

Synge's Love and Death: *When the Moon Has Set and Deirdre of the Sorrows*

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I

In 1872 when John Millington Synge was just one year old, his father died of smallpox. His mother single-handedly raised five children, and four of them, Robert, Edward, Annie and Samuel grew up to be firm believers in Christianity. Against her expectations, John, her youngest son, became the only obstinate “renegade” of the family. Her puritanical religious teaching backfired on John, who was an over-sensitive and sickly child. Furthermore, the idea of Hell, first introduced to him by his mother at the time of his aunt's death in his childhood, terrified him. Therefore, he solemnly treated death with awe and wonder throughout his life.

As Robin Skelton categorizes, “It is impossible always to separate an author's private and personal necessities from his more controlled selections of theme and form.”⁽¹⁾ In other words, no writer can escape the spirit of the times, his personal experiences and family background. J. M. Synge is typical of such a writer, since Synge himself also admitted to Padraic Colum that “all his work was subjective and came out of moods in his own life.”⁽²⁾ There are a lot of unmistakable evidences in his works which relate directly to his philosophies and life experiences.

His morbidity, which was not inherited, became one of his defining characteristics. Synge's morbid obsessions were initially nurtured through his observation of the difficult bleeding of the unhealthy rabbits

he kept in his childhood, as well as repressed feelings about the daily events he could not participate in while other children were fully enjoying all sorts of outdoor activities. Synge recollects:

This ill health led to a curious resolution which has explained in some measure all my subsequent evolution. Without knowing, or as far as I can remember hearing anything, about doctrines of heredity I surmised that unhealthy parents should have unhealthy children — my rabbit breeding may have put the idea into my head. Therefore, I said, I am unhealthy and if I marry I will have unhealthy children. But I will never create beings to suffer as I am suffering, so I will never marry. I do not know how old I was when I came to this decision, but I was between thirteen and fifteen and it caused me horrible misery.⁽³⁾

On top of this pessimism about future romantic ties, Darwin's *On the Origin of Species*, which Synge read at the age of fourteen, completely upset the very basis of his perception as well as ideas of creation of humankind and life itself. Consequently, this made him skeptical about orthodox Christianity. Once, during an argument with his mother about Christianity, in answering his mother's reproach and her final statement "It is simpler to believe in God," Synge voiced "I will believe in millions of them if you like, but I have no doubt they care as little for us as we care for the sorrows of an ant-hill."⁽⁴⁾

Contrary to the absurd thoughts of his childhood, he fell in love with Cherrie Matheson, a pious Protestant brought up by her father, who was a leader of the Plymouth Brethren. As their relations became closer and closer, Synge started to consider their marriage. Even though he half-an-

anticipated her refusal, he audaciously proposed on June the 3rd, 1896 when he was 25 years old. As their marriage would have required her to renounce her Christianity, there appeared no hope of their union; "Synge seems to have sensed the hopelessness of the situation from the very beginning, though he did not admit it for a long time."⁽⁵⁾

Synge's mother had hoped Cherrie would accept the proposal because there was a chance Cherrie, an earnest believer in God, would have brought Synge back to religion he had forsaken. His mother's wish for Synge's return to the spiritual sphere was shared with all the members of her family, but did not eventuate as expected. When she received Synge's disappointed, though half expected, letter describing Cherrie's refusal, Synge's mother was as disheartened as her son and recorded this in her diary: "I got a sad, sad letter from my poor Johnnie from Paris."⁽⁶⁾ She gave up hope of ever bringing him back to the world of Christianity.

II

Synge's experimental play *When the Moon Has Set*, which has been excluded by many editors and critics from his complete works, was first written in May 1901. Though it has been neglected as trivial, this play provides clues to understand the significant issues of Synge's dramatic works closely related to his life. Ann Saddlemyer included this in her collection of Synge's plays, saying that it "provides perhaps the most important clue to his transition from apprentice to playwright."⁽⁷⁾ It unmistakably reflects his thoughts and feelings related to his lover Cherrie Matheson.

When Synge showed the original version to W. B. Yeats and Lady Gregory, they were not impressed, as the plot was too simple. In the story

Colm, Synge himself in disguise, is a young Irish writer living in Paris, who is called back home by the news of his uncle's failing health. Colm's distant cousin and his companion of his childhood, Sister Eileen, has been taking care of the dying man. After his uncle dies, Colm is shot and wounded by the half-mad brother of a woman whom his uncle was once closely associated with. Sister Eileen continues to stay to nurse this young Irish writer until he recovers. In the final scene he woos Sister Eileen and wins her affection.

The background of this autobiographical play is easily identified as the relation between Synge and Cherrie Matheson. The other two women from whom he had romantic feelings are not reflected in this play: Florence Ross with whom he shared experiences of Nature in the Wicklow woods, and Margaret Hardon to whom he proposed in vain in 1899.

