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Synge's Conception of the Drama

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SYNGE'S CONCEPTION OF THE DRAMA

BY

MARY LAURETTE SPEHN

A THESIS SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF
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VITA

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DEDICATION

To Bridget

Who has been so generous of her time and assistance in my behalf.
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CHAPTER I

BACKGROUND OF THE TIMES

No dramatist has had a more stormy career or has been the subject of more heated and bitter controversy than John Millington Synge. The fight began on January 26, 1907. A large audience had gathered in the Abbey Theatre, Dublin, to witness the first performance of his *Playboy of the Western World*. The first and second acts were greeted with a quiet uncertainty which changed to an indignant and loudly expressed disapproval. This baptism by fire launched a battle of a week for the Abbey Theatre, but a battle that has been endlessly repeated in nearly every city in which the *Playboy* has appeared.

Ever since that memorable debut Synge has been the object of controversy. Irish newspapermen of his day scathingly denounced his plays as insults to the dignity of Ireland and the integrity of the Gaelic character. Writers and reviewers, both native and foreign, have been greatly
concerned with the Irishness of Synge and his plays; some with showing the predominance of foreign sources and others claiming his work had its roots in native soil. Biographers and critics have vied with one another in unearthing some choice bit of information or deduction that would support their individual theories.

Most of the material on Synge and his work was written in his own time or soon after his death, and so to a certain extent it lacks the true perspective of time. Whatever has been of recent date is taken up with determining the relative value of the foreign and Irish sources in Synge's work and with separate critical analyses of the plays. Many have touched on the dramatist's expressed theory of drama, but none to the writer's knowledge have made an integrated study of the influences that were responsible for the evolution of Synge's concept of the drama.

It will be the purpose of this thesis, then, to show that Synge's conception of the drama was chiefly the product of three significant factors;
first, his continental training and his relation to the Celtic Literary Renaissance; second, his singularly individual character and personality; third, his close observation of the lives of the Irish peasantry. We shall likewise strive to determine the value and place of his plays and his dramatic theory in literature.

In analyzing the nature of these influences this study will concern itself with showing how they are responsible for Synge's theory and practice in drama; how through them came his idea of a dramatic art founded in reality but rich in imagination. Synge himself left accessory writings; his poems, his prefaces to the plays, and the Aran notebooks as guides to his character and literary thought. This paper will utilize these works in tracing Synge's concept of the drama as it is exhibited in the plots, characters, and dialogue of his plays.

Synge's name is invariably associated with Irish nationalism and patriotism. His adherents hold that he was a staunch and faithful Gael, while
his enemies and those of the more narrow ultra-nationalist group would cast him out as an alien, a member of the hated Anglo-Irish set, who scoffed at and ridiculed the ideals close to the Irish heart. If he had perhaps lived in another age, or better, in another land, instead of the Ireland of the turn of the century, Synge and his works might be considered only from the literary point of view. But that is an idle thought. As it stands, Synge, like most writers, was associated with the life of his time, with a detached interest in some phases of it, but intimately related in others. Since he was a dramatist, and a successful one in terms of the theatre, Synge, whether he wished it or not, related himself to the thought and trends of the day.

At the time of Synge's birth in 1871 nationalism was molding strong countries and breeding racial and political hatreds among nations. The United States, finding new power after civil war, was revolutionizing her living and strengthening her union with gigantic leaps in industry, com-
merce and transportation; in Germany Bismarck had consolidated the states of the Confederation, had defeated France and Austria, and imbuing the people with the glory of the Fatherland, was creating the Hohenzollern Empire; in Italy Victor Immanuel was wresting Rome from the Pope to secure a capital for a united Italy; and in England Victoria's agents were successfully realizing a dream of empire in Africa and India.

In Ireland too this spirit was apparent. After the great famine the Young Ireland Society had united many in rebellion against England, while later the violence of the Fenians and the Reform Bill of 1867 started a period of conciliation in England's relations with Ireland. Under Parnell the Nationalists agitated for the reestablishment of Home Rule, and although the Home Rule Bill of 1886 was defeated and the leader and many of his party came to a sad end, their work bore fruit in the twentieth century political upheavals and in the agrarian reforms of their own time.

For centuries the Irish peasant had been the
victim of English landlordism, but in the nineteenth century there was passed a series of Land Acts designed to alleviate the miseries that followed the terrible potato famine of 1846 and the conditions encumbent upon a people who worked the soil but owned no part of it, for "the grievance of eviction rankled bitterly in the hearts of the peasantry who, losing their holding, lost everything, since they had no alternative occupation to which they could turn."

The Act of 1870 forbade the raising of agricultural rents at random or evicting peasants without repaying them in some way for the improvements they had made on their holdings, but as Synge shows in his Aran Islands, evictions continued on a large scale even though the landed gentry were divested of some of their power. But in 1879 Michael Davitt led the way for radical agrarian reform with the founding of the Land League. Gladstone, forced by the Parnell regime, tried to meet the demands

1 Ernest Barker, Ireland in the Last Fifty Years, p. 11.
of this new group by reducing rents with the Act of 1881. This did not satisfy the members of the Land League who believed the peasants should not only be tillers of the soil, but owners as well. England saw how the Irish rallied to the new organization, and to stop what she termed crime and violence, and to strengthen her reins, passed the Crimes Act in 1887.

