

**THE DRAMA OF J. M. SYNGE: A CHALLENGE TO THE IDEOLOGY
AND MYTHS OF IRISHNESS**

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CONTENTS

Acknowledgements	vi
Summary	viii
Abbreviations	ix
Chapter One -Introduction	1
Criticism since 1960	3
The Identity of Ireland and the Question of Unity	9
Dublin Theatres in the 1890s	12
Early Irish Nationalist Productions	13
Ideological and aesthetic difference, political transgression	21
Chapter Two -From The Kingdom of God Into The Kingdom of Ireland	30
Severance from family tradition	34
"When the Moon Has Set"	48
Nationalism in the Dublin of the 1890s	53
"A Landlord's Garden in Wicklow"	58
The 1890s and The Literary Revival	64
Political Stalemate	65
The Origins of The Abbey	67
Subsidised Theatre	74
Chapter Three -Maternity and Necessity in <u>The Shadow of the Glen</u> and in <u>Riders to The Sea</u>	81
<u>The Shadow of the Glen</u>	87
Ideological Challenges of <u>The Shadow of the Glen</u>	100
<u>Riders to the Sea</u>	110
The Nature of Maurya's Story	117
Cosmologies	120
Survival Strategies	129
Chapter Four -The Fool as Outcast <u>The Well of the Saints</u> and <u>The Tinker's Wedding</u>	133
<u>The Well of the Saints</u>	137
"The Woman of Sligo"	137

La Moralité de L'Aveugle et le Boiteux	140
Challenge of The Well of the Saints	147
The Fool as Outcast	150
The Tinker's Wedding	155
Source of the Play and its Changing Fortunes	156
"Nomad and Civilized Tribes"	159
The Outsider as Observer	163
The Voice of "The Pride of Women"	177
Chapter Five -- <u>The Playboy of the Western World</u> Or the Pose and Purpose of the Theatre	192
Synge's Aesthetics	194
The Comic Tradition and the <u>Playboy</u>	201
Synge and the Controversy	204
The Drafts and the Previous Story of Christy	207
Ideological Challenges of the Violent Scenes	222
Final Marriage Pairing	226
Chapter Six -Representation of Women in Synge's plays compared with Tennyson, Ibsen and Strindberg	232
The Anguish of Obscure Threats	233
Liberation of the Male Bourgeois Artist	238
Synge and Mythical Thought	245
The Modern Heroines in Synge's Plays	248
Chapter Seven -- <u>Deirdre of the Sorrows</u> : From Mythical Legend to Tragic Choice	254
Sources or Influences	258
Rewriting the Past or Reviewing the Present	261
Fate of the Sons of Usna	265
AE's Reverie of Deirdre	269
Yeats's <u>Deirdre</u>	272
<u>Deirdre of the Sorrows</u>	277
Synge's Conception of Historical Plays	277
Creation of the Character	280
Synge's Manipulation of the Legend	291
Old Women and Madmen: Grotesque Wisdom	294
Deirdre's Choice	300
To Rave and Rend Before the Grave	308
Deconstructing the Myth	318
Chapter Eight -Conclusion	321
Bibliography	334

SUMMARY

Opinions about Synge's work vary from redundant noise to vanguardist art, or the embodiment of the spirit of the Nation. The literary mask created by Yeats and the disparaging caricature his opponents publicised, have barred access to the unbiased study of his work documents. Synge's plays changed the course of the emerging National Theatre. Yeats's plays were attacked for not serving well enough the nationalist cause, but Synge's were seen by nationalists as working completely on the other side of the fence. This argument and the poetical fallacy of Synge's political inactivity are here reappraised. For the nationalists both his witting silence and his social and family background caused aggravation which found opportunity to be voiced at each production of his plays. What still disturbs in the plays is the interaction between individuals and social groups. The exchanges between characters, the progress or stasis of individual characters through the play, the continual change of perspective forced on the audience, these are the features that still strike a controversial note today.

Synge is here seen as a "colonizer who refuses" as he frees himself from family strict rule. The first two chapters analyse the historical and personal evolution towards a native Irish Theatre in English. The following chapters study the process by which each play diverts the expectations it arouses in the audience, following the genesis of each play through its source material when possible, to see how some controversial images and dialogues were arrived at, where they acquired their polemic weight. This part of the study focuses on the writing methods of Synge, and the "reading formation" of the public. The grotesque style of the plays and prose is found to be similar in tone to the Rabelaisian grotesque: both share the hope of regeneration in life's forces and nature, as opposed to a strict Christianity. Synge's use of grotesque shattered aesthetic and philosophical expectations in his intellectual audience, causing the anger among the nationalists and the literary coterie. The particular depiction of women's roles in his plays are compared with Victorian and modern patterns of female behaviour.

In the plays Nature is seen not as the bucolic "locus" for philosophical self-contemplation, but as nurturer and threat for its original dwellers. The knowledge of and closeness to the forces of Nature elicit respect for outsiders as possessing a valuable culture, either in isolation or organised in marginal societies. The outcasts in Irish society are given an articulate voice in Synge's plays: beggars, vagrants, tinkers, the blind and women. In all plays strong female characters assert themselves in unorthodox ways, defying custom and legend. The use of legend in his last play shows Synge as heralding the end of a mythologising era, presenting legendary events issuing not from fate but personal heroic decision, that of a woman who chooses her life and death, following her own values.

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In this thesis I have followed the Modern Humanities Research Association Style Book, third edition, London 1981.

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- 4373 (5) Notebook with reading and lecture notes from 1889, on Locke, Stokes, Petrie, Trench
- 4378 (10) Notebook used in 1895-96 and 1898-99, with language notes, Italian and Irish, reading notes on folklore, mythology, contemporary writers and literary exercises
- 4339 (11) Notebook used probably 1894-95, with notes on books covering various interests, literary, artistic scientific, political, and philosophical. Notes on Marx and Hegel were taken in German
- 4382 (15) Notebook used in 1897-98, with notes on the Irish Tramp, a dialogue between Rabelais and à Kempis, among other French material

- 4383 (16) Notebook in use betwee 1904-8, with drafts and fragments of plays on old Irish themes, and notes on Villon, Ronsard and Greene
- 4385 (19) Notebook dated Aranmore/ Inishmaan May 1898, with material on the Aran Islands
- 4386 (20), 4388 (25) Notebooks in use in 1898 with drafts and poems for 'Vita Vecchia'
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