Though the plot of this experimental work is mundane and too simplistic, Synge's originality is present there. Yeats writes:

I wish to be emphatic about this play. It is just the kind of work which some theatrical experimenter with no literary judgment or indifferent to literature would be glad to get. It is quite complete. It might have a slight stage success with a certain kind of very modern audience. It was Synge's first play, he read it to Lady Gregory and myself in either two or three acts. He has since then, at what date I cannot now remember, though certainly not very recently, reduced it to one act. It is morbid and conventional though with an air of originality. The only thing interesting about it is that it shows his preoccupation with the thought of death.⁽⁸⁾

The plot of the revised version, completed in May 1903, is much sim-

pler and straightforward; Sister Eileen has been attending to Colm's sick uncle for the three months before he passes away. Colm goes out in darkness and heavy rain to arrange the coffin, a cemetery plot and some other necessary things for the funeral. On his way home he gets lost as he takes "the road through the bogs to the graveyard of Glan-na-nee."⁽⁹⁾ There Colm meets a stranger and wonders if she is a "beggar woman". When he comes back home and mentions her, a young maid named Bride identifies the mystery woman as Mary:

She's a Costello from the old Castilian family . . . big wealthy nobles of the cities of Spain, and herself was the finest girl you'd find in the whole world, with nice manners . . . for she was reared with the nuns (p. 217)

When Bride leaves after showing a portrait of Mary in her younger days to Colm, Sister Eileen comes into the room and explains the relation between Colm's uncle and Mary: "He [Colm's uncle] wanted to marry her although she was beneath him, but when it was all arranged she broke it off because he did not believe in God." (p. 219)

Nearly twenty years have passed since this incident, and Mary has lost her mental balance through regret of her decision. In the case of Colm's uncle, this incident made him despair and caused him to shut himself off from the world. The relation between Colm's uncle and Mary is a foreshadowing counterpart of the one between Colm and Sister Eileen. Both Colm and his uncle are agnostic as was Synge, and Mary and Sister Eileen are pious believers in God as was Cherrie Matheson. Colm learns that his uncle told Sister Eileen about Mary's case as a warning before he died, but Colm is not sure whether what his uncle had

told her would have had some kind of effect on Sister Eileen, or whether she would have taken her [Mary] “as a model example to be followed” (p. 219) disregarding his proposal.

As Colm half expects, Sister Eileen does not budge in her decision and she innocently believes that Mary was right in following God’s voice: “She did what was right. No woman who was really a Christian could have done anything else. . . .” (p. 219) Colm, on the other hand, is firmly convinced that “this woman [Mary] did what was wrong and brought this misery on my uncle and herself.” (p. 219) Once the task of nursing Colm’s uncle is no longer needed, Sister Eileen is now ordered by Mother Superior to come back to Dublin as they require help there. Bride laments that the house will be “dark” again once she is gone:

It’s lonesome you’ll be leaving the lot of us behind you, and you after bringing a kind of a new life into this house was a dark quiet place for a score of years, and will be dark again maybe from this mortal night. (p. 220)

Colm tries to persuade her to stay with him: “We must talk about it till I make you decide with your whole mind whether you will obey the earth, or repeat the story of the mad woman and my uncle.” (p. 221) But Sister Eileen’s belief does not waver: “It is only those who do the will of god who are happy; that is all I know.” (p. 221)

At this very moment Mary bursts into the room in a tormented state. She says she can picture the five children she would have given birth to, had the nuns and the priest not forced her to give up marrying Colm’s uncle. She says, sobbing, “Oh, my head’s perished with the night wind, and I do be very lonesome the time I do be going the bog road,

with the rabbits running round on it and they drowned with the dew."
(p. 223)

Before she leaves them alone, she gives a piece of advice:

God save you kindly the two of you. There's great marrying in the world but it's late we were surely, and let yourselves not be the same. Let you mind the words I was saying, and give no heed to the priests or the bishops or the angels of god, for it's little the like of them, I was saying, knows about women or the seven sorrows of the earth. (p. 223)

Colm, encouraged by Mary, praises the virtues of courage and will-power, especially that of women's, and criticizes both Sister Eileen's simple-minded belief in God and her attitude that sees virtue in unthinking obedience and slavish self-sacrifice. Colum's attack on religion here is identical to Synge's assailance against his mother and Cherrie Matheson. Colm continues:

You realize that the forces which lift women up to a share in the pain and passion of the world are more holy than the vows you have made. Before this splendour of the morning you cannot lie. You know that the spirit of life which has transfigured the world is filling you with radiance. Why will you worship the mania of the saints when your own existence is holier than they are. People renounce when they have not power to retain; you have power and courage. . . . I implore you to use them. (p. 224)

The words of his proposal are forceful since he is confident of their

future, foreseeing inevitable consequences similar to those which befell Mary and his uncle if she chooses to refuse. He is deeply convinced of the success of his proposal as if her acceptance was Nature's natural flow:

There is the first note of the birds. . . . When the sun comes over that ridge I will ask you to be my wife. . . . You cannot refuse. The trees might as well refuse to grow fragrant and green when it is May or the birds to sing before the dawn. . . . There are the larks, and the wrens. . . . I will not try to persuade you. It is quite unnecessary. The world will persuade you. (p. 224)

Finally Sister Eileen realizes that she must not make the same mistake as Mary Costello. Colm's words are so convincing that she realizes love is more important than faith, and gives her consents to marry him. Precisely at this moment the moon goes down and the sun's rays flood into the room. When Eileen returns to the room, after changing her nun's clothes to the green dress Colm has presented her with, he admires her beauty and asks her to listen to the voices of Nature with a liberated mind:

You are infinitely beautiful, and you have done a great action. It is the beauty of your spirit that has set you free, and your emancipation is more exquisite than any that is possible for men who are redeemed by logic. . . . As a moth comes out to a new sphere of odour and colour and light, so you have come out to live in a new sphere of beautiful love. . . . Listen to the tumult the birds are making in the tress. That is our marriage hymn. Without love this world would be

a loathsome sandhill, and a soul without love is not a great deal better. (p. 225)

The final marriage vow spoken by Colm, whose belief is in Nature, clearly reflects Synge's ideology that Nature itself is God:

Here is the ring that was the sorrowful heirloom of my worship you, the soul of credulous feeling, the reader of the saints. From our harmonized discord new notes will rise. In the end we will assimilate with each other and grow senseless and old. We have incarnated God, and been a part of the world. That is enough. In the name of the Summer, and the Sun, and the Whole World, I wed you as my wife. (p. 225)

In the final vows Synge predicts his eventual old age and dementia. The episode of his uncle and Mary Costello also denotes the consequence of the breakup of Colum's relation to Sister Eileen: despair, insanity, violence and, perhaps, morbid death. David Greene points out that the morbid tendency characterizing Synge's works is already apparent in this work:

Like all his early work the play is full of a deep and haunting sense of death, and no matter how eloquently the hero preaches his doctrine of the joyful life, the atmosphere of death, madness and decay which saturates the action is never dispelled.⁽¹⁰⁾

It is interesting to note that though Synge is thought to be "morbid" and his entire work is full of morbidity, Synge himself disparages

Baudelaire, who chooses morbidity over laughter:

Of the things which nourish the imagination, humour is one of the most needful, and it is dangerous to limit or destroy it. Baudelaire calls laughter the greatest sign of the Satanic element in man; and where a country loses its humour, as some towns in Ireland are doing, there will be morbidity of mind, as Baudelaire's mind was morbid.⁽¹¹⁾

Synge's inclination towards pessimism and negative treatment of social events are easily interpreted as "morbid", but it is not morbidity in the usual sense of the word. He takes it for granted that we all face unavoidable death and even the non-living things will inevitably decay and collapse. When he sees life, he tends to see ultimate death in life. Nature, which he believes is immortal, might be the only thing he adores for its eternity.

When we see the bog frequented by mad Mary, we can feel Synge's perception of the bog, as in *In the Shadow of the Glen*, where the dark and damp atmosphere depresses the locals. In *When the Moon Has Set*, the only symbolic use of a natural object is the "moon" which he equates with religion, while the "sun" is love. When love overcomes conventional religion, which is for Synge something that restricts personal freedom, Synge believes the two lovers are truly united. Synge's own thought and feelings are apparently embodied in Colm, an unconventional man of firm conviction.

No one pretends to ignore the bitterness of disease and death. It is an immense, infinite horror; and the more we learn to set the real value

on the vitality of life the more we dread death. Yet any horror is better than the stagnation of belief. . . . The people who rebel from the law of God are not those who linger in the aisles droning their withered chants with senile intonation. . . . In the Christian synthesis each separate faculty has been dying of atrophy. . . . The only truth a wave knows is that it is going to break. The only truth we know is that we are a flood of magnificent life, the fruit of some frenzy of the earth.⁽¹²⁾

Colm's skepticism about religion and the almost contemptuous attitude to the nun's innocent belief in God are actually those of Synge, who more than once shocked his mother with his negative attitude towards Christianity.

III

The special features of Synge's main characters in his "peasant plays" are seen in their unconventionality in thought and deed, and in their defiance of authority and conventional institutions. Just as Pegeen in *The Playboy of the Western World* is independent and strong-willed, Christy is also special in the unconventionality of his "parricide" in the father-dominated traditional Irish society. Nora, having been unfaithful to her old husband, leaves her house never to return with the Tramp in *In the Shadow of the Glen*. Martin and Mary Doul, discarding their sight, choose to be blind for the sake of their spiritual well-being, while Deirdre defies her fate and chooses to commit suicide rather than to marry an old king. The protagonists of Synge become "outsiders" in terms of the societal norm, and Colm is their forerunner.