It was not until 1894 when Horace Plunkett founded the Irish Agricultural Organization Society that the Irish farmers were united in a co-operative movement, which, while not political in purpose, was the first to solidify the interests of the Irish in the development of the soil; the first to create a new unit in the social scale of agrarian life. It was probably responsible for the truly revolutionary Land Purchase Act of 1903 which enabled the tenant cultivators to become peasant proprietors.

The introduction of judicial rents, and still more the introduction of land purchase, has been fatal to the social power of the
landlords, and the administrative corollary of these changes was drawn when in 1898 they were deprived of the control of local government, and the control was vested in bodies mainly drawn from the tenant and peasant classes.²

However far-reaching these changes, one must recognize the big drawback to complete reform. "Among the many problems of Irish life the most persistent is that presented by a redundant population pressing on the margin of subsistence in a small country of which the greater part is better suited for pasture than for tillage."³ So, while Synge was peopling his plays with lowly peasants and presenting them to an actively nationalist audience, it must be understood that the Irish farmer had not nearly been satisfied with Britain's answer to his requests; that, if anything, he had become more conscious of his

² Ibid., p. 94.
³ W. A. Phillips, Revolution in Ireland, p. 3.
state in the midst of these new movements; that he was extremely jealous of his time-honored reputation as the ideal of integrity, purity, religion and family life. He was not ready to forget the famines, the evictions, and the domination of the Union Government; he was not ready to see any of his class presented on the stage in an unfavorable guise without feeling personally insulted; especially if the playwright, as Synge, came from the land-owning class.

However distant Synge was from the peasantry he did not belong to the upper class. His parents owned a modest but comfortable dwelling in suburban Dublin and later in Wicklow. Throughout his short life John Synge never lived in luxury, but from his pen and additional income he was able to maintain himself adequately for his simple needs. Because his family can be traced back to seventeenth century England, some hostile Irish critics imply that he is necessarily un-Irish in his writings. But most historians and critics agree that Ireland has had a wonderful ability to
incorporate other nationalities, especially, surprisingly enough, colonists from England, so that after a few generations they are as Irish as the native Gael. And "if Irish means anti-English then Synge was intensely Irish, for he always loathed, or at least ignored England and the English in general."

On another score Synge might more easily be put in an alien camp. He was a Protestant, and "creed marked the line of cleavage in everything that made for national sentiment. This is the fundamental fact which must be grasped if the root cause of many of the subsequent troubles is to be understood." The worst indictment that Ireland made against the Act of Union was that England had not proved faithful to her bargain with the Catholics, and it was too late in 1829 to placate them with the long-awaited Act of Emancipation. Henry VIII started the religious

feud in Ireland, a feud that developed and grew into a terrible bitterness since the landowners were the Protestants and the impoverished farmers the Catholics. The latter, forced to support an alien church and united by their common faith, regarded the Protestants as hostile to their national cause. It is quite true that "the Catholic agitation widened the gulf between the religions in Ireland itself, where the rival ideals of Nationalism and Unionism became more and more identified with those of the rival creeds." 6

Although Synge was raised according to a strict form of Protestantism, (his grandfather was a clergyman, as were several of his ancestors) in manhood he was not known to profess any religion. Some would even go too far and make him an atheist. But in none of his non-dramatic writings does he scoff at Catholicism—either in his poems, or in his travel record, The Aran Islands, in which he speaks of the peasants' attendance at mass, the hardships endured by the

6 Ibid., p. 28.
priest who travels the islands, and the unwavering devotion of his people. It is quite probable that subconsciously he carried over from his boyhood something of the scornful and jesting attitude of many non-Catholics of the day—and that in spite of the fact that the Protestantism he had been reared in was of the tolerant variety. Yet, on the other hand, he had many associations with Catholicism, especially in his intimate contacts with the Abbey Players and playwrights, such as Edward Martyn, that would more than compensate for any Protestant upbringing.

Young John Synge was not the average boy of his day. He was educated, not in the public schools but as most boys of his class, in the Dublin private schools. At fourteen, forced to leave school because of poor health, he was tutored until he was ready to enter college. This is the first instance we have that illness interfered with the regular routine of life, and unfortunately, from this time until his early death in 1909, there were to be many such occurrences.
Perhaps it was his delicate health rather than an extreme shyness that made John seem unboyish and shun games and companions. By nature he was quiet and detached, but his fraility drew him farther away from the usual run of boyhood activities.

Despite this handicap he was an outdoor lad, and even joined the Dublin Naturalists' Field Club. In summer he put his club work into practice as he cycled and tramped among the glens near Annamoe in Wicklow. His remembrance of this boyish delight finds expression in "The Prelude:"

Still south I went and west
and south again,
Through Wicklow from the morning till the night,
And far from cities, and the sights of men,
Lived with the sunshine and the moon's delight.

