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The Advent of the Irish Dramatic Movement: From Politics to Drama

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In the early stages of the Irish Dramatic Movement, the success and the fame were primarily due to the contributions of John Millington Synge, though the key figures were undoubtedly W. B. Yeats and Lady Gregory. At the start of the Irish Dramatic Movement, nobody realistically had the thought of establishing the Abbey Theatre in mind. It was the end product of the Movement, which started partly as a result of the failure of the parliamentary efforts by politicians for achieving the goal of Irish Independence.

The Irish struggle for independence over the centuries had not been an ever-growing trend. It had ups and downs; it was tried sometimes by force and sometimes by negotiation through parliamentary efforts.

The constitutional campaign of Charles Stewart Parnell (the leader of the Irish Parliamentary Party) was first successful in laying the groundwork for Home Rule; his party's main objectives were land reform and legislative independence from the United Kingdom. Hence he supported land agitation as he believed it would help to achieve his objective of self-government in Ireland, but the bills for Irish Home Rule were voted down.

Parnell was a Protestant Wicklow landlord who devoted himself to the emancipation of peasants from landlords, and also to that of Ireland from British rule. As he was a well-to-do Protestant, his political campaign, like Maud Gonne's and Constance Markievicz's, actually meant revolt against his own class. Supported by many Irish Catholics, he soon became President of the Land League founded by Michael Davitt, a Fenian leader. Through his parliamentary efforts, the Gladstone government finally passed the Land Act in 1881, recognizing "the three F's" of Tenant-rights: Fixity of Tenure, Free Sale and Fair Rents. However, just as hopes of Home Rule reached a peak, they were completely dashed when Parnell's divorce proceedings came out in court. This incident became an ugly political scandal due to the Victorian social mores and decorum. Immediately after this, the Church authorities denounced him.

Parnell had been successful in uniting major different factions, such as the Fenians and the Roman Catholic Church, into one strong force, but the unified factions were split after the scandal; consequently political settlement became

impossible. On top of this, Parnell's sudden death confounded people who had aspired for independence. Mass rallies were no longer systematically organized, and the parliamentary debates produced practically no changes. Gladstone also retired three years after Parnell's death and the hopes for establishing Irish Parliamentary Home Rule vanished.

Because of the disunity of factions and the devastating course of events for Home Rule, the general population of Ireland became apathetic towards politics. Yet, though the majority of them lost interest in politics and in achieving independence through parliamentary movements, the nationalist movement never actually died down. Edmund Curtis pointed out the new phase of the societal development, and remarked, 'in the grand disillusionment that followed Parnell the national cause took new and deeper channels than mere politics.'⁽¹⁾

The channel that the nationalists opted for was the intensification of an already growing literary movement. It was a movement to draw inspiration through delving into Irish sagas, myths and folklore and Irish history. Ernest Boyd dates the beginning of modern Irish literature with the publication of Standish O'Grady's two books: *History of Ireland: The Heroic Period in 1878*, and *History of Ireland: Cuchulain and his Contemporaries in 1880*. These two works helped Irish writers to come to terms with the ancient Irish literature. Intellectuals, influenced by

Standish O'Grady, felt compelled to create national literature and drama in order to express their desire for independence. They wanted to establish their national identity through the literary movement, part of a cultural nationalist movement called "the Celtic Renaissance".

Concurrently, a new "Young Ireland" movement, initiated mainly by Fenians, was gaining ground. John O'Leary, as its leader, had proved his patriotism to this movement in difficult social and political circumstances. It was through the personal influence of John O'Leary that a group of hopeful intellectual patriots, W. B. Yeats, George Russell, John F. Taylor and others, sought another means of achieving the goal of independence; they initiated a new Irish literary movement. Yeats had a firm belief: "There is no great literature without nationality, no great nationality without literature."⁽²⁾

The literary movement was rapidly becoming a substitute for the political movement to enhance the Irish people's spirit of independence. Yeats's artistic aim of the Celtic Revival was to restore the lost Irish culture, raise the national consciousness and establish national identity through literature and drama using Irish mythology and folklore as materials.

Yeats, "The Great Founder" as Sean O'Casey called him, set up and promoted the National Literary Society in London in 1892. He wanted to produce a completely new style of drama which was a revolt

against realism. Then he formed in Dublin, a sister organization to the National Literary Society of London. Douglas Hyde became the president of the society and he gave a memorial lecture titled 'The Necessity for De-Anglicising Ireland' as an inaugural address. His argument was to preserve and revive all that was best in Irish language and culture.