The sinister atmosphere in the storm and darkness in Act I of *Deir-*

dre of the Sorrows is also present in *When the Moon Has Set*. His morbid preoccupation first seen in *When the Moon Has Set* is more clearly integrated in *In the Shadow of the Glen*. This is evident in the dark shadow of the glen, a typical example in which Synge symbolizes the darker side of nature, the absence of light and life, and the madness and death. The same case is seen in the horrendous death of Patch Darcy who was witnessed in a ditch in the storm, hallucinating.

In *When the Moon Has Set*, after the moon has gone down, the sun is promised to shine, but in *In the Shadow of the Glen*, the sun moves towards its setting location. This covers the land in darkness in which Nora's cottage itself becomes like a tomb in a cemetery, where only macabre visions of death are present. Like the desolation in the dark shadow of the glen and isolated villages where decent men are rare, we are able to glimpse the nomadic life of tinkers in a wooded land where refugees wait for time to pass among frustrated people. The confrontation with nature lies in the background of the apparent verbal and physical violence. Though Synge's sources of folk tales and popular legend are more violent than his dramatic versions, the shocking and violent scenes in Synge's plays such as the physical attack on the clergyman in *Tinker's Wedding* or the second "parricide" in *The Playboy of the Western World* were performed on the stage for the first time in the history of Irish drama.

As his relation with Cherrie Matheson motivated Synge to write *When the Moon Has Set*, an eighteen-year-old Abby actress named Molly Allgood inspired him to start writing *Deirdre of the Sorrows* around 1906 and 1907 when he was often ill in bed with Hodgkins Disease. Though he sometimes felt it impossible to marry any woman at all, he could not resist his passionate feelings of love towards her. In addition to the fact

that Molly was from a completely opposite social sphere, her lower-middle-class Catholic upbringing contrasted with Synge's land-owning Anglo-Irish family. Her profession was an actress, one which was not highly thought of by Synge's mother and his class. Yet, his anguished love for Molly was as strong as his life-long obsessions with violence and macabre horror of death. His notion of love and death is illustrated most strongly in his unfinished final work *Deirdre of the Sorrows*. Robin Skelton writes that Synge's main theme of freedom of the spirit and the value of individualism is definitely present in his final work:

Though Synge ended his life's work with an imperfect play, he also ended it with yet another presentation of themes of rejection. Deirdre, like others of Synge's protagonists, rejects the world of convention in order to find spiritual and emotional richness and freedom.⁽¹³⁾

Aware of his encroaching disease, yet with the hope of marriage to Molly Allgood as if it were his last means of hanging onto life, Synge wanted his personal tragic motif dramatized in a mythological Irish setting. Though we have seen a similar case of fear in *In the Shadow of the Glen* in which Nora Burke was obsessed with the macabre horror of death, Synge glorifies death, especially towards the end of his life. He also recounts ageing and the loss of beauty to the passage of time, and the eventual loss of love. Deirdre's suicide is nothing like Juliet's, in which she showed passionate love and faithfulness to Romeo. Deirdre is inspired by her pride and defiance of life, since she finds death meaningful. Nicholas Grene relates Deirdre and Synge himself who wrote this play:

The most obvious reason why Synge should have been so excited while writing it, is that it was concerned with his own situation, his love for Molly and his fears of death.⁽¹⁴⁾

Nora Burke and Deirdre are both haunted by age. *Deirdre of the Sorrows* is Synge's most "complete" play and in it his final messages on love, old age and death are expressed by Deirdre and Conchubar, who represent Synge's image of an ideal woman and a weak old man, possibly Synge himself.

After more than fifteen drafts, *Deirdre of the Sorrows* was still unfinished. It was completed by W. B. Yeats, Lady Gregory and with the help of Molly Allgood who was assigned to play the role of Deirdre by Synge, and it was actually performed a year after Synge died. Yeats lamented Synge's untimely death:

. . . had he lived to do that, 'Deirdre of the Sorrows' would have been his masterwork, so much beauty is there in its course, and such wild nobleness in its end, and so poignant is an emotion and wisdom that were his own preparation for death.⁽¹⁵⁾

In this work we can see the culmination of his idea of life and death. Synge took the storyline from Irish mythology in the same way as other writers who wrote poetry and plays from a similar source: George Russell's *Deirdre* (1902), W. B. Yeats's *Deirdre* (1906), James Stephens's *Deirdre* (1923), Eva Gore-Booth's *The Buried Life of Deirdre* (1930), and Vincent Woods' contemporary play *A Cry from Heaven* (2005).

Synge apparently knew George Russell's *Deirdre* and W. B. Yeats's *Deirdre*. Similar to Synge's play, Russell's *Deirdre* contains three acts.