I knew the stars, the flowers,
and the birds,
The grey and wintry sides of many glens,
And did but half remember human words,
In converse with the mountains,
moors, and fens.

It was on these holidays, on his long hikes into the lonesome hills and glens that he had opportu-
nity to meet the odd types of people that appear in several of his plays. "That such an environment and such an ardent love of scenery profoundly influenced his subsequent work, is, we shall see, beyond doubt."

At Trinity College where he received his B. A. Degree in 1892, Synge was able to indulge his interest in music. As a boy he had learned to play the flute, and later in his travels on the Aran Islands he amused the people by playing the penny whistle. His studies at college strengthened his talent and love for music with an excellent knowledge of its theory, and he became so proficient in his favorite instruments, the piano and violin, that he seriously considered making music his profession. It is difficult to over-estimate the importance of this musical background in Synge's later plays. Without a doubt, it was this musical gift, as we shall see in a later chapter, that made his prose so startlingly different and melodic, and his training in composition and harmony

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helped him to acquire a power and discipline in his writing.

Synge was never considered a "conversationalist." Perhaps it was partly because he might have suffered from inhibitions about his voice: "as regards Synge's speaking knowledge of languages, he always was seriously handicapped, even in the use of the mother-tongue, by his guttural and somewhat jerky utterance." But this was more than compensated for by his natural skill in languages. From his childhood Synge spoke the native Irish tongue (another sign that his Irish culture was not later super-imposed, but a development of the foundation laid in a truly Irish home) which later was to be of great assistance in his journeys among the Irish peasantry by whom he was respected and treated familiarly as one whose language was their own. Equipped with the Gaelic, at Trinity College it is likely that the young Synge became acquainted with the older Celtic literature, with the poetry to which he too

8 Ibid., p. 12.
turned for inspiration.

During these undergraduate years Synge acquired several continental languages, French and German especially, which helped to open to him another door to world literature. It was not long before he made practical use of these courses during his trip to the continent. Along with the prize he received for his competence in Irish in 1892 he was given another in Hebrew. It is not difficult then to see how his outlook became so broad and his work so virile and grand with this wealth of knowledge at his command.

Finding nothing at home to stimulate his talents, impelled by his musical interests to study in the lands of the masters of that art, and no doubt consumed with the spirit of wanderlust that was deep in his being, Synge left for the continent. Maurice Bourgeois implies another, more personal reason, for Synge's departure: "Before leaving Ireland Synge had an unfortunate and mysterious love-affair, which it appears, somewhat
darkened his outlook on life." Other writers do not mention this, but even though the statement is unelaborated and lacks confirmation, one must remember that Bourgeois talked with Synge's intimate friends and read many of Synge's unpublished letters. Confidences may have refrained him from telling more. In "Under Ether" Synge himself may be referring to this hidden feature of his life: "I felt I was talking of a lady I had known years before, and sudden terror seized me that I should spread forth all the secrets of my life. I could not be silent. The name was on my lips. With wild horror I screamed: 'Oh, no, I won't!'"

Doubtless this incident in his life left its mark on the heart of the man who later appears in his plays to be a little skeptical of love.

For some time he lived with the German peasants in the villages on the banks of the Rhine, listening to the old folk tales that he must have later compared with those he heard in Aran, and probably be-

9 Ibid., p. 13.
coming acquainted with the German Little Theater in the peasant drama of Hauptmann. When he decided not to pursue a career in music because he felt his talents were not great enough, Synge expressed a quality that was ever-present in his life and work—a craving for perfection in whatever he attempted.

When Synge settled in Paris it was not, as many of his enemies would have us believe, as a bohemian. While it is generally agreed that Synge was no prude, there is no evidence to show that he shared the freakish and shallow life of the pseudo-artists of the day. His circle of friends in the Irish colony was small but included men of letters such as George Moore and avid nationalists who came to France to prepare their program. Stimulating conversation, exchange of ideas among a group united by their common interest in Ireland were no doubt to effect the mind of J. M. Synge.

Synge was not directly influenced by the French authors for he did not know them personally, or include them in his artist colony group, but only
indirectly through books. That he was actively interested in French literature can be seen in his desire to translate Racine and others for English readers. His sympathies in French literature were mainly with the classics, especially Corneille, Molière and Racine. He had even decided on a work of criticism on Racine, but it is easy to agree with Ernest Boyd who says: "a man so careless and indifferent to ideas as Synge could not have made near the success he had as a dramatist." But without doubt the fine precision and dramatic economy of Synge's plays were aided by the seventeenth century French writers whose works are noted for their classical restraint.

Although Mr. Yeats claims that Synge was ignorant of the modern writers, being content to peruse the masters, there is evidence to the contrary. Between 1898-9 he reviewed the works of Anatole le Broz and Maeterlinck, popular figures of the day. He tells that he found Baudelaire

Ireland's Literary Renaissance, p. 318.
morbid, and in the preface to the *Playboy of the Western World* he mentions Mallarmé. He knew these men, but his affections were with old French literature and such poets as Muset, Marat, and Villon, who appealed to his spirit of adventure.

