. Synge, Collected Works, II, ed. Price, p. 12.

15. Ibid., p. 35.

16. Robert O' Driscoll, "Yeats's conception of Synge", Sunshine and Moon's Light, ed. Bushrui, p. 165.

queer thing to see an old man sitting up there in his bed with no teeth in him [The Shadow of the Glen] resembles the language of many of his poems,

" 'Tis winter in my heart, the air
Is wailing, bitter cold
While I am wailing with despair
As I have wailed of old".

[In the city again]

or,

"Would she forgive me or fool my fate
I loath the living to death I am wed"

[Quatrain]

Moreover his poems are replete with images like "dead year met year ... and it is I am gone away into furrows, the hair of my head is grey and whitish, my eye brows are tumbled from me, and my two eyes have died out within my head", [An old woman's lamentations]. "I saw a woman dead", " 'Ah, Death, it is you that have left the world cold and shady, with no sun over it" [Sonnet from Laura in Death].

In Petrarch's sonnets, Laura in Death Synge found his own vision of death, "life is flying from me, not stopping an hour, and Death is making great strides following my track",

"what a grudge I am bearing against Death, that is standing in her two eyes, and will not call me with a word", and in Villon, he discovered his own weariness of age, "it is I am left behind, grey and aged", "I'm getting old in your big house", "I'm growing old with singing on your stairs".

Thus, Synge's translations of Petrarch and Villon were a kind of revelation of the poet's own heart. Therefore, those who want to know what he was himself, should read the poems, "The poems are the man speaking. They are so like him that to read them is to hear him"[17].

Synge, who suffered from the weariness of age and death, wished to create a world for his own soul. That world he found in poetic reality embedded in imagination and love. In Molly, towards the end of his life, Synge found love and expressed his desire to be "in you [Molly] and you [Molly] in me".

[The Passing]. Synge could not "put from his mind coughing and old age and the sound of the bells"[18]. To get his mind rid of the hard facts of life, he sought peace and joy in the blessed mood of nature. And his last wish before death was to see the Wicklow Glens which like Wordsworth's Tintern Abbey

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17. John Stallworthy, "The Poetry of Synge and Yeats", Irish University Review 1971 ed., Marcus, p. 148.

18. W.B. Yeats, Essays and Introductions (London, 1961), p. 309.

had become for him as it were, "the anchor of my purest thoughts, the nurse, my guide, the guardian of my heart and soul of all my moral being". (Timon of Athens, lines 139-41). All his principal characters who are wearied of age, and death find the poetic reality amidst "the singing birds, and the flowers of the earth", "meat" "woods" "fresh grass" "whole set of the stars, the moon and the sun".

In modern drama, the dramatists seldom portray nature and the natural environment. For "modern drama, like modern life, takes place for the most part in drawing rooms and kitchens"[19]. Shakespeare couldnot forget nature. He always accepted it "as the setting and basis of human life"[20]. In his works we get the view of "the natural world, the world of wind and shadow, spring and harvest"[21]. Like Shakespeare, Synge in his plays has portrayed this natural world which gave him the vision of poetic reality as well as the vision of the reality of the earth consisting of the fundamental truths of human life. While Shakespeare, "affirms the whole range of our experience, sensual, emotional, moral, intellectual, spiritual"[22], Synge couldnot illumine the whole province of human experience. He was a very

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19. Ronald Peacock, Drama and Reality : the European Theatre since Ibsen (London : Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1972), p. 3.

20. Ibid., p. 3.

21. Ibid., p. 10.

22. Ibid., p. 4.

small world. Within his short life, he could not absorb the wider range of human knowledge. However, his vision was complete, because it had revealed "the reality of the natural world, in which and by which we live"[23]. Simultaneously "Synge was much indebted to nature's beauty as the raw material and inspiration of art"[24]. Synge's knowledge of the contrary images of nature, gave him knowledge of the contrary aspects of life, where joy is often associated with pain, and life is replaced by decay and death.

These two realities which constitute Synge's vision of life, owe their origin to nature where the inhabitants of the Wicklow glens, riders to the sea, the tinkers, the two blind beggars and their associates, the playboy and the Mayo people and lastly Deirdre, Naisi, his brothers and, conchubor, and all other men and women have their "entry" and "exit". It is for this, a close study of nature in Synge's works is so important, especially when we want to know about the writer's vision of life. For Synge in his plays and topographical books had "tried to give humanity and this mysterious external world"[25].

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23. Ibid., p. 4.

24. Lant M. Synge, "The autobiography of Synge", Sunshine and the Moon's Delight ed. Bushrui, pp. 126-28.

25. Synge, Collected Works, ed. Price, II, p. 35.

CHAPTER - VI

A study of J.M. Synge's Imagery

A study of J.M. Synge's plays in relation to his imagery is not only important, it is at the same time fascinating also. True Synge could not create a world of images vast and myriad like Shakespeare's. However, Synge within his limited range made excellent uses of imagery. Through the imagery, we are privileged to get nearer to the dramatist himself, to his mind, his taste, his experience and his deeper thoughts. For an imagery is the "little world-picture used by a poet or prose writer to illustrate, illuminate and embellish his thought".[1] Moreover, images play a great role in raising and sustaining action, in providing atmosphere or in emphasising a theme. The functions of images are indeed varied and a writer's vision of life often remains embodied in the images. Synge's own life and experience have gone a long way in formulating the images in his plays. An image therefore is a faithful document that reveals to us "the man himself" and throws "fresh light on the individual plays"[2].

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1. Caroline Spurgeon, Shakespeare's Imagery and what it tells us (Cambridge University Press, 1958), p. 5.

2. Ibid., p. 11.

In The Shadow of the Glen, the images serve the dramatic purpose of the story and reveal at the same time the writer's own vision of life. Synge's thoughts hover over the states of youth and age, mutability and death. From "summer", "winter", and "spring" on the one hand, and, the "sheep", "rabbit", "horse", "crows", "mountain ewes", "ass" "lamb", "spider", "herons", "grouse", "owls", "larks", "thrushes" on the other, Synge has drawn the images of mutability, age and finally death. "old house", "old bush", "old fellow", "old shirt", "dead sheep", "old boots", and "cold", "frost", "rain", "wild night", "evening", being dark images, have created a gloomy atmosphere in the play and provided the very background of the drama. Otherwise we could not understand properly how pathetic indeed is the life of Nora who sees "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 bitts of broken trees"[3]. Living constantly amidst this gloomy surrounding Nora's mind is obsessed with the images of mutability, age and death. She notices the "young growing behind" her and "the old passing". The spectre of age haunts her, "It is a pitiful thing to be getting old". Images like "old shirt", "dead sheep" "coughing and choking like

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3. Synge, "The Shadow of the Glen", "Plays and Poems of J.M. Synge, ed., Henn, p. 91.

an old man", "old goats", "old house", "old bush", "old fellow wheezing, the like of a sick sheep", flash across her mind. She is so much preoccupied with the thought of age that she cannot think of marrying even a young man Michael who promises her "a fine life ...a fine life surely". For he too would "be getting old ... in a little while ... with a shake in" his "face" and "teeth falling, and the white hair sticking out round you like an old bush where sheep do be leaping a gap"[4].

When Nora's husband, Dan Burke, an old man, curses his wife for her infidelity, the image of death as the final "end" of life comes to his mind. Nora would be seen "stretched like a dead sheep with the frost on her, or the big spiders may be, and they putting their webs on her, in the butt of a ditch"[5]. The tramp, in the play arrives at the cottage when the drama moves through "winds crying" "wind crying out in the bits of broken trees", "streams roaring with the rain". Nora who is afflicted with the harsh reality of life, in the "fine bit of talk" of the tramp, finds a real recipe. The dark images are replaced by images like, "grand morning", "sun going up", "herons crying" "when the days are warm", without the "tale of getting old like Peggy Cavanagh, and losing the hair off you and the light of your eyes" and "there will be no old fellow wheezing, the like of a sick sheep, close to your ear"[6]. Nora

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4. Ibid., p. 91.

5. Ibid., p. 92.

6. Ibid., p. 94.

finally decides "to go" with the tramp, leaving the cottage of Dan Burke.

In Riders to the Sea which presents the life of the fishermen against the background of "rocks", "cliffs" and "sea", the images of a "gust of wind", "roaring in the west", "deep grave coffin", "a strong wind", "grey pony", "blackknight", "dark night", "dark word", "white rocks", "white boards", "black feet", "green head", "white-tossed hair", "red sail", "red petticoats", "red mare", at once create an atmosphere and accentuate the very theme of the play. Against this dark, somber background, we notice the "cottage", "kitchen", "chimney corner", "pot-oven", "cake", "fire", "fish", "spinning-wheel", "kelp", "halter", "flannel", "keening coat", "pier", "tongs", "stool", "cloth", "stick", "knife", "sleeve", which suggest the domestic setting of the play. These two backgrounds are important for a proper understanding of the play. The sea-riders' constant struggle with the sea, and the woman's passive suffering while waiting in anxiety for their return to the cottage "with an awareness of the imminence of death"[7] is the theme of the play.

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7. A. Norman Jeffares, "J.M. Synge : Riders to the Sea", Notes on literature, Number 48, (Published from the British Council, London, 1961), p. 2.

The ominous indications are brought in the images like "there was a star up against the moon, and it is rising in the night", "we're after forgetting his bit of bread", "seen the dead man with the child in his arms", "fine clothes on him and new shoes on his feet". These images heighten the tragic undertone of Synge's Riders to the Sea. The body of Bartley is brought in. He has been knocked over by the "grey pony" and drowned in the "surf on the white rocks". Maurya understands what has happened : "They are all gone now, and there is n't anything more the sea can do to me"[8]. In this way, Riders to the Sea becomes "the finest piece of tragic work done in Ireland"[9].

In the Tinker's Wedding, Synge has drawn the images of the external nature from the "hedge", "grass", "thorn trees", "big bush", "ash-tree", "spring-time", "dews of night", "dry moon in the sky", "big hills", "rocks", and invested the play with a joyous and happy mood : "the spring is coming in the trees", "for it'd be a fine life to be driving with young Jaunting Jim". But the images of mutability and death which frequently appear in all the plays of Synge, are present in this play too. Conscious

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8. Synge, "Riders to the Sea", Plays and Poems of J.M.Synge, ed. Mann, p. 105.