But it contains “too much blind fate, too much Druid magic, too little human passion and conflict”⁽¹⁶⁾ while Synge treats the characters in the mythology realistically. Yeats's *Deirdre* is only one act, more like a Greek play keeping three unities with a chorus, and the “stiff, cold, marmoreal dignity of its blank verse, remains as remote, stylized, and archaic as a group of ancient statues”⁽¹⁷⁾ while Synge's *Deirdre* treats a character as lively and powerful as if she were a figure living in the contemporary world. Declan Kiberd also analyzes the reason why Synge chose the ancient character:

. . . when Synge reworked a motif from the ancient literature in his modern play, he did so in the knowledge that such motifs had persisted in the native tradition precisely because of their vividness and power.⁽¹⁸⁾

Deirdre is one of the most famous tragic figures in part of Ulster Cycle, one of the four great cycles of Irish mythology. According to the mythology, Deirdre was the baby girl of Fedlimid mac Daill, the royal storyteller. When she was born, Cahbad the Druid predicted that she would become a very beautiful woman but would cause war in Emain Macha (Ulster) as well as the exile of three greatest warriors in Ulster. The wise men's congress advised Conchubor, High King, to have the baby girl killed immediately. But Conchubor decides to make this baby his bride when she grows up. For that reason, he hides Deirdre in seclusion in Slive Fuadh under the care of Lavarcham.

Twenty years passed since her birth, and now Deirdre grew up to be a beautiful young woman. One day she met a handsome young warrior, hunter and singer named Naisi in the woods, and immediately fell in

love with him, and eloped to Alban (Scotland) from her foretold but loveless match. But wherever they went, the local kings tried to kill Naisi and his two brothers, Ainnle and Ardan, to rob Deirdre. To avoid this, they escaped to a remote island.

After seven years, Conchubor found out their whereabouts, and sent Fergus to lure them back home with a message of his false assurance of their safety. When they returned, he ordered his men to kill Naisi and his brothers, and tried to force Deirdre to marry him. Even after all sorts of entertainments, persuasions, even threats by Conchubor, Deirdre's feelings towards him never changed. Eventually, Conchubor gave her up, and decided to give her away to the man who had killed Naisi. In order to commit suicide Deirdre intentionally bumped her head against a rock by putting her head out of the chariot when she was being carried away. This is the rough storyline of the mythology.⁽¹⁹⁾

In Act One of Synge's *Deirdre of the Sorrows*, while she is wandering alone in the woods and hills Conchubor comes to stake his claim to bring Deirdre back to his country and make her his queen. Just before Conchubor appears, Lavarcham vividly describes Deirdre's high spirit and lively nature. She is still like a untamed creature, enjoying herself in wilderness.

Lavarcham: She does be all times straying around picking flowers or nuts, or sticks itself, but so long as she's gathering new life I've a right not to heed her, I'm thinking, and she taking her will.⁽²⁰⁾

Synge, in the last stage of his life, was no longer able to gather new life in the Wicklow woods he had been so familiar with from his child-

hood and could not walk along in company with Molly Allgood. As Synge, yet not as old as Conchubar, faced death, while wishing to marry active young Molly Allgood. She went out hiking with other friends, leaving Synge jealous in his bed.

While Conchubar is waiting for Deirdre to come back, he inspects her workbox as she is still collecting nuts and twigs for fire there. Conchubar is, in a way, Synge, while Deirdre is Molly. The age difference between Synge and Molly was seventeen years while it is forty years between Conchubar and Deirdre. Though Synge identifies himself with the ageing Conchubar in physical aspects, Synge wants to identify himself spiritually with Naisi whose death triggered Deirdre's suicide.

After Deirdre and Naisi fell in love with each other, Deirdre, disgusted with Conchubar's importunate proposal of marriage within a couple of days, asks Naise to take her to a place out of Conchubar's reach.

Deirdre: You must not go, Naisi, and leave me to the High King, a man is ageing in his dun, with his crowds round him and his silver and gold. I will not live to be shut up in Emain, and wouldn't we do well paying, Naisi, with silence and a near death? I'm a long while in the woods with my own self, and I'm in little dread of death, and it earned with riches would make the sun red with envy, and he going up the heavens; and the moon pale and lonesome, and she wasting away. Isn't it a small thing is foretold about the ruin of ourselves. Naisi, when all men have age coming and great ruin in the end? (p. 245)

Naturally Naisi is aware of the consequences if he dares to steal the High King's cherished "asset", but he does not care. Deirdre is outwardly

positive, but her uncertain feelings about the consequences are expressed in the words “dread” and “lonesome” and in “destruction”.