Hostile critics would place Synge in the "realistic" school with Balzac and Maupassant, because they feel he shared their use of the ugly as material for reality. But, as will be shown in a later chapter, Synge did not seek out moral freaks for their own sake, but only as they furnished dramatic material. It is quite true, however, that Synge's reading on the continent might have made him more sensitive to this material when it came his way.

To M. Pierre Loti a more definite debt may be traced. Synge thought him the greatest contemporary prose writer and often expressed the wish that he would like to do for the West of Ireland peasantry what M. Loti had done for the Breton fisherfolk. In 1903 when Synge was rewriting his Aran manuscript, John Masefield paid
him a visit, recording later: "I remember...the table had a pile of type-written drafts upon it, as well as a few books by M. Pierre Loti...There are marks of M. Loti's influence in the Aran book. Much of the Aran manuscript was on the table at that time." In addition, a few months later, Synge reviewed for the Speaker Loti's L'Inde sans les Anglais.

Another figure whom Synge admired was Anatole France whose subtlety and stylistic ease attracted him. It is true he found in the Frenchman that scepticism to be later seen in his plays, but fortunately Synge's sense of humor and zest for life prevented his pessimism from becoming bitter and biting.

It was fortunate indeed for literature that Yeats met Synge in Paris in 1898. The former was at his peak and in the midst of his revolt against the symbolism and decadence of the day, preferring now a truer and simpler expression of life. He found his fellow countryman delving rather hap-

hazardly and with little success, into French literature and criticism. But, more important, he saw also that there were talents lying dormant in Synge. He urged him to leave Paris and Racine and criticism to go to the Aran Islands where he could live with the people and express their life in art. "Many young Irish writers have profited by Yeats' clear-sighted and uncompromising criticism; but none more so than John Synge." 

While Yeats played a major role in helping Synge to find himself in literature, he did not influence his style of writing. For Synge did not care for the "spirituality" of the Yeatsian school which was more lyrical than dramatic in its conceptions. But for this reason Yeats should be given even more credit for his encouragement, and especially for his stand with Synge when the Playboy caused mob riots. One cannot say what Synge would have accomplished without Yeats' advice, whether or not he would have gone later to the Aran Islands on his own. But no one can deny

that Yeats turned him into the right path at the opportune time, when Synge had gathered enough from the continent: and that he was responsible, as a leader in the theatre, for much of Synge's success.

Through Yeats, Synge then became intimately associated with the Little Theatre movement of the later nineteenth century. In Norway, Ibsen and his friend Bjørnson had startled the world, first with their peasant plays, and then with their "drama of ideas;" and by creating this new type, began a new movement in the history of the drama. France and the United States were not greatly influenced by the Norwegian school, but England and Germany adhered closely to it. In Ireland it was not the propaganda play, but the idea of a theatre, more local and personal, that quickly took root and developed into several active Little Theatre groups.

The flowering of Ireland's literary life that later came to be known as the Celtic Renaissance was partly an outgrowth of the spirit of nationalism that dominated the Ireland of the nineteenth century. The Irish, whose history was filled with
so much unforgettable sorrow and so little joy, awakened with a desire to develop a life and culture distinct from that which England possessed and had attempted to force upon the Irish. In all forms of literature, but especially in poetry and drama, writers have explored Ireland's wealth of legend, searched her history and expressed Irish life and ideals with newly opened eyes, in an effort to break away from the traditional Irish characters displayed in fiction and on the stage for so many years.

In striving for this independent culture the Irish determined to reinstate Gaelic, the national language which had been practically snuffed out under an oppressive rule that banished the native tongue from public use. It had been kept alive, however, from generation to generation by people like Synge's parents who made the speaking of Gaelic a nursery habit. But the dying embers were kindled anew when Dr. Douglas Hyde in 1892, with no political end in view, founded the Gaelic League.
This society with its avowed purpose, the restoration of the Gaelic language into common usage, soon spread over the island. Not only was this aim quite successful but as Lady Gregory writes of Hyde:

In founding the Gaelic League, he had done far more than that for our work. It was a movement for keeping the Irish language a spoken one, with as a chief end, the preserving of our own nationality. That does not sound like the beginning of a revolution, yet it was one. It was the discovery, the disclosure of the folk-learning, the folk-poetry, the folk-tradition. Our Theatre was caught into that current, and it is that current, as I believe, that has brought it on its triumphant way.14

In 1889 a theatre group organized as the Irish Literary Theater to perform in the Spring season Celtic plays which would build up a repertory of dramatic literature. Yeats was the leader of the society which had to undergo many hardships in raising funds, in combating indifferent and even

14 Lady Gregory, Our Irish Theatre, p. 76.
hostile criticism, and in securing a theater and actors to present the plays. But later some of the company, including Yeats and Lady Gregory, withdrew to establish the Irish National Theater Society with more definite aims in view.

