

## 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".<sup>1</sup> Moreover, images play a great role in raising and sustaining emotion, in providing atmosphere or in emphasizing 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"<sup>2</sup>.

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1. Caroline Spurgeon, Shakespeare's Imagery and what it tells us (Cambridge University Press, 1958), p. 9.

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 goats", 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 bits of broken trees"<sup>3</sup>. Living constantly amidst this gloomy surrounding Nora's mind is obsessed with the images of mutability, age and death. She notices the "y ung 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, <sup>in</sup> "The Shadow of the Glen", "Plays and Poems of J.M. Synge, ed., Henau, 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"<sup>4</sup>.

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"<sup>5</sup>. The tramp, in the play arrives at the cottage when the drama moves through "winds crying" "wind crying out in the bite 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"<sup>6</sup>. Nora

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4. Ibid., p. 91.

5. Ibid., p. 92.

6. Ibid., p. 94.

finally decides "to go" with the tray, 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", "blacknight", "dark night", "dark word", "white rocks", "white boards", "black feet", "green head", "white-tossed hair", "red sail", "red petti-coats", "red mare", at once create an atmosphere and accentuate the very theme of the play. Against this dark, sombre background, we notice the "cottage", "kitchen", "chimney corner", "pot-oven", "oake", "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 women's passive suffering while waiting in anxiety for their return to the cottage "with an awareness of the imminence of death"<sup>7</sup> 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 us"<sup>8</sup>. In this way, Riders to the Sea becomes "the finest piece of tragic work done in Ireland"<sup>9</sup>.

In the Tinker's Wedding, Synge has drawn the images of the external nature from the "hedge", "grass", "thorn tree", "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. Henn, p. 105.

9. W.B. Yeats, Explorations (London : Macmillan, 1962), p. 104.

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"<sup>10</sup> always grieves 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 fine race you have ....."<sup>11</sup> With this vision of age, she recalls the vision of death, "It's a short while only till you die".<sup>12</sup>

Images like "dark night", "dark ditch", "old bucket", "blood and blisters", "black novels", "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".<sup>13</sup> 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 North, The Irish Drama of Europe from Yeats to Beckett (The Athlone Press of the University of London, 1978), p. 127.

us 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 quokoes singing and crying out on the hills"<sup>14</sup> 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 mystery"<sup>15</sup>. In the images: "a wrinkled, wizened hag", "like the old screeching mad woman", "an old wisendry hag", "crumpled whelp", "old sacks and skin covering their bones", "the young girl walking the road", "horis falling each day", "a white beard's a grand thing on an old woman", "lies of an old man", "a young lad", "a woman's young", "wicked wrinkle", "old shabby study 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 hands 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 Ticker'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 then 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"<sup>16</sup>.

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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 lily", "rose" illumined Synge's imagination and formed the basis of his poetic images, "cows", "saining ewes", "saddening dog", "peoning rabbits", "wicklow sheep", "mountain ram", "jackstraw", "scrake 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 drey", "like an old weasel tracing a rat", "y ur whole skin needing washing like 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", "leese boots", "hat", "fine tooth comb", "turnip", "apron", "pipe", "jug of milk", "supper", "a sop of grass tobacco", "pipe", "looking-glass", "duck's eggs", "butter", "cake", "laying pullet", "breakfast", "a scythe", "a drying hearth", "dowry", "shiny coats", "necklace", "goat's milk for to colour y 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 eyed 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"<sup>17</sup>.

In his last and unfinished play, Deirdre of the Sorrows, J.M. Synge through the images, has explored the world of fiere 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", "rams", "goats", "weasels", "wild cats". Her voyage 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 experiences 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 Linn", "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"<sup>18</sup>. 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.