9. W.B. Yeats, Explorations (London : Macmillan, 1962), p. 106.

of her beauty, Sarah Casey feels distressed at the sight of age. The thought that she would be an old woman and hear the "old woman making a great noise in her sleep"[10] always grips her mind. Mary, the old woman in the play, recalls her youthful days. The vision of age haunts her, "Is it putting that ring on your finger will keep you from getting an aged woman and losing the rime race you have .....?"[11]. With this vision of age, she recalls the vision of death, "It's a short while only till you die".[12]

Images like "dark night", "dark ditch", "old bucket", "blood and blisters", "black bowels", "black born fool", "black ass", "digging a bloody grave" are the dark images in this play. They highlight the surface reality of our existence. Beyond this surface reality, Synge has endowed his plays with a poetic reality which is not touched by "the grim negatives".[13] In Tinker's Wedding, besides the images of "grim negatives", Synge has given

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10. "The Tinker's Wedding", p. 111.

11. Ibid., p. 123.

12. Ibid., p. 119.

13. Katherine Worth, The Irish Drama of Europe from Yeats to Beckett (The Athlone Press of the University of London, 1978), p. 127.

as a poetic image, "... it's grand thing to be waking up a day the like of this, where there's a warm sun in it, and a kind air, and you'll hear the cuckoos singing and crying out on the hills"[14] which affirms Synge's vision of life.

In The Well of the Saints, Synge has used, as usual, two kinds of images coupled with the images of "sight and blindness with increasing mastery"[15]. In the images: "a wrinkled, wizened hag", "like the old screeching mad woman", "an old wizendry hag", "crumpled whelp", "old sacks and skin covering their bones", "the young girl walking the road", "hairs falling each day", "a white beard's a grand thing on an old woman", "lice on an old man", "a young lad", "a woman's young", "wicked wrinkle", "old shabby stump of a man", "an old woman rotting for the grave", "old wretched road woman", "the skin shrinks on your chin", "shrunk hag", "old bone of your skull", "like of an old scare crow struck down upon the road", "you'd see the horses, and the asses and the dogs itself may be, with their heads hanging, and they closing their eyes" (p. 166), "old woman with long white hair and it twisting from my brow" (p. 161) "wrinkled-looking hag",

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14. "The Tinker's Wedding", p. 120 (Italics mine)

15. Worth, The Irish Drama of Europe from Yeats to Beckett, p. 131.

"soft white hair falling around it", we get the pictures of that surface reality of life. They are indeed the dark images in Synge's plays. Often these images are made more vivid by adding "colour" to them like "yellow hair", "black birds flying round", "grey days", "grey dawn", "dark stump of a fellow","hair would be grey or white", "grey hawks do be high up", "black wintry air", "dark gloomy day", "grey light", "grey clouds", we feel a despondent note in these images. As man cannot bear the pangs of this stark reality for long, Synge the poet has introduced images like "a grand sky", "twittering yellow birds", "broadening rivers", "soft wind turning round the little leaves of spring" "streams falling to the sea", "a fine warmth now in the Sun" which illustrate a poetic reality that relieves one's mind of the dark and gloomy images of "age" and "death". These poetic images usher in a life of joy and peace for Synge's characters who are much oppressed by the spectacle of age and death. The two blind couples have learned enough of the visible world while getting back their sight. While losing the sight again, they no longer ask for it. For them ignorance is bliss and knowledge is suffering. The images of sight and blindness powerfully inform that. With this new knowledge dawning upon them, they feel, "For it's best we are this way, and we're not asking to see"[16].

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16. Synge, "The Well of the Saints", ed., Mann, p. 166.

In his masterpiece, The Playboy of the Western World Synge has made use of the images very effectively. While "wild coast", "hill", "dews of dawn", "wax a lily", "rose" illumined Synge's imagination and formed the basis of his poetic images, "cows", "straining ewes", "awakening dog", "yearning rabits", "wicklow sheep", "mountainy ram", "jackstraw", "scarare crow" gave him knowledge to look into the animal world. This knowledge had further enlarged the domain of images in his plays : "a crawling beast has passed under a dray","like an old weasel tracing a rat", "y ur whole skin needing washing lie a wicklow sheep", "till I call you in the morning when the cocks will crow", "like an old braying jack ass strayed upon the rocks".

The main action of The Playboy of the Western World takes place inside a country public house on an autumn evening. While Nature has provided the very background of the play, "bottles", "Jugs", "turf", "fire", "lace boots", "hat", "fine tooth comb", "turnip", "apron", "pipe", "mug of milk", "supper", "a nap of grass tobacco", "pipe", "looking-glass", "duck's eggs", "butter", "cake", "laying pullet", "breakfast", "a scythe", "a drying hearth", "downy", "shiny coats" "necklace" "goat's milk for to colour my tea" have enlivened the domestic life of the Mayo people. While there is joy, fun, sports and music in the play, the images of youth, age and death like the "old cats and dogs", "clumsy young fellows do be ploughing all times in the earth and dung", "noted misbehaviour with the old and young", "like

an old woman with a spavindy ass", "old and young", "like an old braying jack ass strayed upon the rocks", "he getting old and crusty", "well, it's a terror to be aged a score", and finally "till the hour of death" are present in the play. In this way, "the images form a world in themselves" and "mirror the richest experience and the most profound and soaring imagination known to man"[17].

In his last and unfinished play, Deirdre of the Sorrows, J.M. Synge through the images, has explored the world of flora and fauna on the one hand and the world of physical reality on the other. Deirdre who is the central interest of this drama has grown up amidst "hills","glen","rock","stream","hill-side", "flowers","dread winter and summer and the autumn and the spring time", "quiet and safety of the woods". Dwelling in nature, she watches "apple trees do be budding in the spring time by the post of the door" and feels the "air","water", the "wind",and "the sea", and "all the hours of the Sun and moon" blessing her. Birds have "schooled" her and she has developed a communion with "hawk", "lamb", "raven", "ewe", "ram", "goats", "weasels", "wild oats". Her woe begins when from the province of nature, she is destined to

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17. Spurgeon, Shakespeare's Imagery and what it tells us. pp. x-xi.

go to the court of King Conchubor. Conchubor, the king of Emain approaches Deirdre, woos her and assures her that "she could be happier and greater with himself" in Emain. But Deirdre wants to remain "safe in the hills" for she is not born at all for Conchubor "to be a queen". When the latter tempts her that he has brought rings, jewels from "Emain-macha" for her, Deirdre remains quite unconcerned by this information. For her, "a bag of nuts, and twigs" for fires at the dawn of day are more valuable than these things. While she has found joy, peace and freedom in nature, she has been at the same time conscious of time, age and death through her experienced of "the days getting a great speed", and "passing" her "by". And her mind is replete with the thoughts of "age" and "death"; "all men have age coming and great ruin in the end", "how would I be happy seeing age coming on me", "until you're dried and old and our joy is gone forever", "it's little joy wandering till age is on you and your teeth is gone away", "it should be a poor thing to see lovers and they sleepy and old", "it's a poor thing the way me and you is getting old","death should be a poor, untidy thing", "it is not a small thing to be rid of grey hairs and the loosening of the teeth","I've had dreams of getting old","the trees naked and bare". In Synge's play a conflict is always waged between youth and age and images like "young girls and poets do be storming at the shapes of age", "You so happy and young", "a young girl must have her lover in

all the course of the sun and moon", "age coming on me each year, when the dry leaves are blowing back and forward at the gate of Lusain", "a day'll come when you begin pitying a man is old and desolate", loom large in Deirdre.

From this hard reality of "age" and "death", Synge's characters always pine for a poetic reality which they seek in love, imagination and passionate life. For Deirdre, love is like a "star shining on a little harbour by the sea". Deirdre's love for Naisi is so genuine that she cannot think of living without him. When Naisi and his brothers are killed, Deirdre prepares herself for death. Now she believes that "in the grave we're safe surely". In this way, Deirdre accepts both the realities and puts "away sorrow like a shoe that is worn out and muddy".

In Deirdre of the Sorrows, the key images owe their origin primarily to Synge's observation of life and things around him. The images of youth, love, age and death have undoubtedly contributed much to heighten the dramatic effect of the play and left at the same time a clear impression about the writer's vision of life.

Images, tell us "every secret of a writer's soul, every experience of his life, every quality of his mind"[18]. Images in Synge's plays have truly become the emblem of his lifevision.

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18. Virginia Woolf, Orlando (The Hogarth Press, 1928), pp. 189-90.

CHAPTER - VII

In The Shadow of the Glen : a joyous hymn to life and liberty.

> Tramp (going over to Nora) : We'll be going now, lady of the house; the rain is falling, but the air is kind, and may be it'll be a grand morning by the grace of God. In The Shadow of the Glen, p. 93.

When Yeats read both Riders to the Sea and In The Shadow of the Glen during early October 1902, he immediately preferred In the Shadow of the Glen, "with its rough humour and, particularly, the vagabond spirit of the tramp who lures Nora away from the bondage of her loveless marriage to an old man, the play reflects the same joyous hymn to liberty"[1].

Synge's source for In the Shadow of the Glen was a folk story[2] where a wife became unfaithful and the husband feigned death to test his wife's fidelity. This folk story received a new meaning and life when Synge expressed in it his vision of life. Harney's cottage which Synge visited gave him

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1. James H. Flannery, W.B. Yeats and the Idea of a Theatre (Yale University Press, 1976), p. 331.

2. Synge heard this story from an old man whom he met during his visits to the Aran Islands. [Synge had recorded this story in his travelogue, The Aran Islands (pp. 37-39).]

the setting for the story.

The time of action of the play is evening and the place of action is inside a cottage situated in a very desolate place. It has been raining outside. A gloomy atmosphere pervades throughout. Inside the cottage a corpse is seen lying on the bed and a woman, quite alone, is "moving about the room" and "looking now and then at the bed with an uneasy look". She cannot decide what to do. Nor can she go outside to call anybody. Moreover her husband has "put a black curse on" her "this morning" that none but his sister would be permitted to touch his body "the time he'd die soon". At that hour, a tramp reaches the cottage while searching for a shelter to protect himself from the foul weather. The appearance of the tramp puts courage in Nora. Now in that lonely cottage she finds someone with whom she can talk. Since her marriage with an old man, Nora has been leading a very unhappy conjugal life. He has been very cold to her from the beginning. Her mental suffering has been further augmented by the environment of her cottage from where she sees "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"[3]. This external situation

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3. Synge, "In The Shadow of the Glen", The Plays and Poems of J.M. ed. Mann, p. 90.

has made her more "lonesome".