We had up to this time, as I have said, played only once a year, and had engaged actors from London, some of them Irish certainly, but all London-trained. The time had come to play oftener and to train actors of our own. For Mr. Yeats had never ceased attacking the methods of the ordinary theatre, in gesture in staging, and in the speaking of verse.\textsuperscript{15}

Through Miss Horniman the Abbey Theater was made the home of the Society and later purchased; a company of Irish actors headed by the genius of the Fay brothers was secured; and despite many difficulties Irish national drama began to flourish. It would be difficult to overestimate the importance of the relationship between such a school and the Irish playwrights of the time.

\textit{It is the existence of the Theatre that has created}\n
\textsuperscript{15} \textit{Ibid.}, p. 29.
play-writing among us. Mr. Boyle had written stories, and only turned to plays when he had seen our performances in London. Mr. Colum claimed to have turned to drama for our sake, and Mr. Fitzmaurice, Mr. Ray, and Mr. Murray—a National schoolmaster—would certainly not have written but for that chance of having their work acted.16

Since Synge became associated with the National Theater Society before he began his dramatic work there is no way of comparing any previous plays with the ones he wrote for the Abbey stage. But certain it is that Synge, one of the directors of the Society, was influenced, as we shall examine in more detail in later chapters, by the high artistic aims and ideals of the organization. His reputation has added not a little to that of the Theater, but it in turn gave Synge the benefit of the experimental stages of its youth and opportunity to produce something unique in drama.

Many critics have doubted that Yeats' poetry would have attained a place on the stage if it had

16 Ibid., p. 98.
not been for one of the Fay brothers' singular talent for speaking verse. Synge too profited on this score and from the industry and artistry of the company of Irish amateurs who labored so diligently. There can be no doubt that one of them especially influenced Synge and his work. This was Maire O'Neill, the girl whom Synge was engaged to marry. She was the leading lady in his plays, the inspiration for his Deirdre, the note of joy in a life that was hurried by disease to an early end in a Dublin hospital in 1909. Not much is known of their relationship, but their daily companionship and association in a mutual endeavor must have greatly compensated for the darker qualities of Synge's brooding nature. That she gave him her love is testified by Mr. Yeats who describes her grief during Synge's last illness and death.

When Yeats counseled Synge to leave Paris in 1898, his advice was followed immediately. After a few visits to the Aran Islands Synge returned to France to sell his bed, because he had found what
he had been seeking. On these islands and in the glens of Wicklow and Kerry he discovered an Irish life that had not been expressed in literature. In a letter to Lady Gregory he says: "'The day after tomorrow I move on, bag and baggage to the Great Blasket Island. It is probably even more primitive than Aran, and I am wild with joy at the prospect.'" This was his attitude throughout his life with these peoples. He was close to them, but never became one of them, and so with the sure instinct of the dramatist, was able to study them objectively. From the stories he heard came the germs of his plays, from the people came his characters, and from their speech came a dialogue that was the wonder of the literary world.

17 Ibid., p. 135.
CHAPTER II

THEMES

In a study and analysis of a dramatist's conception of his artistic medium perhaps the most logical order of approach is to begin with the themes, the plots, the ideas, that are found in his plays, for there can be no drama without action—be the action external or animated by an inner conflict in the minds of the characters. Synge, as expressed by himself in three Prefaces, and as portrayed in his plays, evolved a concept of the drama that spanned two poles, the real and the imaginative. All six of his plays, in varying amounts, are rich in these two elements. It is hoped that it will be seen from a study of the themes of the plays how this concept grew out of Synge's own personality and genius, how it was modified and enlarged by his experiences on the Continent and contact with the Irish Dramatic Revival, and how it blossomed from his intimate observations of the lives of the Irish peasantry.
In the previous chapter it was noted that Synge was not interested in the contemporary drama of the day. The Norwegian drama that startled the world some years earlier with its terse reality, but more especially with its moralizing pleas for domestic freedom and social reform, had for Synge no place in the world of art. "Analysts with their problems, and teachers with their systems, are soon as old-fashioned as the pharmacopoeia of Galen,--look at Ibsen and the Germans." Some critics would find a kinship between A Doll's House and In The Shadow of the Glen. Both certainly present a realistic picture from life, but where Ibsen expounds his idea and belief, Synge is content with dramatizing what he found interesting and compelling in life. He too, like Ibsen, rejected the Hugojesque Romantics because of their disregard for reality; but in spurning the unreal he could not concern himself "with the drugs of many seedy problems." 

19 Ibid.
Maurice Bourgeois would relate Synge to Balzac and the writers of the Realistic School, but the tie is not very strong. Other than their common distaste for the sentimental it would be difficult to correlate the writings of the authors of *Eugénie Grandet* and *The Playboy of the Western World*. On another side some Irish critics who picture Synge as an ogre who delights in the perverted, the hidden, the queer, in an attempt to vitiate Synge's view of Irish life, claim that Synge's plays are filled with the spirit of Zola and Huysmans. But while Synge admired their concreteness, their zest, their pungency, he professed an animosity for the type of literature they represented:

There is another art... founded on the freak of nature, in itself a mere sign of atavism or disease. This latter art, which is occupied with the antics of the freak, is of interest only to the variation from the ordinary minds, and for this reason is never universal. 20

To be sure, at a first glance the story of a boy who killed his father and won lavish praise for the deed seems to deal with the oddities of life, but the whole spirit of the *Playboy* is far removed from Zola. This is more clearly understood when one studies the play in relation to the Celtic temperament and when one sees the fiery imagination that is brought to bear upon "reality."

