

I N T R O D U C T I O N

John Millington Synge was one of the most remarkable dramatists of the first decade of Twentieth Century. He carried on unbroken, through the affinity of spirit, the ideals of imaginative reality and of poetic truth visualised in the workshop of the Irish National Theatre in the creation of living characters and had brought the Irish Dramatic Movement to its highest glory. He was essentially a dramatic poet. He had brought back to the English Theatre the poetry that had been absent in Ibsen. In Synge "the dramatic intensity invariably finds poetic expression and the poetic mood its only full expression in dramatic form" ¹.

The poetic drama had been dead ever since the puritans closed the theatres. It was felt that poetic drama like Greek tragedy can never again be anything but an academic exercise as the epic was in the Renaissance. More imaginative minds were at work. Stephen Phillips, Beerbohn Tree, Yeats and Abbey Theatre had done much to receive the poetic drama. Lady Gregory and W.B. Yeats, the founders of the Irish National Theatre, having themselves tried unsuccessfully to write the kind of plays they had in mind, undertook a search for wandering Irishmen of talent whom they might convert to the new cause and bring back home to Ireland. "In at least one

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instance they made a real find in the person of John Millington Synge".²

Yeats' entire spirit was, of course, devoted to the purely poetic writing. But in his protege, J.M.Synge appeared a writer, destined to be of great influence both in Ireland and abroad. He was the most imaginative of them all. The element of poetry and fantasy present in Masefield and Barrie gained a far stronger expression in his plays. Una Ellis - Fermor said of Synge, "Poetic and dramatic expression in him are one and simultaneous, as they appear to have been with Shakespeare and with Webster, in whom the presence of a high degree of one mood meant the presence of a high degree of the other, whether the form prose or verse, the matter comedy or tragedy".³

T.S.Eliot was, no doubt, the greatest writer of poetic drama. He said that "behind the drama of words is the drama of action, the timbre of voice and voice, the uplifted hand or tense muscle and the particular emotion".⁴ But his plays were all experiments in the realization of his grand conception of drama viz. the drama based on the inner action beneath the words. Yeats' plays have beautiful ideas and lyrical poetry of a high order. But he has failed to create human characters. Without character there can be no drama as a good drama always revolves round the characters and not around any real or imaginary situation. Without living

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characters a drama will become a dull commentary on the happenings that took place in the lives of the characters. Though Aristotle wrote of plot as the soul of tragedy, it is the characters, the dramatic ~~presence~~^{personae} which create the dramatic situation. Synge's characters play much the significant role in displaying the ways of life of the Irish peasantry.

Synge's plays display the poetry in life as a whole, the roots of which are in mysticism, especially, nature - mysticism. A sense of intimacy between man and nature is the ever - recurring theme of his plays. It is Nature that shapes the moods, actions and fates of his characters. Nature is the indivisible part of their existence. It is in itself a character- sometimes playing the role of a protagonist as in The Shadow of the Glen, Riders to the Sea and Deirdre of the Sorrows; and sometimes becomes friendly, filling their minds with its presence, offering them comfort and unmixed joy as in The Well of the Saints and The Tinker's Wedding.

Synge dealt with his material as to make it of appeal and interest to those utterly ignorant of its customs and essentially alien to its spirit. He has transmuted the real world around into something rich in imaginative quality. But he was aware of the limitations of his medium, namely, the stage. He knew well that the

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pale and pallid words possess only ephemeral worth. Therefore, he deliberately attempted to Gaelicise the language of his plays for aesthetic purposes. The language, his characters speak, appears at once real and joyful. They speak almost the same poetic language in the same poetic vein which their counterparts in real life speak. Synge had mastered a prose style that had within it the richer cadences, at the same time retaining ties with the common speech of men. The language he has employed in his plays is poetic in itself. But there is difference between the poetic qualities of the dialect and Synge's poetic handling of it. It is exemplified by the identification of certain of his characters as poets, for example, Martin Doull and Christy Mahon. His narrative appears to be spontaneous and mainly Irish in construction.

The body of Synge's dramatic work is small but significant in that herein he has given expression to the kind of life that had never found expression. In all he wrote seven plays. The first play When the Moon has Set (1900-1) is amateurish in comparison with the other plays and has not been published. Riders to the Sea (1904) and Deirdre of the Sorrows (1910) reveal his strength at craftsmanship in writing tragedies. The Well of the Saints (1905), The Playboy of the Western World (1907), The Shadow of the Glen (1903) and The Tinker's Wedding (1908) are the four comedies not without a touch of tragic passion.

In none of his plays, serious or humorous, does he deal even by implication with the social and political themes so beloved by the stage during the first years of the Twentieth Century. The playwrights have tended to cultivate two areas, those of social and sexual revolt. The problem plays were stemming from the tradition set by Pinero and Jones and found its highest achievement in the increasing awareness of the work of Ibsen and his followers. Strindberg was an exaggeration of Ibsen and was far more subjective. For England, Bernard Shaw became the great expounder of Ibsen, of Nietzsche, of Mark and the whole revolutionary crew. He startled his audience by introducing the word 'bloody' into his dialogue. The Abbey Theatre was founded as an anti-modernist movement and Synge had successfully detached himself from what was called 'the modern drama'. He resisted the influence of Ibsen and Shaw. Yet in a sense he was the modern dramatist in that he had redeemed the drama from its traditional framework of characterization in spirit and in subject matter.