Both Synge and Maeterlinck have stressed the soliterieness of the human self. "Queer are the victims of loneliness which they fear, the loneliness of lost beauty for a lost hero like Patch Darcy, the loneliness of old age and of death"[4]. Nora has been "obsessed with the grim imagery of old age and death"[5], "It's a queer thing to see an old man sitting up there in his bed with no teeth in his, and a rough word in his mouth, and his chin the way it would take the bark from the edge of an oak board you'd have building a door ..."[6] Her physical hunger, a feeling of loneliness and the grim realization of sterility have told heavily on her mind. She speaks to the tramp, "what way would a woman live in a lonesome place the like of this place, and she not making a talk with the men passing"[7]? Nora is a natural woman, a creature of flesh and blood. She must have a genuine longing for motherhood. She thinks of Mary Brien, "who is now with two children

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4. Seamus Deane, "Synge's Poetic use of language", Twentieth Century Poetry, ed. Hamon, pp. 140-41.

5. Maurice Bourgeois, John Synge and the Irish Theatre, p. 102

6. Synge, The Shadow of the Glen, p. 91.

7. Ibid., p. 94.

and another coming on her in three months or four"[8]. Had she been a mother, she could possibly overcome her sense of alienation and an overwhelming consciousness of mortality. Unfortunately her late marriage with an old man has deprived her of that possibility[9] once for all. Nora first of all should be treated as a human being before she is taken for "a bad wife she is — a bad wife for an old man"[10]. If her husband would treat her quite sympathetically, her suffering would have been less and she could not be that "unfaithful" to him. Nora Burke in Synge's In The Shadow of the Glen reminds us of Ibsen's Nora Helmer who in A doll's House speaks to her husband, "I believe that before all else I am a human being - just as you are — or at least that I should try and become one"[11]. And for this Nora Helmer finally rejects her husband and actively seeks her freedom.

Nora Burke in In The Shadow of the Glen is essentially a Synge woman who is in possession of a great "life-force" which has not made her till now wholly shrunken and lifeless. It is true that she is terribly mortality-ridden but a great "life-force"

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8. Ibid., p. 90.

9. "In no other country in the world marriage is undertaken so late in life ... until men is almost sterile and the woman incapable of producing more than one or two children". J.A. O'Brien, The Vanishing Irish (London, 1954), p. 44.

10. "In The Shadow of the Glen", p. 87.

11. Henrik Ibsen, "A Doll's House", Ibsen's Plays, ed. Ivn Gallisnne (The Modern Library, New York, n.d.), p. 77.

has been still working in her. Therefore she dreams of an escape from her husband and her pitiful environment which is so desolate with "no house near" her and "where there are n't two living souls"[12]. She pines for love and life. In course of her conversation with the tramp, Nora enquires whether he has seen "anyone on the last bit of the road". She learns from the tramp that "there was a young man with a drift of mountain ewes, and he running after them this way and that"[13]. Now Nora requests the tramp to make himself easy and say a prayer for her husband's "soul", and goes out telling him, "It's not long I'll be coming again"[14]. Now we are prepared for the climax of the play. Dan Burke, the husband who has been so long pretending to be dead soon "looks out" "sits up in his bed" and speaks to the tramp to experience "a great sight" and himself returns to his former state. Nora comes back to her cottage "in two hours or three" with Michael Dara, "a tall, innocent young man behind her". Michael begins to woo Nora, "... and then you will marry me in the chapel of Kathvanna" and "it's a fine life you'll have now with a young man - a fine life, surely ..."[15] Nora has been so

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12. "The Shadow of the Glen", p. 84.

13. Ibid., p. 85.

14. Ibid., p. 86.

15. Ibid., p. 91.

such mortality-conscious that she cannot get thoughts of ageing and death out of her mind. That is why, she cannot think of marrying Michael. She speaks to him, "why would I marry you, like dare? You will be getting old and I'll be getting old, and in a little while. ... You will be sitting up in his bed ... the way himself [her husband] was sitting with a shake in your face, and your teeth falling, and the white hair sticking out round you like an old bush where sheep do be leaping a gap"[16]. What Nora wants is Michael's physical association which enkindles in her loveless and lonely life a feeling of companionship and warmth of love. Nora's husband cannot morally approve of this relationship which she has developed with Michael. Dan Burke all on a sudden sneezes violently, jumps out of the bed with the sticks in his hand and holds Michael who tries to get to the door. He remonstrates with Nora for her faithlessness and further tells to "walk out now from that door, ... and it's not tomorrow, or the next day, or any day of your life, that you'll put in your foot through it again"[17]. Michael does not

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16. Ibid., p. 91.

17. Ibid., p. 92.

come to Nora's rescue now. Rather the tramp is emotionally moved by this sight and feels sympathetic to Nora. He [the tramp] offers Nora a promise of a "finer life" and tells her husband, "what would the like of her do if you put her out on the roads?"[18]. In this way, the tramp in The Shadow of the Glen reminds one of Tegeus, the guard in Christopher Fry's A Phoenix too Frequent[19].

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18. Ibid., p. 92.

19. "Both of them [Tegeus and the tramp] are the emblems of love and life. Dynamene in A Phoenix too Frequent feels the pulsation of life at the approach of Tegeus. Dynamene, waiting for death near the tomb of her husband who died a premature death, now wants to live again with Tegeus to enjoy life which is indeed so beautiful. Fry's play though presented in a different framework is almost identical with Synge's The Shadow of the Glen in the sense that the tramp in Synge and the guard in Fry stand almost for the same purpose to propagate the joy of love and life.

In A Phoenix too Frequent, the story is set against death-wish. In In The Shadow of the Glen the story is placed in the midst of the shadow that falls upon the glen leaving on Nora's mind a sense of loneliness, age and death. In A Phoenix too Frequent, there are two contrary atmospheres. From death-wish Dynamene returns to life again. The atmosphere which prevails in the drama at the outset is replaced by a joyous note. In the company of Tegeus, Dynamene feels that her husband "moves again in the world, accomplishing our welfare? It's more than my grief could do?" ("A Phoenix too Frequent", p. 49).

Dynamene speaks to Tegeus:

"And we're the disciples of love

I hold you to that; Hold you, hold you".

("A Phoenix too Frequent", p. 48).

In The Shadow of the Glen, we experience the same transformation of atmospheres. In the wake of "a bad night" "wild night" "rains falling", we hear promise of "fine songs"

Nora's dream of an escape from her surrounding "where beauty and joy will eventually disappear leaving ugliness and old age in their wake"[20] becomes a reality for her in the company of the tramp who in his final speech seems to suggest that a life, close to nature, offers some kind of immortality that the songs of the birds somehow banish thoughts of growing old."... it's not from the like of them you'll be hearing a tale of getting old ... and losing the hair off you, and the light of your eyes ... and there will be no old fellow wheezing the like of a sick sheep"[21]. The tramp is moreover a poet who represents truly

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"grandmorning" and "sun again". Against the "grim negatives" of everyday life where we experience the sights of sickness, age and death in "teeth falling" "shake in one's face" and "no teeth in her mouth", we hear again the "herons crying" "the grouse and the owls with them, and the larks and the big thrushes when the days are warm" (p. 94) and finally "you'll not be getting your death with myself" ("In the Shadow of the Glen", p. 93).

20. Ann Saddlemyer, J.M. Synge & Modern Comedy (Dublin, Dolmen Press, 1968), pp. 17-18.

21. "In The Shadow of the Glen", p. 94.

a poetic spirit of life. Nora is caught by the fine speech of the tramp, bouyed up with the pulsation of a new life and finally decides to cast her lot with the tramp, "you've a fine bit of talk, stranger, and it's with yourself I'll go."[22]

What Tegeus does in A Phoenix too frequent by bringing Dynamene from her "death-wish" to life, the tramp does in In The Shadow of the Glen. He "gives Nora a definite alternative to the misery of the loveless marriage"[23] and "loveless existence"[24]. Moreover he sets Nora free from her "old husband" "from her sense of temporality of life" and inspires her to a life of poetic choice, "epitomized in the tramp and his chosen vagrancy, his freedom, his promise of Youth and nobility set against"[25] the cruel facts of life.

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22. Ibid., p. 94

23. Nicholas Grene, Synge : A critical study of the Plays, p.90.

24. C.B. Cox & A.E. Dyson (eds.) Twentieth Century Mind, Vol.I, (Oxford Paperback, 1972), p. 466.

25. Seamus Deane, "Synge's poetic use of language", Synge centenary Papers 1971, ed. Harmon, pp. 140-41.

Riders to the Sea : a vision of the destiny of man.

Maurya (in a low voice, but clearly):

> ... Bartley will be last now, and let you call in Eamon and make me a good coffin out of the white boards, for I won't live after them. I've had a husband, and a husband's father, and six sons in this house - six fine men, though it was a hard birth I had with everyone of them and they coming into the world - and some of them were found and some of them were not found, but they are gone now the lot of them ...

Riders to the Sea, p. 103.

The source of J.M. Synge's Riders to the Sea, as of his other four plays, is his first hand experience[1] of the human drama he saw in the life of the Aran people. Looking at them and talking to them, Synge realised that they were "wearied of the sea" and "in the face of a universe that wars on them with winds and sea they are usually silent ... they shriek with pitiable

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1. "The maternal feeling is so powerful on these islands that it gives a life of torment to the women. Their sons grow up to be banished as soon as they are of age, or to live here in continual danger on the sea". Synge, "The Aran Islands", Synge : Collected Works, II, ed. Price, p. 108.

It has been further suggested that Synge while reading The History of Ireland by Geoffrey Keating found in it a story which seemed to harmonise with his experience of Aran.

despair before the horror of the fate to which they are all doomed"[2]. He could not help feeling that he was "talking with men who were under judgement of death"[3]. He knew that "everyone of these would be drowned in the sea in a few years and battered naked on the rocks, or would die in his own cottage and be buried with another fearful scene in the graveyard" he "had come from"[4].