As was mentioned earlier in this paper Synge was an avowed disciple of the classics: "the best plays of Ben Jonson and Molière can no more go out of fashion than the blackberries on the hedges." For him, Racine was an ideal. Although he did not write the critical work on Racine as he had planned before he met Mr. Yeats, his years of study in Seventeenth century French drama certainly were in some measure responsible for the well-nigh flawless technique by which he was able to heighten the effects of his tragedies and comedies by interrelating all the incidents of the

plot. The deftness with which he prepares for the impending doom that is soon to overwhelm Maurya in Riders to the Sea is seen in the masterful little touches--the turf for the fire, Michael's clothes, the new white boards, the forgotten cake--which aid the movement of the play but which are also symbols of the cruel fate that approaches mercilessly and irrevocably.

However attached Synge was to the classical writers, in spirit he was close to such light-hearted poets as the medieval Villon, who according to Synge, along with Herrick and Burns, "used the whole of their personal life as their material, and the verse written in this way was read by strong men, and thieves, and deacons, not by little cliques only." Synge was not indebted to these writers for any of his ideas or sources for his plays, but it is very possible that their rollicking adventurous vitality, while not by any means directly responsible, might at

least have augmented Synge's natural inclinations in the boisterous comedy of *The Tinker's Wedding* and in the pungent humor of *The Well of the Saints*.

Although it is now quite well agreed that Synge's sources and ideas for his plays were for the most part obtained from his experiences in Ireland, there is some evidence in the plays that Synge utilized his reading of foreign drama for parts of his plots. It was mentioned earlier that *Riders to the Sea* shows unmistakable signs of the influence of Loti's novel, *Pecheur d'Islande*. Both are charged with the heavy atmosphere of doom, both deal with the vain struggles of a primitive people against the sea, both present an aged woman bereft of her sons.

Indeed this is the sole instance in which it may be asserted with absolute certainty that Synge was beholden to some one else, if not for the actual subject of a play, at least for the external incentive or stimulus that fostered and vitalized his own original Irish theme, and ultimately inclined him to its selection and treatment.23

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The Dutch play, *The Good Hope*, while analogous to Synge's in its theme of the dangers and hardships of living by the sea, can be dismissed as having no other similarity to Synge's one-act drama.

Dublin critics were quick to seek out foreign models for *In The Shadow of the Glen*, but the fruits of their search only point to a community treasury of folklore among nations. Synge's play does retell the old Widow of Ephesus tale, but that does not discount its Irishness, for it has been retold in French and Oriental literature. Synge even changed the general spirit of comedy to one of tragedy, and above all, we can accept his own word that his drama essentially differs from any version of the story of the Widow of Ephesus with which he was acquainted.

Four years before the production of *The Well of the Saints* M. George Clemenceau had a play, *Le Voile du Bonheur*, which Synge may easily have seen. It too contains the idea of a second blindness, but the spirit of the second blindness is differ-
ent, for while Tchang in the little Chinese play merely resigns himself to being deceived by his wife, Synge enhances the whole theme when the Douls build new illusions that will bring them happiness once more. There is however another Continental source that must be accepted, for Padriac Colum says that Synge once talked to him about a medieval French farce which suggested the plot of *The Well of the Saints*. In the farce two beggars chance upon the relics of a saint, and are cured of their blindness. They are not delighted, as might be expected, for the cure leads to the loss of their livelihood. But to these sources Synge owes only the root-ideas, for they are not responsible for the spirit of the play.

Yeats who is given credit for sending Synge from Paris to the Aran Islands was, along with Lady Gregory, closely associated with Synge in the management of the newly formed Irish Theatre. Although Synge was an individualist and was not influenced by Yeats' own style or ideas on art--indeed he was quite opposed to the symbolism of
the Yeatsian school—he was directly or indirectly
touched by the ideals and activities of the group
and its leaders. Synge became a member of the
group because he shared their ideal of a theatre
devoted to art, Irish art especially, instead of
the interests of any partisan group. Yeats' "Ad-
vice to Playwrights Who are Sending Plays to the
Abbey, Dublin" illustrates how much Synge and his
plays were in accord with the policy of the Thea-
tre:

We do not desire propagandist plays, nor plays
written mainly to serve
some obvious moral pur-
pose; for art seldom con-
cerns itself with those
interests or opinions that
can be defended by argu-
ment, but with realities
of emotions and character
that become self-evident
when made vivid to the
imagination.24

Here was a group, a theatre, that professed his
doctrine of "Art for Art's sake;" here was a
friend in the person of the leader of the Abbey,
Mr. Yeats, who by his uncanny perception of genius

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in others, urged Synge to find an outlet for his talents in the lives of the Aran Islanders.