Deirdre: And yet I'm in dread leaving this place, where I have lived always. Won't I be lonesome and I thinking on the little hills beyond, and the apple-trees do be dubbing in the spring-time by the post of the door? Won't I be in great dread to bring you to destruction, Naisi, and you so happy and young? (p. 245)

Though Deirdre asks Lavarcham to wed her and Naisi before leaving for Alban, Lavarcham flatly refuses on the ground that she would not want to be involved with the ruin of the country and their deaths as has been foretold. So Naisi's brother Ainnle presides over the wedding rite, which is the prelude to a new start:

Ainnle (joining their hands): By the sun and the moon and the whole earth, I wed Deirdre to Naisi. May the air bless you, and water and the wind, the sea, and all the hours of the sun and moon. (p. 247)

This line parallels Colm's marriage vows to Sister Eileen; Their vow is to the earth and the natural elements. Another parallel is Sister Eileen's new green dress and Deirdre's queenly attire for the wedding. She has changed her clothes to show her defiance after she made the decision to flee from Conchubor:

Deirdre: I'm going into the room to put on the rich dresses and jewels have been sent from Emain. . . . I will dress like Emer in Dundean-gan, or Maeve in her house in Connaught. (pp. 239-40)

In Act Two, seven years have passed since Deirdre and Naisi left for Alban, the symbolical place of Nature. Here Synge's ideal free world is well contrasted with the narrow religious world. Mary C. King's apt comparison is worth quoting here:

The lovers' withdrawal into the woods raises the critical issue of the idealizing similarities between the sylvan alternative to existence in the diseased world offered to sister Eileen, and the green world existence temporarily achieved by Deirdre and Naisi.⁽²¹⁾

Lavarcham comes all the way to Deirdre's quiet tent in order to warn her just before Fergus officially arrives with Conchubor's sealed parchments to lure them back to Emain. Fergus says there is no dangerous plot involved as he has surety with Conchubor. Lavarcham tries to dissuade her from returning as she senses Deirdre will not be safe if she comes back. Deirdre is in two minds:

Deirdre: I've dread going or staying, Lavarcham. It's lonesome this place, having happiness like ours, till I'm asking each day will this day match yesterday, and will tomorrow take a good place beside the same day in the year that's gone, and wondering all times is it a game worth playing, living on until you're dried and old, and our joy is gone for ever. (p. 248)

When Lavarcham hears Deirdre's misgivings about her future, she foresees the tragic ending:

Lavarcham: I'm not the like of many and I'd see a score of naked corpses

and not heed them at all, but I'm destroyed seeing yourself in your hour of joy when the end is coming surely. (p. 249)

The ominous character Owen, Conchubor's spy, is a role not present in the original mythology; nevertheless Synge created him on the model of the wise fool in Shakespeare's plays. Owen embodies the horror of ageing, and demonstrates death by killing himself with a sword, an act foretelling the many deaths following him:

Owen: Queens get old, Deirdre, with their white and long arms going from them, and their backs hooping. I tell you it's a poor thing to see a queen's nose reaching down to scrape her chin. (p. 251)

Fergus also tries to persuade Deirdre, as women's beauty does not last long. He advises Naisi to come back to his country while Deirdre is away as it is natural that he will grow weary of her and the relationship will not go smoothly forever. Naisi is first tempted to agree with Fergus, but he strongly denies the possibility of his love for Deirdre diminishing.

Naisi: I'll not go, Fergus. I've had dreams of getting old and weary, and losing my delight in Deirdre; but my dreams were dreams only. . . . We'll stay this place till our lives and time are worn out. (p. 253)

He strongly insists this as if trying to convince himself, and asks Fergus to pass the message to Conchubor that he won't go back. His determination is poetically expressed with all the images drawn from Nature:

Naisi: I've had dread, I tell you, dread winter and summer, and the autumn and the spring-time, even when there's a bird in every bush making his own stir till the fall of night. But this talk's brought me ease, and I see we're as happy as the leaves on the young trees and we'll be so ever and always though we'd live the age of the eagle and the salmon and the crow of Britain. (p. 253)

Deirdre eavesdrops on the conversation between Naisi and Fergus in which Naisi confesses that weary feelings have in fact been creeping into his relationship with Deirdre during their long exile in Alban. Therefore she decides to leave.

Borrowing from Irish mythology, what Synge did was to demythologize the characters, and gave Conchubor, Deirdre and Naisi all human dimensions; depicting Conchubor as merely an old man who wants to possess a young beautiful woman, Naisi not as a prince but a hunter living in the woods, and Deirdre not as a future queen but as a vivacious and independent girl.

Donna Gerstenberger explains the treatments of the characters and the use of the language:

The language of Deirdre is relatively simple: certainly it is more restrained than in Synge's other plays. The people are simple in spite of their royal lineage, and, since Synge's intention is to stress the fact that their tragedy is that of human beings rather than of ancient kings, the use of common, serviceable language underwrites the total effect of the play.⁽²²⁾

After having heard Naisi's doubts about their future relationship,

Deirdre expects that the horrible ageing process will surely ravage their youthful features, and consequently he will break off future relations with her. She is convinced there is no other choice but to go back, and Naisi blindly adheres to her decision.

Deirdre: There are as many ways to wither love as there are stars in a night of Samhain; but there is no way to keep life, or love with it, a short space only. . . . It's for that there's nothing lonesome like a love is watching out the time most lovers do be sleeping. . . . It's for that we're setting out for Emain Macha when the tide turns on the sand.