In this experience, Synge who "was a poet with the eye of a realist, or a realist with a poet's talent" found food for his living imagination and a means to "transform" "this experience into gold"[5] in his "unquestioned and well-nigh flawless masterpiece"[6], Riders to the Sea. As in In The Shadow of the Glen, Synge in Riders to the Sea moved "from the particular to the universal"[7] and made Riders to the Sea, a universal tragedy of maternal grief and of the human predicament. What is more, in Riders to the Sea, Synge has presented his vision of the destiny of man. Maurya, the archetypal image of motherhood in Riders to the Sea, accepts death as the destiny of man and

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2. Ibid., p. 75.

3. Ibid., p. 162.

4. Ibid., p. 162.

5. John Gassner (ed.), A Treasury of the Theatre, (New York : Simon and Schuster, 1951), p. 627.

6. Bourgeois, J.M.S. and the Irish Theatre, p. 172.

7. Barnard Laurie Edward, "The vision of J.M. Synge : A study of the playboy of the Western World", English literature in Transition 1880-1920, Vol. 17, No. 1 (1974), p. 8.

sends a prayer for the soul of everyone "left living in the world"[8]. Maurya's attitude to life is not acceptable to her sons. Bartley, the only living son of Maurya, manifests in himself the youthful spirit of the "chainless mind". He embodies the spirit of poetic reality which is above the surface reality of our common experience. The real destiny of man is to be found in this poetic reality which inspires man to action and stands as foil to death.

The way Maurya behaves, "There is nothing to do but sit and wait for the sea to strike again, then again, till she has lost all her sons"[9], would naturally bring the active world to a standstill. Bartley's way of looking at life is quite contrary to that of his mother. Despite his mother's opposition, Bartley is ready to accept the challenge of the sea, "I'll have half an hour to go down and you'll see me coming again in two days, or in three days, or may be in four days if the wind is bad"[10]. A conflict between the known reality of our day-to-day

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8. Synge, "Riders to the Sea", The Plays and Poems of J.M.Synge ed., Mann, p. 106.

9. Katharine Worth, The Irish Drama of Europe from Yeats to Beckett (The Athlone Press of the University of London, 1978), p. 127.

10. "Riders to the Sea", p. 99.

life and that of the poetic reality which remains embedded in the human heart is the essential feature of Synge's plays. Synge's real vision of life emerges from that knowledge. Riders to the Sea, in this regard, offers a double vision of life. The life-force which governs Bartley and his other brothers evinces that "evolutionary appetite" which cannot be crushed. Its working goes on. When Michael died in the sea, Bartley the last son left to Maurya prepares himself to go to sea again.

Bartley (taking the halter) :

> I must go now quickly, I'll ride down on the red mare, and the grey pony 'll run behind me ... The blessing of God on you (Riders to the Sea, p. 99).

Maurya's sons are more concerned with the "life-force" than with death. The "life-force" which is so dominant in Synge's other female characters is absent in Maurya. She has resigned herself to death, and, there is no effort in her to go beyond the accepted reality of life. It might be due to her unaccountable grief which she has passed through while losing "a husband, and a husband's father and six sons in this house of six fine men"[11] excepting this last one Bartley who, she knows for certain, "will be lost now"[12].

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11. Ibid., p. 103.
12. Ibid., p. 103.

She has the premonition of his doom and, she foresees, "we'll not see him again. He's gone now, and when the blacknight is calling I'll have no son left me in the world (Riders to the Sea, p. 99). Had death been the only destiny of man, Maurya's sons would readily accept the verdict of death. But the real destiny of man is found in his onward journey knowing full well that "no man at all can be living for ever".[13] The children of Maurya stand in opposition to their mother's acceptance of death. Maurya does not speak of the active life of force and energy. Her view of life paralyses the essential spirit of man and hence cannot be acceptable to those in whom we find the zest for life:

> "Bartley : I must go now quickly. I'll ride down
> on the red mare, and the grey pony 'ill run
> behind me .... the blessing of God on you".
>
> (Riders to the Sea, p. 99)

The "sea disease" of Synge's Riders to the Sea has universalized human emotions and lent a touch of real dignity to make the story a story of every man always struggling against the inhospitable forces of life. And "the sea signified the

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13. Ibid., p. 106.

inexorability of Fate itself"[14]. And the "wave is the most adequate symbol of human personality"[15]. Albert Camus in his The Myth of Sisyphus has written about the absurdity of human life and human existence. The destiny of man has been illustrated in the archetypal image of Sisyphus, "ceaselessly rolling a rock to the top of a mountain, whence the stone would fall back of its own weight"[16]. The futility of human endeavour to attain something is generally hinted at in this image. But the picture of man's destiny as embodied in the story of Sisyphus speaks of at the same time something more than this common concept. "... a blind man eager to see who knows that the night has no end, he is still on the go. The rock is still rolling ... The struggle itself towards the heights is enough to fill a man's heart. One must imagine Sisyphus happy"[17]. This is in fact the real vision of the destiny of man. In the very process of the rolling of the rocks, the "life-force" of Sisyphus remains active and he remains alive too. As soon as the process would be over, it would bring

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14. Cox and Dyson (eds.), Twentieth Century Mind, Vol. I, pp. 466-67.

15. Andrew Carpenter (ed), My Uncle John : Edward Thomas's life of John Eyre (London, 1974), pp. 147-48.

16. Albert Camus, The Myth of Sisyphus tr. Justin O'Brien (Penguin books, 1942), p. 107.

17. Ibid., pp. 110-11.

about the ultimate disaster of this life. However meaningless and absurd this life may be, man must continue his search for "Prospice" and the struggle must go with him. This vision of Sisyphus rolling the rocks can be well transplanted in Riders to the Sea where Synge has presented the active life of force and vitality rather than the absurdity and meaninglessness of life.

Eugene Benson has found in the story of Synge's Riders to the Sea, elements of "existentialism", "nihilism" and that "existential despair" which Samuel Beckett has pronounced forty years later in Waiting for Godot. Benson has quoted from Waiting for Godot, Lucky's monologue, 'the earth in the great cold, the great dark the air and the earth abode of stone in the great cold also alas ..."[18] The world in which Synge's characters live, apparently seems inhospitable to its inhabitants. But Synge's view of life is not like that of Samuel Beckett of the Absurd School. Being himself a dying man, Synge was always in love with life. And "It is in terms of this interaction of dream and actuality that Synge's people live"[19]. While Maurya has accepted in her calm resignation that "actuality" and sends prayers "on the soul of everyone is left living in the world"[20] including

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18. Quoted in Eugene Benson, J.M. Synge (Macmillan, 1982), p. 64.

19. Quoted in Bernard Laurie Edwards, "The vision of J.M. Synge : A Study of the Playbody of the Western World", English Literature in Transition 1880-1920, Vol. 17, No. 1 (1974), p. 10.

20. Ibid., p. 106.

herself, Maurya's sons, on the other hand, do not accept that reality of their mother. Rather they dream of that poetic reality which Nora Burke dreams and from which she draws the sustenance of life. This very dream gives a lie to life's known reality and man goes on rolling the rocks. Maurya's misfortune is, indeed, of grave concern. When Maurya in her grief bewails, "they're all gone now, and there's not anything more the sea can do to me"[21], We cannot restrain our tears. But the tide of life and death, the process of entrance and exit are a continual process of this life-drama. With the death of all her sons, there is the end of an individual mother's misfortune. But that life-force remains with those who are not dead and Maurya's experience would be repeated every now and then in other Mauryas.

The speech of the Chorus in Sophocles's Antigone, "Ask nothing what is to be, no mortal can escape" seems to be much stagonistic to the very teaching of Sisyphus's life. If we "Ask nothing," man would not struggle to achieve something. This idea violates life's legitimacy to go forward. If the life-force does not work, human energies begin to languish and man becomes immobile and inactive. In Maurya's sons, we get that "life-force" which teaches "that all is not, not has been exhausted"[22]. So the

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21. Ibid., p. 105.

22. Camus, The Myth of Sisyphus tr. O'Brien, p. 110.

vision of death which looms large in Synge's Riders to the Sea, should not be accepted as the real destiny of man.

Synge in his personal life was always mortality-conscious and time-haunted. He once told Mr. Padraic Colum that the reason why he wrote Riders to the Sea was that he had personally begun to anticipate something of the sadness of old age and death[23]. Synge in his texts chose life rather than death and granted "a higher destiny" to man. In Riders to the Sea, the vision of the higher destiny of man is reflected "against the overwhelming forces of mutability and the sea"[24] in man's "unpretentious heroism opposing sea and tempest that hang like fate over man's lives"[25].

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23. "All his work was subjective, he once told me, it all came out of moods in his own life. 'Riders to the Sea' had come out of the feeling that time - and death was making approach".

    Padraic Colum, "My memories of John Synge",

    Synge : Interviews and Recollections, ed., Mikhail, p. 66.

24. "Introduction", The Plays and Poems of J.M. Synge, ed., Henn, p. 19.

25. Ronald Peacock, The Poet in the Theatre (London, 1946), p. 92.

Tinker's Wedding : a vision of life : a comedy

> Sarah (puts the ring on his 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 asking talk of marriage or the like of that, Synge, The Tinker's Wedding, p. 129.
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> (Italics mine)

Of all Synge's plays, Tinker's Wedding has received the least attention from the critics. It has been criticised as a very inferior type of dramatic art. For a fair estimate of this play one should read Synge's preface carefully. Otherwise one would be prejudiced about the play and the playwright.

In his preface to the Tinker's Wedding, Synge has very definitely stated the aims of writing this drama. He wanted to introduce humour on the stage. He believed that "of the things which nourish the imagination humour is one of the most needful and it is dangerous to limit or destroy it"[1]. He had the impression that "where a country loses its humour, as some towns in Ireland are doing, there will be morbidity of mind, as Baudelaire's mind

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1. Synge, "Preface", "The Tinker's Wedding", The Plays and Poems of J.M. Synge, ed., Mann, p. 108.

was morbid"[2]. In order to rid one's mind of morbidity which stands in the way of a joyful living, Synge brought "plenty of life in its [Tinker's Wedding] rough and tumble"[3] and made the play so blusterous. Synge observed that "in the greater part of Ireland, however, the whole people, from the Tinkers to the Clergy have still a life and view of life, that are rich and genial and humourous"[4]. And he wished to present on the stage "these country people, who have so much humour themselves"[5]. Synge at least expected that they [these country people] would not "mind being laughed at without malice"[6].