Although Synge's plays progress from the one-act to the two-act to the three-act form, it cannot be inferred that his plays show a corresponding growth in dramatic power. Many contend that *Riders to the Sea*, his second play, is his masterpiece. It will be seen later that the plots in Synge's plays were to a great extent governed by the tales he heard in Ireland, but it is quite possible that Synge's dramas reflect the engaging simplicity that was the keynote of the new Irish drama. Having no pretentious aims, the new dramatists were often content with the one-act form for some simple plot instead of stretching their idea over three long boring acts. While there is no way of knowing if Synge was following the lead of Lady Gregory or Yeats in writing one-act plays, at any rate it can be said that as a director of the Abbey he knew that his short plays would have a hearing as curtain raisers—a fact of some importance since Synge was by no means a closet
dramatist, but one actively interested in producing his plays.

Being a member of the inner circle Synge was in close contact with the common themes used by the other dramatists. Mr. Bourgeois quite rightly believes that Synge's natural pessimism was reinforced in *The Playboy* by the spirit of the Revival, which while national in outlook, was not complacently admiring the national qualities, but rather completely analyzing the national defects. Synge was not alone—Yeats himself was taken to task for his "unfavorable attitude."

Nor was he unique in retelling the Deirdre legend. Nearly every Abbey dramatist tried his hand at it. Synge was no doubt aware of the most popular manuscript and literary versions, such as Hull's *The Cuchullin Saga in Irish Literature*, Lady Gregory's *Cuchulain of Muirthemne*, and of course Dr. Hyde's *Three Sorrows of Story-Telling* and his *Literary History of Ireland*. Yeats suggested the Deirdre legend to Synge, but their
versions are very different. Yeats like George Russell gave his a mystical tone. Synge may have conceived the mechanical structure of his play from Russell's since they are alike in having the first act at Deirdre's cottage, the second in Alban, and the third at Emain Macha. Apart from this, Synge's *Deirdre* is in a class by itself.

Since the Abbey Theatre was only in its infancy it was necessary to stretch the finances as far as possible, and so there was as little scene shifting as possible. The *Playboy* had to be changed. Synge had first set the opening scene in the ploughed field, where the quarrel between Christy and his father took place. "But when he thought of the actual stage, he could not see any possible side wing for that 'wide, windy corner of high distant hills.'" He had also planned the scene of the return of the father at the church door where Christy was to wed Pegeen. However, all took place in Michael James' shebeen.

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It is difficult to estimate the aid Synge received from the other members of the triumvirate, Lady Gregory and Yeats, in constructing his plays. Synge was an individualist, but on the other hand he respected their criticism and often waited for their opinion before continuing with a play. He wrote to Lady Gregory: "'May I read The Playboy to you and Yeats and Fay...one or two structural points may need--I fancy do need--revision, but I would like to have your opinions on it before I go any further.'" He knew that those who had endured the fiery protest at In the Shadow of the Glen would give his art full hearing. To these friends too must go the credit for giving the world his Deirdre, unfinished though it was. After Synge died they took great pains to bring the versions together, and produced it early in the following year. But unfortunately it needed the master's touch.

Synge then found security and inspiration as a writer and director of the Abbey Theatre, but

26 Ibid., p. 132.
there were other dramatists who shared the same environment who did not blossom into fame. The difference lies, of course, in the "priceless ingredient," the native genius in a writer, his personality and character. Other playwrights penned dramas of Irish peasant life, but Synge's are very different from all of them. Despite his dramatic objectivity Synge's plays are an expression of himself. He once told Padriac Colum that all his work was subjective, that it expressed moods in his own life. "Riders to the Sea had come out of the feeling that old age was coming upon him--he was not forty at the time--and that death was making approach." In The Tinker's Wedding, which even the Abbey did not perform, we find his typically non-religious attitude. He is not scoffing at the priesthood, but the humor, as he says in the Preface to The Tinker's Wedding, which he deems necessary to imagination, here is so sardonic that it nearly escapes comedy to become true tragedy. The rowdy finale with the

\[\text{27 Road Round Ireland, p. 365.}\]
tinkers tying the priest up in a sack and releasing him only upon his oath that he will not inform against them, keeps the play near farce.

In *The Well of the Saints*, this humor is more sternly ironic, and illustrates Synge's predominate pessimistic view of life. But the wonderful third act in which the Douls imagine themselves "in a short while," changes the harshness to a gentle humor, full of beauty. Here we see that behind the grimness and mockery, Synge's mind was not basically cruel in its laughter; that beneath his zest for the pungent was a quiet delicacy; that through his melancholy there came at times a vision of better things to come--just as the tramp of *In the Shadow of the Glen* tells Nora of the "larks and the big thrushes when the days are warm" that will follow the cold nights on the road.