In this play too, major characters are all suffering from loneliness as Deirdre who uses the word "lonesome" like Nora in *In the Shadow of the Glen*.

Naisi: You're right, maybe. It should be a poor thing to see great lovers and they sleepy and old. (p. 255)

Deirdre wants to express her death wish towards the end of Act Two:

Deirdre: It is my wish. . . . It may be I will not have 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 who had great beauty in their youth."

And her final words in Act Two are an accurate prediction of her demise in Act Three:

Deirdre: It's seven years we've had a life was joy only, and this day we're going west, this day we're facing death, maybe, and death should be a poor, untidy thing, though it's a queen that dies. (p. 258)

In Act Three Deirdre and Naisi are ushered into a "shabby, ragged place . . . with frayed rugs and skins are eaten by moths" (p. 262) and when Deirdre pulls back a hanging, she sees behind it a trench meant for their grave. Deirdre utters, "There's new earth on the ground and a trench dug. . . . It's a grave, Naisi, that is wide and deep." (p. 263) When he realizes that they have been deceived by Conchubor, Naisi says that the ones Conchubor wants to kill are Naisi and his two brothers, not Deirdre. Deirdre's response is that she cannot bear to be "lonesome" left alone without him when Naisi asks her to stay alive:

Naisi: You'd best keep them off, maybe, and then, when the time comes, make your way to some place west in Donegal, and it's there you'll get used to stretching out lonesome at the fall of night, and waking lonesome for the day. (pp. 263-64)

Deirdre: Let you not be saying things are worse than death. (p. 264)

The old Conchubor endorses the young couple's fear: "There's one sorrow has no end surely — that's being old and lonesome." (p. 268) After Conchubor's men kill Naisi and his two brothers, Deirdre kills herself with a knife. Before she presses the knife into her heart, she leaves the final words to Conchubor, which echoes Maurya's lamentation in *Riders to the Sea* for the loss of all her sons, her father and grandfather. The final words of Maurya, "No man at all can be living for ever, and we must

be satisfied" (p. 106) echo the cry of Synge, whose fatalistic pessimism is his creative power. Synge's characters are often doomed, yet they are not the definitive victims of their destiny. It is the heroines who choose their fate for themselves though those women are also sufferers.

Deirdre: It was the choice of lives we had in the clear woods, and in the grave we're safe, surely. . . . It's a pitiful thing, Conchubor, you have done this night in Emain; yet a thing will be a joy and triumph to the ends of life and time. (p. 272)

Those women's final words are a tragic exaltation of death. As Eugene Benson writes, "he [Synge] strove in his final illness to finish a play with so poignant and personal a theme"⁽²³⁾. The Deirdre myth affected him deeply, even when he reviewed Lady Gregory's *Chuchulain of Muirthemne* five years before he was striving to finish *Deirdre of the Sorrows*. In spite of the fact that most versions of the legend, Naisi, not Deirdre, plays the dominant role, here in Synge's version Deirdre controls their destiny. This is seen in all other Synge's plays in which female characters take the initiative: such heroines as Maurya, Nor Burke, Sarah Casey, Molly Byrne and Pegeen Mike.

Conchubor's fears of ageing is the reason for deceiving Deirdre and hastening her return to Emain Macha. Deirdre's decision is also rooted in her own deep-seated fear of ageing, which echoes Naisi's subconscious fear. All three characters' fear reflects Synge's fear of ageing and the subsequent loss of love; in Deirdre's case her suicide is in defiance of the eventual lonesome life, an equivalent of death. Nicholas Grene defines Synge's intensions in creating this play: "In Deirdre he wanted to create a full tragic pattern, to set a positive force of life against the reality of

death, a sense of life strong enough to stand in tension with it”⁽²⁴⁾

Almost twelve years after he wrote *When the Moon Has Set*, Synge was dying, not yet having completed *Deirdre of the Sorrows*. Both plays are the clear reflections of Synge's personal life, though in completely opposite ways. Here in *Deirdre of the Sorrows*, Synge's tragic view of life is finally defined as his life was finalized by the play. W. B. Yeats heard from the nurse the last words of Synge: “It is no use fighting death any longer”⁽²⁵⁾.

Eugene Benson also concludes that Synge's glorification of the death-wish is in *Deirdre of the Sorrows*: “The dominant *leitmotif* of the play is a horror of life which brings ageing and entails (for Deirdre) an inevitable loss of beauty and a consequent blighting of love.”⁽²⁶⁾ Although Synge rewrote Act Two more than twenty times, it is perhaps the weakest act, where there is little plot development, and the waning relationship between Deirdre and Naisi during their stay in Alban is not well described. Yet, it is a great achievement at the point of the terminal stage of his illness to write a play which is as personal to him as *Long Day's Journey into Night* was to Eugene O'Neill. Eugene Benson describes J. M. Synge's *Deirdre of the Sorrows* as thus:

Deirdre of the Sorrows is a recapitulation on a grand scale of themes, motifs and dramatic methods which characterize Synge's entire *oeuvre*. Always at the centre of his drama there is the struggle between those forces that restrict human liberty and those energies that seek to enhance it. Most commonly Synge, reflecting perhaps his own reaction to the repressive religious creed in which he was raised, opposes the peasant and the tinker to the institutionalized ethic of the Church. . . . There is in all his work a profound sense of mortality

linked to a pathetic reaching out by all his characters for a finer destiny which always seems to be denied them.⁽²⁷⁾

Synge's dramatic works serve as both his self-expression as a folk-dramatist and his own illustration of universal human psychology. *Deirdre of the Sorrows* was left unfinished, yet his maturity as a dramatist is unmistakable in his skill at humanization of legendary figures and his brilliant expression of inevitability and mortality. Yeats writes of Synge's perception of life and death in "J. M. Synge and the Ireland of his Time":

. . . he contemplates even his own death as if it were another's and finds in his own destiny but, as it were, a projection through a burning-glass of that general to men. There is in the creative joy an acceptance of what life brings, because we have understood the beauty of what it brings, or a hatred of death for what it takes away, which arouses within us, through some sympathy perhaps with all other men, an energy so noble, so powerful, that we laugh aloud and mock, in the terror or the sweetness of our exaltation, at death and oblivion.⁽²⁸⁾

Synge transfigured reality by blending a deep fear of ageing into heartrending Irish mythology. In *Deirdre of the Sorrows*, Deirdre believes that she would be united with Naisi in the life hereafter, where their love would know no waning and their youth no fading just as in the legendary world of Tir-na-nOrg. Synge desperately clung to the notion that his love to Molly Allgood would be remembered as triumphant and laudable even after his death, and this exaltation through death is fully dramatized in *Deirdre of the Sorrows*. The heroine Deirdre was por-

trayed by his bride-to-be Molly at the Abbey Theatre as if it were an extension of his will to eternalize the relationship between her and himself.

As we have seen, both Synge's first play *When the Moon Has Set* and his final play *Deirdre of the Sorrows* have not only great autobiographical significance, but also stand as effigies of Synge's perception of youth and ageing, social norm and freedom, life and death, and above all, the nature of existence.

Notes

- (1) Robin Skelton, *J. M. Synge* (Lewisburg, Bucknell University Press, 1972), p. 38.
- (2) See *Ibid.*, p. 12.
- (3) See David H. Greene and Edward M. Stephens, *J. M. Synge 1871-1909* (New York: Macmillan, 1959), pp. 5-6.
- (4) *Ibid.*, p. 116.
- (5) *Ibid.*, p. 36.
- (6) *Ibid.*, p. 54.
- (7) Ann Saddlemyer, Introduction, *J. M. Synge Collected Works III* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1968), p. xxi.
- (8) Ann Saddlemyer (ed.), *J. M. Synge: Plays* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1969), p. 213.
- (9) Ann Saddlemyer (ed.), *J. M. Synge: Plays* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1969), p. 216. All the page numbers of the subsequent quotations taken from this edition are written in brackets in the text.
- (10) David H. Greene and Edward M. Stephens, *J. M. Synge 1871-1909*, p. 115.
- (11) The Preface to *The Tinker's Wedding* in *Synge: The Complete Plays* (London: Eyre Methuen, 1963), p. 108.
- (12) David H. Greene and Edward M. Stephens, *J. M. Synge 1871-1909*, pp. 115-16.
- (13) See Robin Skelton, *J. M. Synge*, pp. 83-84.
- (14) Nicholas Grene, *Synge: A Critical Study of the Plays* (London: Macmillan, 1975), p. 164.
- (15) Ann Saddlemyer (ed.) *J. M. Synge Plays*, p. 167.

- (16) See F. L. Lucas, *The Drama of Chekhov, Synge, Yeats, and Pirandello* (London: Cassell, 1963), p. 314.
- (17) *Ibid.*, p. 314.
- (18) Declan Kiberd, *Synge and the Irish Language* (London: Macmillan, 1979), p. 194.
- (19) There are some other versions, in which Deirdre dies of grief.
- (20) J. M. Synge, *Synge: The Complete Plays* (London: Methuen, 1963), p. 233. All the page numbers of the subsequent quotations taken from this edition are written in brackets in the text.
- (21) Mary C. King, *The Drama of J. M. Synge* (London: Fourth Estate, 1985), p. 182.
- (22) Donna Gerstenberger, *John Millington Synge* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1964), p. 98.
- (23) Eugene Benson, *J. M. Synge*, p. 138.
- (24) Nicholas Grene, *Synge: A Critical Study of the Plays*, p. 161.
- (25) *Ibid.*, p. 16.
- (26) *Ibid.*, p. 146.
- (27) *Ibid.*, p. 152.
- (28) W. B. Yeats, *Essays and Introductions*, (London: Macmillan, 1961), p. 322.