The theme of Riders to the Sea is serious and that of Tinker's Wedding "is made serious in the French sense of the word not by the degree in which it is taken up with problems that are serious in themselves but by the degree in which it gives the nourishment, not very easy to define, on which our imaginations live"[7]. Moreover, this play is irradiated with that 'life-force'

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2. Ibid., p. 108.
3. Lucas, The Drama of Chekhov, Synge and Pirandello, p. 90.
4. "Tinker's Wedding", p. 108.
5. Ibid., p. 108.
6. Ibid., p. 108.
7. Ibid., p. 108.

which is evident in Synge's dramas. If In The Shadow of the Glen is a hymn to freedom, the Tinker's Wedding is unquestionably a happy play pleading for love, life and joy. Behind the surface reality of the play, lies this poetic reality which the audiences could not fully understand. That was the reason why they had scorned the play. While the Irish peasants had enkindled his imagination, the tramps and tinkers in spite of their "curious reputation for witchery and unnatural powers" had fascinated Synge. He found in them, "the full-blooded, violent, zestful life"[8]. Amidst this "violence", he could perhaps find the life-force which gives life both nourishment and sustenance required for it. He too believed that "if art did not treat violence, it could not go to the heart of things"[9]. In the violent life of the tinkers, Synge found the life-force which he presented in The Tinker's Wedding.

In In the Shadow of the Glen, Synge had delineated the tramp and in The Tinker's Wedding, the tinker. The tramp and the tinker for Synge were the emblems of "free life" which he so much celebrated. For this free life, Synge sought an escape from his

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8. T.R. Henn, "Introduction", The Plays and Poems of J.M. Synge ed., Henn, pp. 220-3.

9. Eric Bentley, The Life of the Drama (Methuen & Co. Ltd., 1969), p. 227.

home and chose the outdoor life as the best asylum for mental peace and happiness. Therefore, "the tinker's life free and unfettered by convention"[10] was an ideal choice for him. If Tinker's Wedding is judged in this perspective, it would appear as a joyous hymn to life.

First written in 1902-3, Tinker's Wedding was a one-act play. Synge took much time to finish it. When it was finally completed in 1906, it became a two-act drama. The reason why Synge made it a two-act play is not known. One argument might be this, that Synge was not at all satisfied with one act. He wanted to enlarge it with a view to propagating in detail what he actually wished to present. Tinker's Wedding is "concerned with the clash between the conventional and the unconventional"[11]. Both Nora Burke In The Shadow of the Glen and Sarah Casey in The Tinker's Wedding "are caught between the possibility of security and respectability on the one hand, and freedom and fulfilment on the other"[12].

In order to attain respectability and fulfilment of life, Sarah and Michael in Tinker's Wedding approach the Parish priest "with the ring" to give the two in marriage. But the priest

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10. Orne, Synge : a critical study of the Plays, p. 107.

11. Ibid., p. 108.

12. Ibid., p. 109.

refuses to do the same unless they bring "the bit of gold" with them and "the tin can". It has been suggested that while the "ring" symbolises marriage, "the tin can" on the other hand is symbolic of the priest's attraction to the tinker's' life and values. To Synge the tinker's way of life and their natural religion were superior to the priest and the Church which the priest represents. But it would be perhaps wrong to think as Eugene Benson has felt that "it is Synge's purpose to show that marriage is an absurd institution"[13]. Rather Synge seems to be leading the audience to sympathise with Sarah's wish to get herself married. "The tinkers ... had a social sense that pointed to marriage as a desirable condition"[14]. Synge is never in opposition to marriage. In his own life,he had the very longing for marriage. He was forced to Celibacy only for his ill-health. For he had the apprehension that if he married, he would have unhealthy children. That longing returned to him again when he was acquainted with Molly Allgood. And they decided to get themselves married. But his premature death did not fulfil this last wish. Marriage is a necessity to make living meaningful. But it must hinge on love and understanding. Excepting Riders to the Sea in

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13. Eugene Benson, J.M. Synge (The Macmillan Press Ltd., 1982), p. 83.

14. T.R. Henn, "Introduction", The Plays and Poems of Synge, p. 46.

all his five plays, Synge has introduced the theme of physical love and marriage. Both love and marriage are part and parcel of human life. To stand against life is unlawful and in this regard, the priest violates the law of life and becomes an offender. Perhaps this is the reason why both Sarah and Michael decide that the priest should be tied to his hands and thus be taught a good lesson. Mary, the old woman who acts as a foil to the priest, advises him "to learn a little sense and patience, the way you'll not be so airy again going to rob poor sinners of their scraps of gold"[15].

The audiences could not accept this episode in a lighter vein despite Synge's appeal : "I do not think that these country people will mind being laughed at without malice"[16], and they ran down Synge. For "The combination of Synge's mocking satire, symbolic realism, and earthly dialogue was too simple for audiences"[17]. Thus "the theme of individuality triumphing over social restraint"[18] was totally overlooked by them. Even the reviewers were up against Synge. The London Times described it as "less a play than a picture of Irish life in its more squalid aspects"[19].

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15. "The Tinker's Wedding", p. 108.

16. Synge, "Preface", "Tinker's Wedding", p. 108.

17. James W. Flannery, W.B. Yeats and the idea of a theatre (Yale University Press, 1976), p. 335.

18. Ibid., p. 335.

19. Quoted in "Introduction", Ann Saddlemyer, Synge : Collected Works, III, ed. Saddlemyer (Oxford University Press, 1968), p. xxi.

In fact, the exuberance of life wherein lies the poetic reality of the play, couldnot be appreciated by them. Sarah is a splendid creature of impulse and violence. She is dynamic, positive, imaginative and full of wit, irony and humour. Sarah's conversation with the priest sparkles with wit. Sarah approaches the priest for his help to perform the nuptial rites. The priest at first does not understand the purpose of her coming to him. He thinks that she has come to beg money and speaks accordingly:

"I have n't a half penny at all ..." Sarah readily replies:

> "It is n't a half penny we're asking, holy father but we were thinking may be we'd have a right to be getting married"[20].

Synge's characters cannot endure the agony of physical reality. Hence they aspire after a life of poetic choice. The tramp in In The Shadow of the Glen has assured Nora of that life of poetic choice. That choice Sarah Casey and Michael earnestly wish to attain through marriage which would at least give them the joys of living. Nora's obsession with age is in Sarah. Therefore, she is very much insistent on the priest's giving them in marriage which "may save her from the fate of Villon's old woman"[21]. The

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20. "Tinker's Wedding", p. 112.

21. "Introduction", Mann, The Plays and Poems of Synge, p. 46.

poetic vision of life which is superior to earthly reality where old age and death stare man in the face, bestows upon all Synge's principal characters a tremendous zest for life. Out of the conflicts between dream and reality, youth and age, life and mortality emerges this poetic vision which leads all his characters to taste the joy of life and nature as much as they can. Mary Byrne who represents age, recalls her own youthful days and soliloquizes on the brevity of youth and the necessity of tasting the joy of life and nature while we can, reserving the same right for herself as well"[22]. "That's a little stirone on your head beside sitting lonesome on a time night, hearing the dogs barking, and the bats squeaking, and you saying over, and it's a short while only till you die"[23].

There is another aspect to this play where Synge has pleaded for humanity. The tinkers, condemned as society's outcasts, should not be so roughly treated by society. Love and life are no respecter of persons. Sarah's and Michael's desire to see them

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22. Ann Saddlemyer, John Synge and Modern Comedy, pp. 17-18.

23. "The Tinker's Wedding", p. 113.

married is quite humane. And the priest's refusal to help them unless they pay him a reasonable amount either in kind or cash is contrary to humanity. Synge being an advocate of human liberty has sympathised with the tinkers and the freedom they symbolise. Mary has been made the spokeswoman for the superiority of the tinker's way of life and its wildness to the restrictive and conventional morality of the priest. The boisterous elements embodied in the characters so common to the community, have put real vigour into the play and made The Tinker's Wedding inspite of its very trivial plot, an interesting drama.

Considering marriage as a desirable condition of life, Synge wished to present his vision of humanity as a joyous ceremony with the gospel of love and liberty as opposed to the restrictions of priest and Church.

The Well of the Saints : a vision of poetic reality.

Saint to Martin Doul and Mary Doul:

It's a hard life you've had not seeing sun or moon, or the holy priests itself praying to the Lord, but its the like of you who are brave in a bad time will make a fine use of the gift of sight the Almighty God will bring to you today.

The Well of the Saints, p. 141.

Martin Doul (coming towards her, [Mary Doul] wiping sweat from his face):

Well, sight's a queer thing for upsetting a man.

The Well of the Saints, p. 160.

Mary Doul (nearly in tears):

It's a poor thing, God help us, and what good'll our grey hairs be itself, if we have our sight, the way we'll see them falling each day, and turning dirty in the rain?

The Well of the Saints, p. 163.

Martin Doul:

We're not asking our sight, holy father, and let you be walking on and leaving us in our peace at the crossing roads, for it's best we are this way, and we're not asking to see.

The Well of the Saints, p. 166.

Apart from Lennox Robinson's estimate of The Well of the Saints as Synge's most perfect play, the controversies about the play "as an apprentice piece" and "Synge's first attempt at a full length play"[1] remain with some critics. However, if the play is judged by the dramatist's vision of life as revealed in it, its importance cannot be overestimated. The story of The Well of the Saints hinges on the interplay of illusion and reality and moves "backwards and forwards between the world of the blind and the world of sight, between deception and clarity, disappointment and realisation"[2]. The idea for The Well of the Saints as Synge himself stated, came from a pre Moliere French farce . This farce has been identified as La Moralite de laveugle et du boiteux by Andre de la vigne. Apart from this source, Synge heard the story [which has been dramatised in his play] during his visits to the Aran Islands and decided to treat the subject in a more complex manner, combining laughter and pathos and subsequently found in it both meaning and purpose. This play shows the necessity of illusion in life. For "human kind cannot bear very much reality"[3].

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1. Nicholas Grene, Synge : A critical study of the Plays, p. 110.
2. Ann Saddlemyer, J.M. Synge & Modern Comedy, pp. 21-22.
3. Quoted in Nicholas Grene, Synge : A critical study of the Plays, p. 130.