At this time Yeats published his play *The Countess Cathleen*. While the London society was founded for intellectual and social affairs, the Dublin society was for publishing books, holding open lectures and discussion sessions with distinguished figures on Irish history or on contemporary Irish political and social problems. Maud Gonne, who single-handedly created a national lending library network in Ireland, had concurrently been trying to rediscover Irish nationhood through Irish literature and myth.

Yeats's energy had always been spent on establishing an Irish theatre as a home base from which to promulgate Irish culture. After he was acquainted with Edward Martyn, Yeats was introduced to Lady Gregory and George Moore through Martyn who had written two plays, *The Heather Field* and *Maeve*. Lady Gregory thought it was a pity that they had no Irish theatres where Irish plays could be staged.

Yeats had the idea of a literary theatre for some time, and it began to take shape strongly in his mind. However, Yeats knew the difficulty in establishing an Irish theatre for Irish drama due to the lack of

funding. Lady Gregory encouraged him, saying that she would either collect or provide the necessary funds.

Yeats wanted to recreate the forgotten Irish cultural heritage through poetry and drama. He hoped to use literary arts as an expression of ancient and original Irish psyche. He also started to establish a literary theatre where his mystic and intellectual plays would be performed. He wrote his ideas in "The Reform of the Theatre":

We have to write or find plays that will make the theatre a place of intellectual excitement. . . . If we are to do this we must learn that beauty and truth are always justified of themselves, and that their creation is a greater service to our country than writing that compromises either in the seeming service of a cause. . . . Such plays will require, both in writers and audiences, a stronger feeling for beautiful and appropriate language than one finds in the ordinary theatre. ⁽³⁾

Yeats wrote many verse plays for his Irish Dramatic Movement, but his plays were symbolical and sometimes too enigmatic for the audience. Hence, his plays could not attract large audiences as Synge's. It was almost by chance that Yeats met Synge in Paris; this meeting was a crucial incident which had a tremendous effect on the future of the Irish Dramatic Movement: the first meeting of Yeats and Synge in 1896. Yeats gave counsel to

Synge, just after coming back from the Aran Islands himself:

I said, 'Give up Paris, you will never create anything by reading Racine, and Arthur Symons will always be a better critic of French literature. Go to the Aran Islands. Live there as if you were one of the people themselves; express a life that has never found expression.' I had just come from Aran and my imagination was full of those grey islands, where men must reap with knives because of the stones. (4)

Synge recorded his experiences minutely in his journals. Synge made direct contact with the people of Aran while living there, and dramatized the folklore he had directly heard from them.

His recognition of mortality through the experience of his physical ailment from incurable disease resulted in his melancholy and pessimism. His own physical problems and his experiences in the Aran Islands were linked together and helped him to formulate the original themes of his plays. He recorded the fear of death among the country folk he met in the Aran Islands in his Journal, which might have been the resonance of his own fear of death. The desolate life of the people of Aran and Synge's dark and ironic view of life combined to help him to formulate his problem plays, such as *In the Shadow of the Glen*, *Riders to the Sea* and *Deirdre of the Sorrows*. His active period as a dramatist lasted a relatively short time:

only for the last seven years of his life under the shadow of death.

The formation of the Irish Dramatic Movement in the midst of the Irish Literary Renaissance accidentally coincided with the centenary year of Wolf Tone's revolt against British reign in 1798. Patriotic feelings were reawakened by Arthur Griffith, the founder and third leader of Sinn Féin. Although Yeats's aspiration was basically the same as those whose political aim was Irish independence, the approach to the aim was different. Yeats's Irish Dramatic Movement gathered literary people around him, and they tried to rediscover Irish cultural heritage in mythology and folklore untainted by the English.

Notes

1. Edmund Curtis, *A History of Ireland* (London: Methuen, 1950), p. 388.
2. James Hogg (ed.), *Poetic Drama & Poetic Theory* (Salzburg: Universität Salzburg, 1981), p. 39.
3. See Francis Bickley, *J. M. Synge and the Irish Dramatic Movement* (London: Constable and Company, 1912), p. 68.
4. W. B. Yeats, *Essays and Introductions*, (London: Macmillan, 1961) p. 299.