Many critics of Synge's plays have studied comprehensively almost all the aspects of his dramatic art. Some like Nicholas Grene and Una Ellis-Fraser have written outstanding and masterly critical works. However, very few of the critics have specifically studied Synge's art of characterization. Much critical attention is paid to his language, the Irishness of characters, the themes

and his aesthetic theory of drama. The criticism or language ranges from St. John Ervine to T.S. Eliot. A Bibliography of criticism on J.M. Synge by E.M. Mikhail shows the range of criticism on his plays, on play productions, unpublished material, recordings and background and criticism in periodicals. No systematic study has yet been undertaken on his art of characterization. Therefore, it is intended in this dissertation to study 'The Art of Characterization in the plays of J.M. Synge'.

The range of Synge's characters is limited but they reveal a great deal of subtle human nature, even the slightest shades of feelings and his vision of life. His plays are peopled with the beggars, the tinkers, the drunkards, the farmers, the herds, the maids, the fishermen and the ballad-singers, leading a life of poverty, struggling with the fierce though beautiful nature around them. All of them belong to one Nation and especially to Irish peasantry. The characters are selected from the actual life but they are not the literal transcripts of life. With enough mastery of art he depicts them with objective detachment and never indulges in drawing philosophic inferences. No use of commentary is made in the exposition of his characters. They develop in the course of the play and reveal themselves as naturally and realistically as a flower glows in the midst of a jungle.

The reality with which the characters are portrayed attract critical attention towards his craftsmanship at characterization. Too many critics have followed Yeats' view that the experience at the Aran Islands had turned Synge into dramatic artist of outstanding quality. Aran Islands was, no doubt, the main spring of his inspiration. It had provided him with the material of his plays. But the spirit with which he approached the subject matter was poetic and therefore he invented a technique of his own in the presentation of his material. He was obsessed with Truth and Beauty which had inspired him to transform the reality into imaginative poetry in the form of drama.

Synge's greatness as a dramatist is now realised by all literary scholars. No other playwright but Synge, with the exception of Shakespeare has yet achieved the perfection in characterization. Again, Synge differed from Shakespeare in that while Shakespeare has dealt with the characters of historical origin and with extraordinary personalities, Synge dealt with the most ordinary men and women of the impoverished part of Ireland. For the first time in the history of dramatic literature, ordinary men and women, utterly neglected common lot has found their appearance on the stage as main characters. At this place, a brief survey of characterization would not be out of place as it would throw light on the greatness of Synge's art of characterization.

Since the beginning of the Tenth Century, in England, the stage has witnessed constant changes in characterization. After the Norman conquest the plays were founded on the Bible and inevitably the characters were Gods and angels. Then the Miracle plays became popular and for the first time, non-biblical characters such as shepherds, soldiers, mid-wives and servants were introduced. Still, the main characters were holy saints. In the Fourteenth Century, the Morality plays began to present such abstract characters as strength, Hope, Death, Greed, Good Deeds, etc. and all sorts of mental and moral qualities such as , science, perseverance, Free-Will, the Five Senses, the Seven Deadly Sins, etc. Gradually, the characters of personified abstractions of Morality plays began more and more to take after individual persons. The Elizabethan period witnessed the supremacy in characterization. Still, the great characters were stereotyped, either of historical or of mythological origin. The common men had no place in dramatic literature as the writers thought that there was nothing dramatic in their lives. Even when they were presented on the stage they had lost their individual identity with all its intrinsic attributes in the so-called social and political problems.

In Synge, for the first time, we have characters more at themselves; the men as they really are. This is a very strange phenomena, the highest achievement of the

dramatist, with emphasis less on plot than on the characters. Characters in dramas emerge as living persons due to specific and characteristic themes, situations, surrounding circumstances and particular language they speak. Especially, it is these and other factors of dramatic art which contribute to the breath and spirit of the dramatis personae. In the case of Synge's characters, one has therefore to present and analyse these major component parts of dramatic art to show how Synge has handled them to make his characters real and alive.

According to Aristotle, the Fable is ^{the} end for which tragedy exists and character comes next. In comedy, we laugh at the actions and utterances, not at a comedy as a whole. Thus, in tragedy as well as in comedy there are necessarily six elements viz. the fable, the character, Language, Thought, Scenery and Melody. Thus, it is clear that plot, theme, setting and language are the main dramatic devices in the creation of characters. The study of Synge's art of characterization is carried on keeping in view all these dramatic devices that are at the disposal of the dramatist. Accordingly, the study is divided into main three chapters. The First Chapter deals with Synge as a man and as an artist because howsoever objective the artist may be, his personality is the most influential factor in his work. The second Chapter is devoted to the study of dramatic devices

handled by Synge in his own peculiar way. Keeping in background all the dramatic devices, the actual study of characterization is taken over in the Third Chapter.

In prosecuting the studies all the significant critical works on Synge's plays and other books relating to the Modern Twentieth Century Drama and the books on the development of drama are referred to. The main source of study is the actual plays by J.M.Synge. The text followed is John Millington Synge; Plays, Poems and Prose (1941), published ^{and ed.} by J.M.Dent and Sons Ltd., London. All the books referred to are enlisted in the Bibliography.

The study of characterization is significant in itself as we are to ask ourselves with what skill the particular writer comes to portray them. Drama is specifically written for the theatre and in the theatre we are interested in characters. Therefore, also, it is a matter of great pleasure to study the art of characterization. The students of literature always find it difficult to study the characters as they do not understand how the particular writer comes to portray them. Therefore, the prospect of this study is that it would encourage the students of literature to appreciate the literary characters on their own.

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R e f e r e n c e s

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