Amidst these conflicts and contrasts, we get a double vision of the world. The priest in the play is the key figure who is responsible for what happens in the play. The state of illusion which indeed is a state of bliss protects the two blind beggars Martin Doul and Mary Doul from the truths of stark reality. As soon as they eat the forbidden fruits of knowledge after the restoration of their sight by the priest, their real woe begins. And they want to be blind again. Now the sight of reality appears unbearable to them. They prefer ignorance to knowledge and illusion to reality. This is, in fact, the story of the Well of the Saints and the story as it stands becomes "wholly Synge's own"[4]. The blind couple Martin and Mary Doul cannot see each other. They create an illusory world about themselves. The tragic irony that both of them are ugly looking, they do not understand. While Martin Doul learns from Molly Byrne about Mary Doul that "it was little more than a fight you were"[5], Mary Doul is quite ignorant of this truth. Rather she is much complacent about herself, "Let you not be making the like of that talk when you've heard Timmy the smith, and Pat Simon, and Patch Raudh, 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"[6].

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4. Henn, "Introduction", The Plays and Poems of J.M. Synge, ed., Henn, p. 51.

5. "The Well of the Saints", ed., Henn, p. 133.

6. Ibid., pp. 132-33.

At this particular hour, they strongly feel that "it'd be a grand thing if we could see ourselves for one hour or a minute itself, the way we'd know surely we were the finest man and the finest woman of the seven countries of the east"[7]. When Timmy reports the two blind beggars about the arrival of the Saint and also tells them that "he'll be coming after to this place to cure the two of you — we're after telling him the way you are — and to say his prayers in the Church"[8], they are emotionally excited. Synge could well gauge the emotions of the blind to whom the promise of vision is heralded. Now they would be able "to see a great wonder this day"[9].

The contrast between the world of the blind and the seeing people has been very powerfully demonstrated by Synge as soon as the vision is restored to Martin Doul and Mary Doul by the Saint. Mary Doul in her former state was very much sceptical about the seeing people, "for they're a bad lot those that have their sight"[10] and furthermore, "for the seeing is a queer lot, and you'd never know the thing they'd do"[11]. Mary Doul wished to get back her vision only to see herself and her husband. And for Martin Doul, the yearning for sight was more to see "the

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7. Ibid., p. 133.
8. Ibid., p. 137.
9. Ibid., p. 140.
10. Ibid., p. 133.
11. Ibid., p. 134.

big woman and the young girls". With the restoration of their sight, neither Mary Boul nor Martin Boul can recognise each other. Their real suffering begins when they discover themselves and learn the real truth about themselves.

When they were blind, they could not see things around them but they were not that much unhappy at least about themselves. But no sooner had Martin Boul recognised his wife Mary Boul than began "a great fight" between them. Martin Boul becomes hostile to his wife and cannot put up with such an ugly-looking woman for whom she can be blind "a hundred years or a thousand itself, than to be looking on your like"[12]. How reality changes, in no time, the state of illusion which is, indeed, a state of bliss, has been very vividly presented by Synge in The Well of the Saints. The problem which faces Mary Boul and Martin Boul is common to all of us. We cannot bear the burden of reality longer and seek relief elsewhere. In this way, "The Well of the Saints deals, at many levels, with the problems of human illusion and whether it be necessary for happiness"[13].

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12. Ibid., p. 146.

13. Benn, "Introduction", The Plays & Poems of J.M. Synge, ed., Benn, p. 51.

In Act II of the play Synge has shown the very vision of reality which Martin and Mary Doul now experience after gaining their sight. The physical world of sensual beauty for which Martin Doul craves and for which his wickedness now urges him to approach Molly Byrne "to go off with him"[14] presents reality "full of earthiness, malignity and jealousy"[15]. Moreover, now they experience the truths of the physical world with its common spectacle of mutability or mortality. Owing to their blindness, they could not have any visible impressions of the "fall" of "hairs" "each day", "hair would be grey or white",("The Well of the Saints, p. 101) "soft white hair falling around it" ("The Well of the Saints, p. 101). Now they discover that they are old and "rotting for the grave" (p. 134), while "sitting alone in the cold air, hearing the night coming" (p. 139).

Out of this contrast and conflict between the visible world of the seeing people and the unseen world of the blind, Synge has perceived the real irony of life. Had not the two blind couple tasted the bitter fruits of experience of the world of reality around them, their suffering definitely would have been much less than that they experienced now. This experience has established the truth that "human kind cannot bear very much reality"[16]. Their disillusionment tells them about the necessity

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14. "The Well of the Saints", p. 136.

15. Henn, "Introduction", The Plays and Poems of J.M. Synge ed., Henn, p. 34.

16. Jean Cox & Alan Dyson (eds.), The Twentieth Century Mind, I p. 467.

of preserving the world of illusion and imagination for an escape from the horror of the world. In this way, all Synge's characters move from the surface reality of day to day life to a realm of poetic fancy. When the two beggars are blind again the poetic reality becomes an obvious choice for them. They have learned enough of surface reality. Therefore, they do not ask for their sight again. 'For it's best we are this way, and we're not asking to see"[17]. Martin Doul is convinced now that "he is more likely to survive in the blind world of his unfettered imagination where his heightened senses allow him to feel"[18] that "it's a good right ourselves have to be sitting blind, hearing a soft wind turning round the little leaves of the spring and feeling the sun, and we not tormenting our souls with the sight of the grey days, and the holy men, and the dirty feet is trampling the world"[19].

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17. "The Well of the Saints", p. 166.

18. David Krause, "Sean O'Casey and the higher nationalism", Theatre and Nationalism in 20th Century Ireland ed., Robert O'Driscoll (London : Oxford University Press, 1971), p. 124.

19. "The Well of the Saints", p. 170.

The blind beggars' acceptance of the poetic life as opposed to surface reality ["sight is queer thing for upsetting a man", The Well of the Saints, p. 160], was, indeed, a choice for Synge whose life was equally afflicted with the torments of reality. He sought peace and joy first in nature and then in the physical love of women. Human love for Synge remained unfulfilled. But nature remained with him till the last hour of his life. The best way to live away from the harsh world of reality is to create world for one's own soul. Synge created it for himself and suggested the same for his characters who longed for the poetic reality considering it as the summumbonum of life because here "beauty and joy" do not "wither"[20]. Therefore their journey for a world that yet stands untarnished by the pallid reality, "we've seen too much of everyone in this place and it's small joy we'd have living near them, or hearing the lies they do be telling from the grey of dawn till the night"[21] begins. The Saint prays for them, "They have chosen their lot, and the Lord have mercy on their souls"[22].

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20. Saddlemyer, J.M. Synge & Modern Comedy, pp. 17-18.
21. "The Well of the Saints", p. 171.
22. Ibid., p. 171 (Italics mine)

The Playboy of the Western World : a vision of illusion and reality.

> Widow Quin [She pulls Christy up]
>
> ... There's great temptation in a man did slay his da, and we'd best be going, young fellow; so rise up and come with me.
>
> Synge, The Playboy of the Western World, p. 191.

> Pegeen : I'll say, a stranger is a marvel, with his mighty talk; but what's a squabble in your back yard, and the blow of a lay, have taught me that there's a great gap between a gallows story and a dirty deed.
>
> The Playboy of the Western World, p. 227 (Italics mine)

The Playboy of the Western World, apart from being artistically a very brilliant play, is important so far as Synge's vision of life is concerned. The story of the Playboy is based on a real incident[1] Synge heard when he was in the Aran

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1. "Another old man, the oldest on the island is fond of telling us anecdotes - not folktales - of things that have happened here in his life time. He often tells us about a connaught man who killed his father with the blow of a spade when he was in passion, and then fled to this island and threw himself on the mercy of some of his natives with whom he was said to be related". Synge, "The Aran Islands", The Plays and Poems of Synge II ed. Price, p. 93.

Islands. Synge in his Note Book jotted down the idea of The Playboy, "Ireland with population of wreckers, smugglers, poteen makers etc. are startled by the arrival of a stranger ... He is an escaped criminal and wants them to help him over to America, but he thinks that they are so virtuous he is afraid to confess his deeds for fear they should hand him over to the law that they are so apparently in awe of. At last all comes out and he is got off safely"[2].

With this story, Synge perhaps wished to revive in Ireland "the popular imagination that is fiery and magnificent, and tender" and wanted to present on the stage both "reality" and "joy"[3]. In dramatising the life of the Irish people who lived in the remote corner of Ireland, Synge wanted to bring back for the Irish audience that reality and joy which "the intellectual modern drama has failed" to create and in consequence, "People have grown sick of the false joy of the musical comedy, that has been given them in place of the rich joy found only in what is superb and wild in reality"[4]. But the orthodox Irish audience

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2. Quoted in David H. Greene & Edward M. Stephens, J.M. Synge 1871-1909 (New York, 1959), p. 191.

3. Synge, "Preface", "The Playboy of the Western World", The Plays and Poems of J.M. Synge, ed., Henn, p. 174.

4. Ibid., pp. 174-75.

could not grasp that "superb and wild in reality" which Synge focused in the story of the Playboy. They took it for a deliberate vilification of the Irish peasants and worse still, of the Irish womanhood. Arthur Griffith went so far as to run it down as an "inhuman story told in the foulest language"[5]. But for Synge who knew the Irish peasants well, the play could not be otherwise. So he made his "methods Irish". And The Playboy of the Western World "has more of Ireland in its characters, in its methods of art, in its conception of morals"[6].

W.B. Yeats, Lady Gregory and other members of the Abbey Theatre defended the play against the fulmination of the public when it was presented at the Abbey Theatre in 1907. With the Playboy, W.B. Yeats "saw the rise in the country of a new thought, a new opinion, that the country had long needed"[7]. P.D. Kenny wrote a defence of "that dreadful play", published in the Irish

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5. Quoted in F.L. Lucas, The Drama of Chekhov, Synge and Pirandello, p. 205.

6. W.B. Yeats (ed.), Samhain 1903, p. 234.

7. W.B. Yeats's opening speech in the Debate on February 4, 1907, at the Abbey Theatre, collected in the Samhain, p. 227.

Times 30 January 1907, "... and I cannot but admire the moral courage of the man who has shot his dreadful search light into our cherished accumulation of social skeletons"[8].

Synge could not foresee the reactions that the play would produce. He was terribly upset by the "hullaballo" and in a letter to Molly, his fiancee, he wrote, "I had a dreadful turn of despair over the play last night - it seemed hopeless"[9]. The Playboy of the Western World is, indeed, a very significant play of Synge and there are "several sides" to it. Synge himself has called the play an "extravaganza", and Yeats has characterised it as an "exaggeration". Felix Gross suggests that the play might be seen as a "semi-tragedy", as a "free comedy". Others have found in the play, "two like views" which may be called "Dionysiac" and "Apollonian". Daniel Corkery has used the first term for the play believing that 'Dionysiac would have served him better, meaning by that word the serving of the irrepressible spirit of natural man"[10]. But Northrop Frye has called it an "Apollonian comedy" as

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8. Quoted in Richard M. Kain : "The Playboy Riots", Dublin and the Poet's Twilight, ed. Bushrui, p. 182.

9. Ann Saddlemyer (ed.), Letters to Molly : John Millington Synge to Maire O'Neill, p. 44.

10. Quoted in Augustine Martin, "Christy Mahon and the Apotheosis of Loneliness", Synge, Centenary Papers 1971 ed. Kiberd, pp. 82-83.

the story manifests, "how a hero becomes accepted by a society of gods"[11]. And it has dramatised, "what is most characteristic in Gaelic life — the Gaelic delight in vivid personality"[12]. In Christy Mahon, "we witness the metamorphosis of a figure of farce into a dynamic character"[13], parallel to his, W.L. Henry finds in Beowulf and other heroic Irish Sagas. W.L. Henry's estimate of Christy, of course, suffers from exaggeration. How Christy Mahon from dependence on his father, through dependence on his first love "moved to a healthy and mature self-sufficiency"[14] is the real theme of the Playboy. To look at the Playboy simply as a satire criticising "that human tendency to romanticise crime and violence"[15] perhaps does not hold good. Rather the triumphant march of Christy to a brave new world of glory through the story of patricide reveals "the romance of illusion" and also "the illusiveness of romance"[16]. Moreover, beneath the story of the son killing his father, we have the real allegory and that is "the myth of rebellion against the father at its basis"[17]. In

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11. Ibid., pp. 62-63.

12. Padraic Colum, "My memories of John Synge", Synge (Interviews and Recollections, ed., Mikail, p. 68.

13. Nicholas Grene, Synge : A critical study of the Plays, p. 139.

14. Ibid., p. 139.

15. Lucas, The drama of Chekhov, Synge and Pirandello, p. 210.

16. Ibid., p. 201.

17. Norman Podhoretz, "Synge's Playboy : Morality and the Hero", Essays in Criticism, III, 3rd July 1953, p. 537.

fact, the story of the Playboy moves between the world of dream and the world of actuality. Christy Mahon turns the world of dream which depicts his "illusion of personality"[18] into a reality at last. Alan Price has observed the Playboy primarily as a play in which "Christy's imagination transforms the dream into actuality"[19]. Ann Saddlemyer believes that "The Playboy of the Western World deals with the actual creation of myth".[20]

Those conflicting views as regards the Playboy show that the play is not very simple but "perfectly serious". Therefore, we cannot probably decide what the play is about. In order to know the real meaning of the play, we need to go beyond the surface meaning of it. In the exploration of the poetic aspects which are no less real than the usual reality itself, we get the essence of life. In the intermingling of "dream" and "actuality", Synge could reveal the fundamental truths and realities of life. It has been already observed that Synge's characters move round the surface reality of the world about them, "which is the natural

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18. Donna Gerstenberger, John Millington Synge (New York, 1964), p. 82.

19. Alan Price, Synge and Anglo-Irish Drama (London, 1961), p. 162.

20. Quoted in Augustine Martin, "Christy Mahon and the Apotheosis of loneliness", J.M. Synge centenary papers 1971, ed. Harmon, pp. 61-62.

world", as well as the poetic reality, which originates from their imagination. Both the realities are interwoven in Synge's plays. And Synge's vision of life consists of these realities.

Christy Mahon by his fake story that he has killed his "da" without using any weapon but simply with a "lay", creates at once a myth. And the Mayo people accept him as their real hero. Consequently Christy Mahon is born with an "integrated personality"[21]. In the very growth of personality of Christy Mahon through his "struggle to free himself from convention" and "loneliness" of his life, that we get Synge's "conception of self"[22].

Christy Mahon has become truly an image of youth struggling for self-liberation and self-glory from the domain of authority and restraint. Christy Mahon couldnot discover himself unless he had fled away from his father. The parental dominance thwarts the growth of a young man's personality and stands in the way of his proper development as man. And the word "father" "after all, expressed the essence of authority to the peasants, and to kill one's tyrannical father (symbolically) was to achieve

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21. Bernard Laurice Edwards, "The vision of J.M. Synge : A study of the Playboy of the Western World", English Literature in Transition 1880-1920, Vol. 17, No. 1, 1984, pp. 8-18.

22. T.R. Henn, The Harvest of Tragedy (London, 1965), p. 204.

the emancipation from authority which every peasant craved"[23]. In his own life, Synge was tired of restraint which his mother had imposed on him. He sought an escape from the uninteresting life of his home and looked for joy in the outdoor life. Through Christy Mahon Synge was perhaps looking at himself. Though there is a tragic undertone in the story, the overall impression of the Playboy is one of a joyous and comic vision of life "in the manner of Moliere"[24]. The Irish audiences who at first, condemned the Playboy, accepted the play later on as"a treasured classic"[25].

Act one of the play introduces the situation. The second Act traces the course of events of Christy Mahon and in the Third Act which is the real climax of the play, we get the reality and fantasy facing each other and notice the real triumph of fantasy.

Christy Mahon arrives at the country public house to get a safe shelter because "there's many wanting" him. He reaches the place at a time when the owner of the house Mr. Michael is just ready for a journey elsewhere, leaving his only daughter

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23. Christopher Gille, Movements in English Literature 1900-1940 (Cambridge University Press, 1975), p. 174.

24. T.R. Henn, The Harvest of Tragedy (London, 1965), p. 204.

25. Robin Skelton, J.M. Synge and his World, p. 57.

Pegeen alone and "lonesome" in the shop.

Pegeen naturally does not like that her father would be leaving her "lonesome these twelve hours of dark in that house while, the harvest boys with their tongues red for drink, and the ten tinkers is camped in the east glen, and the thousand militia-bad cess to them - walking idle through the land"[26]. Then Michael requests Shawn, who is expected to be the prospective bridegroom of this girl to stay with her. But Shawn being "afeared of Father Reilly" does not like to stay overnight with a maiden in that house. All on a sudden, Christy Mahon, "a slight youngman, comes in very tired and frightened and dirty"[27]. All eyes immediately fall on him. The boy humbly tells them that he is "slow at learning, middling scholar"[28]. The way he introduces himself, at first presents him as "a dunce". But he is, indeed, a fine conversationalist having his poet's talk. He studies the situation and then rouses their curiosity by announcing that he "killed" his "poor father" without using "weapons". He could not put up with him "who was a strong farmer". Perhaps with these words he wants to draw their attention to his poor lot while evoking their sympathy for him, "you take me for a slaugher-boy?" (p. 183).

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26. Synge, "The Playboy of the Western World", "The Plays and Poems of J.M. Synge, ed., Henn, p. 179.

27. Ibid., p. 180.

28. Ibid., p. 181.

Otherwise they would condemn him as a murderer and hand him over to the police for fear of whom, he has toured such a long distance for security. He astonishes all by saying, "I just rin the lay and let fall the edge of it on the ridge of his skull, and he went down at my feet like an empty sack, and never let a grunt or groan from him at all" (p. 184). Henceforth the real "hero-worship" begins. And Christy Mahon is simply amazed at the sight of this new experience : "well, it's a clean bed and soft with it, and it's great luck and company I've won me in the end of time — two fine women [Widow Quin and Pegeen] fighting for the likes of me — till I'm thinking this night was n't I a foolish fellow not to kill my father in the years gone by" (p.192). Act II vividly portrays how Christy Mahon emerges from the threshold of his unboyish growth of personality, as a new man : "Christy : I'll be growing fine from this day, the way I'll have a soft lovely skin on me and won't be the like of the clumsy young fellows do be ploughing all times in the earth and dung" (p. 193). He is celebrated as "a marvel" and is transformed into a "wonder of the Western World" (p. 215). Widow Quin, has found in Christy "the Champion of the World" (p. 218) and, Pegeen has been won over by "his poet's talking , and such bravery of heart" (p. 219). He is such a young man for whom "any girl would walk her heart out" (p. 218), Sarah Cassey offers "thousand welcomes" to him and drinks wishing "a health to the wonders of the Western World" (p. 197). By killing his father Christy had made himself "a marvel",

"a hero in the sight of all" (p. 203). He makes the best use of this new situation. Christy has experienced the power of illusion which has taught him meanwhile, how to rise to the occasion.

Christy Mahon is seen at the height of glory in Act III. He becomes a "good jumper" "grand leaper" "racer" and "champion boy" & The whole episode till now is cast "amidst willing suspension of disbelief" which constitutes poetic faith. But this faith is shattered when Christy Mahon's father old Mahon, all on a sudden reaches the spot as a living creature of flesh and blood. The master of illusion is now exposed to reality. The Mayo people who build their faith in his fake story, now discover the truth, "That's it, now the world will see him pandied, and he an ugly liar was playing off the hero, and the wright of men" (p. 224). Christy Mahon at the sight of his father advances forward to strike him with a loy. But "there's a great gap between a gallous story and a dirty deed" (p. 227). The Mayo people will no longer be the dupes of yesterday. Now they would take him to the peelers to have him hanged for slaying his father. Old Mahon is, indeed, taken aback at the metamorphosis of his son. Once an idiot boy, he has now fully grown to real manhood with a personality. This change pleases old Mahon and he comes to his son's rescue. Christy Mahon, on the other hand, is beholden to the Mayo People for the great service they have done while turning him "a proven hero in the end of all" and "the way I'll go romancing through a romping life time in a this hour to the dawning of the Judgement Day" (p. 228).

Pegeen's grief at the departure of Christy Mahon whom she dreams of as her life's partner : "... for it's that lad, Christy Mahon, that I'm wedding now" is genuine. Because in Christy Mahon, she found the "life-force" which could translate her own life's dream into reality, "Oh, my grief I've lost him surely. I've lost the only playboy of the Western World" (p. 229).

All the principal characters of Synge are in possession of this "life-force." In the manifestation of that life-force in Christy Mahon, The Playboy of the World has been brought to an end. For Christy Mahon has become,

"master of all fights from now" (p. 229).

Deirdre of the Sorrows : a vision of Youth, age and death.

Deirdre :

You must not go Naisi, and leave me to
the High King, a man is ageing in his den.

Synge, Deirdre of the Sorrows,
p. 248 (Italics mine)

Fergus:

It's little joy wandering till age is on you
and your youth is gone away.

Synge, Deirdre of the Sorrows
p. 252 (Italics mine)

Naisi:

I'll not go, Fergus,
I've had dreams of getting old and weary

Synge, Deirdre of the Sorrows
p. 253 (Italics mine)

Lavarcham:

It's a poor thing the way an
and you is getting old conchubor.

Synge, Deirdre of the Sorrows
p. 259 (Italics mine)

Conchubor:

> There's one sorrow has no end surely -
> that's being old and lonesome.
>
> Synge, Deirdre of the Sorrows
> p. 268 (Italics mine)

Deirdre:

> Drew a little back from Naisi, who
> is young forever.
>
> Synge, Deirdre of the Sorrows
> p. 270 (Italics mine)

J.M. Synge's last and unfinished work is Deirdre of the Sorrows. It was written between 1908 and 1909. When the Irish Dramatic Movement aimed at reviving the Irish legends and myths (which in spite of their rich heritage remained unexplored), J.M. Synge in the theme of his last drama, made a significant departure from the peasant plays and took real interest in the mythological tales of the Heroic cycles. The story of Deirdre of the fate of the children of Uisneach which is, "perhaps, the finest, most pathetic, and best conceived of any in the whole range of our Irish literature"[1] fascinated him. It has been

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1. Douglas Hyde, A Literary History of Ireland (London: Earnest Benn Ltd., New York : Barnes & Noble, 1899), p. 302.

suggested by several critics that being tired of perpetual controversy over his themes and topics, Synge was half inclined to try a play after the Playboy disturbance on Deirdre, an unimpeachable epic play. In his letter to Brodsky on 10 December 1907, Synge wrote that Deirdre of the Sorrows was being written as "an experiment to change my hand"[2]. Even to Molly Allgood, Synge wrote about his Deirdre, "My next play must be quite different from the Playboy. I went to do something quiet and stately and restrained and I want you to act in it"[3]. Moreover, the theme of Deirdre legend which "tells the well-known folk tale of a young, beautiful girl, promised as the bride of an elderly king, who elopes with a young man, and of the lovers' subsequent tragic return home"[4] corresponded to the story of his own life and suffering."The most obvious reason why Synge should have been so excited with writing it, is that it was concerned with his own situation, his love for Molly and his fears of death"[5].

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2. This letter written to Brodsky is now preserved in Trinity College, Dublin.

3. Saddlemyer (ed.), Letters to Molly, p. xxvii.

4. Eugene Benson, J.M. Synge, p. 138.

5. Nicholas Grene, The Plays of Synge, p. 164.

Padraic Colum's reminiscence[6] about Synge's Deirdre of the Sorrows is, indeed, memorable. In both When the Moon Has Set and, Deirdre of the Sorrows Synge "gave expression of his own fear of age and dwindling away of life's splendour"[7]. Deirdre, Naise, and Conchubor, the three principal characters in Deirdre of the Sorrows are very much haunted by the vision of age and death. "There is a vivid awareness of death in the play"[8]. The old King Conchubor is threatened by age, coming on him, "each year", "when the dry leaves are blowing back and forward at the gate of Emain"[9]. Deirdre, on the other hand, is much time-haunted

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6. "He [Synge] had been in hospital ; his face was hollow, and although he spoke quietly there was great intensity in his speech. He was working on 'Deirdre of the Sorrows' and he had in spite of his illness, got down to the third act. He began to tell me about this act ; there would be an open grave on the stage. I spoke doubtfully of the impression that this would make - would it not be a too obvious heightening of the tragic feeling? But he said that he had been close to death, and that the grave was a reality to him, and it was the reality in the tragedy he was writing".

   Padraic Colum, "My memories of John Synge", J.M. Synge : Interviews and Recollections ed., Mikhail, p. 68. (Italics mine).

7. Robin Skelton, The Writings of J.M. Synge, p. 152.

8. Nicholas Grene, The Plays of Synge, p. 168.

9. "Deirdre of the Sorrows", pp. 236-37.

and mortality conscious, "when all men have age coming and great ruin in the end"[10]. In the whole play, Deirdre speaks of "age" and "death" times without number. Naisi too is affected by the vision of earthly reality, "It should be a poor thing to see great lovers and they sleepy and old"[11]. In the midst of "the surety of old age and death", Synge's characters search for a poetic reality which inspires them to "have the joy is highest till our age is come"[12]. Two realities thus co-exist in Synge's plays and through these contrary realities, we should see life and try to seek peace and happiness. Synge "granted" his characters "both the potential and passionate life and the knowledge of the earth"[13], with the belief that the contraries are a necessary condition of life and man should learn how "to set a positive force of life against the reality of death, a sense of life strong enough to stand in tension with it"[14]. Though unfinished, Deirdre of the Sorrows is a most finished product of Synge

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10. Ibid., P. 243.

11. Ibid., P. 255.

12. Ibid., P. 254.

13. Robin Skelton, The Writings of J.M. Synge, P. 171.

14. Nicholas Grene, Synge : a critical study of the Plays. (The Macmillan Press Ltd., 1975), P. 165.

so far as his vision of life is concerned. Against age, mortality and all the harsh and hard reality of life, Deirdre and Naisi stand as the emblems of love and life. The old King Conchubor wants to relieve his mind of "the meanness of common human circumstances"[15] and looks for poetic reality by creating a very vision of love and life, and dreams of a happy union with Young Deirdre, "... and then I'm glad surely"[16]. Deirdre also speaks of an "escape into a world of beauty and joy which cannot wither"[17] and tells Naisi, "The dawn and evening are a little while, the winter and Summer pass quickly, and what way would you and I, Naisi have joy for ever?"[18]. Poetic reality safeguards human imagination against the inevitability of doom and decay. Therefore man pines for love and life. Deirdre who finds more pleasures in the outdoor life of nature, cannot think of her life amidst splendour and comforts in the Capital of Conchubor. She simply shudders at the idea of her being married to an old man like

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15. Christopher Gille, Movements in English Literature 1900-1940 (Cambridge University Press, 1978), p. 175.

16. "Deirdre of the Sorrows", p. 237.

17. Saddlemyer, J.M. Synge and Modern Comedy, pp. 17-18.

18. "Deirdre of the Sorrows", p. 254.

Conchubor. She knows what is foretold. The conspiracy of the King [Conchubor] to kill Naisi while inviting Deirdre and Naisi, is made known to her before hand, "... the hardness of death has come between us"[19]. But the "life-force" which is at the root of Synge's plays leads them on to face the troubles to which they are destined. Naisi is killed. Deirdre who has been much wearied of age and death : "Naisi growing an old man in Alban with an old woman at his side, and young girls pointing out and saying : That is Deirdre and Naisi had great beauty in their youth"[20], or, "It's you three [Naisi and the two brothers who are killed] will not see age or death coming"[21], develops a kind of passive attitude to death soon after Naisi is killed, "I'm in little dread of death"[22]. She looks at death as "a poor, untidy thing"[23] and sorrow "like a shoe that is worn out and muddy"[24]. The sights of "grey hairs" and "the loosening of the teeth", which used to afflict her, would not torment her when she should die.

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19. Ibid., p. 266.

20. Ibid., p. 257.

21. Ibid., p. 268.

22. Ibid., p. 265.

23. Ibid., p. 258.

24. Ibid., p. 272.

For "... in the grave we're safe surely". Deirdre, the immortal queen of love does not betray her lover Naisi "who is gone forever"[25]. She stabs herself to death, "to be with" Naisi in his grave.

J.M. Synge's primary concern in his plays is not with the life of man as it is but as it should be. And Deirdre in her last speech speaks of "a joy and triumph to the ends of life and time"[26]. And for this, in spite of the tragic undertones in Riders to the Sea and Deirdre of the Sorrows, Synge's vision of life is not that way tragic. It is rather "joyous, 'wild', extravagant, morbid, mocking"[27]. Yeats has viewed him as a "tragic-comedian"[28]. Synge whose life-story is not in any way happy, cannot let his Nora, the riders to the sea, the tinkers, the blind beggars, the playboy and lastly the two young lovers be the victims of the surface reality of life. "His work does

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25. Ibid., p. 270.

26. Ibid., p. 272.

27. T.R.Henn, "The Prose of John Millington Synge", J.M. Synge Centenary Papers 1971, ed. Maurice Harmon, p. 126.

28. Quoted in Robert O'Driscoll, "Two lectures on the Irish Theatre by W.B. Yeats", Theatre and Nationalism in 20th Century Ireland, ed., Robert O'Driscoll, p. 79.

indeed become the jealous grasping of a dying man for the world that can never be his"[29]. The world apparently seems hostile to them but the world that they create within themselves affirms the poetic rather the imaginative side of life which makes their life worthliving. The passion for life wages a conflict in the characters with the fundamental realities which take possession of the minds of men. "Deirdre cannot face the thought of getting old and losing her teeth; the Douls run from their reflections in the bleak world of fact"[30]. In man's effort to escape from confining reality that the myth ... the most mature stage of this conflict in man between dream and reality is created. The plays of Synge examine the "needs" for the myth and the principal characters create that myth to get their minds rid of the "horizon fever" of the earth. When Synge's own life was gradually languishing, he in his plays created a world which is a kind of "orchestra where every living thing plays one entry and then gives his place to another. We must be careful to play all the notes. It is for

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29. Saddlemyer, J.M. Synge & Modern Comedy, p. 10.

30. Katherine Worth, The Irish Drama of Europe from Yeats to Beckett, p. 137.

that we are created ... every life is a symphony. It is this one in one out in the person which lives all personal art, and all sincere life, and all passionate love a share in the dignity of the world"[31]. Life, to Synge is a kind of stage drama, "a theatrical process of self-creation and self-production. And the modern theatre has wholeheartedly embraced this principle of Synge's drama"[32]. This is in fact, Synge's vision of life, which his plays manifest.

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31. Synge, Collected Works, II, ed., Alan Price, p. 24. (Italics mine)

32. Katharine Worth, The Irish Drama of Europe from Yeats to Beckett, p. 130. (Italics mine)

B I B L I O G R A P H Y

John Millington Synge
(1871 - 1909)

b. 16th April, 1871. d. 2nd February, 1909.

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