Throughout his few years of writing Synge was continually hampered by his poor health. All his life he had been frail, but in these years he saw the end approaching. Perhaps if he had not
been under the shadow of death he would not have portrayed the violent and the crude with so much zest. He always loved melodramas and went to see them. Possible effects of this can be seen in *The Playboy's* third act where the villagers delight in Pegeen Mike's burning Christy with the lighted turf. Even his technical powers may have been influenced by the melodrama. His situations are sometimes improbable. Would Christy be shielded and honored for his confessed patricide even before his imagination had developed it into a "gallous tale?" Was it not faulty right at the crisis of *Deirdre of the Sorrows* when the audience knows Deirdre will die by her own hand, to have Deirdre for a painfully long time mourn over Naisi's body so that Fergus and Conchubor may see her death?

It is by no means fair however to judge *Deirdre* as a finished piece of work. Into this richly autobiographical play, Synge, himself doomed to die in the Dublin hospital where he lay composing, put all the splendor and tragedy of his own love.
Encouraged by his betrothed who enacted his play scene by scene as he wrote, Synge managed to complete three acts before he died, but he was conscious that the structure was unwieldy and had been considering cutting it down to two long acts. This play did not have the advantage of the dramatist's studious work habits. "He was the only writer I have ever known who composed direct upon a type-writing machine...He worked rather slowly and very carefully, sitting very upright. He composed slowly. He wrote and rewrote his plays many times." Is it any wonder that a man of his genius, using such painstaking methods, would produce such compact, dramatically sound dramas as Riders to the Sea and The Playboy of the Western World?

Writing to Lady Gregory in February of 1906, Synge says:

I am pleased with the way my play is going, but I find it quite impossible to rush through with it now, so I rather think I shall take it and the type-

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He was not only a careful craftsman; he knew the importance of keeping his imagination fired with his idea before his mind grew stale. It was only the recurring illness, his conscious working against time, that interfered. In November, 1906, he tells his friend again that he had a worse attack, that one of his lungs had been affected and that he would have to be careful for a while.

"Would it be possible to put off The Playboy for a couple of weeks? I am afraid if I went to work at him again now, and then rehearsed all December, I would be very likely to knock up badly before I was done with him." Is it not very likely that this constant strain was largely responsible for the relatively minor defects in the structure of his plays?

Although Synge was indebted to the continent for a few ideas for his plays, and although his dramas are truly an expression of his own strange brooding personality, it was in Ireland that he found his real themes. Taking Yeats' happy advice Synge made several lengthy visits to the Aran Islands and roamed through such widely different districts as Wicklow, Kerry, and Connemara. His life with the people, his observations of their primitive culture, the legends and folk-tales they told him are beautifully preserved in his travel narratives. From these excursions into rural Ireland came the germs of his plays, and fortunately the diary sketches have preserved them, so the student of his plays may compare the bare original with the finished product.

Synge showed true dramatic instinct when for his first two plays he chose the one-act form. Although the story of In the Shadow of the Glen has been termed a common Irish hearth tale, Synge heard it from Pat Dirane on his first visit

\[31\] Ibid., p. 110.
to Inishmann. A traveller (Pat Dirane in the story) comes to a lonely cottage where an old man, by way of catching his unfaithful wife, pretends to be dead. The wife leaves and comes back with a young man who shortly retires. The wife goes for his candle and remains, so the husband, who has previously revealed himself to the stranger, arises, finds the couple together, and kills the young man with a stick. Synge follows the tale closely, but with great art he changes the stranger who merely observes the action in the original, into the tramp who is important to the play. For the fabliau-like ending he substitutes one rich in drama that combines the imaginative and the real, with Nora going out into the world with the tramp, and Dan Burke and Michael joining in a drink at the table.

As there is hardly any development of plot, interest is in the situation. It is the spirit of the play, the spirit of utter loneliness and dejection, that moves the spectator. This spirit is indeed native to Synge, but he met it too in
his Wicklow travels. In "The Oppression of the Hills" we find the tramp's story of poor Patch Darcy, and an account of the influence of a special locality. "These people live for the most part beside old roads and pathways where hardly one man passed in the day, and look out all the year on unbroken barriers of heath." In the fogs of Glencree he experienced the thoughts and emotions of his characters. "When I sit down for a moment the sense of loneliness has no equal. I can hear nothing but the slow running of water and the grouse crowing and chuckling underneath the band of cloud...and the silence is so great and queer." There does not seem to be a catastrophe, but a denouement of soft, brooding music in which Nora escapes the cold reality that faces her. Here Synge brings into play his appreciation of the power of atmosphere in conveying his theme of loneliness as viewed in the loveless

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32 In Wicklow, p. 11.
33 Ibid., p. 49-50.
marriages of the Irish country folk.

Synge's next play, Riders to the Sea, which was completed in 1902 or 1903 is clearly a result, despite the foreign source mentioned earlier, of his life on windswept rock-bound Inishmann, where an angry sea exacts a terrible toll from the people who are bound to it for a meagre existence. Although there is no "central" source for the play in the journals, many ideas for it are recorded there. Maurya's vision of Michael was related to Synge: "When the horses were coming down to the slip an old woman saw her son, that was drowned a while ago, riding on one of them." While Synge was on the island a man had been washed ashore in Donegal, and for three days the people were trying to identify him. In the play Nora and Cathleen speak in hushed tones over a "shirt and a plain stocking were got off a drowned man in Donegal." But more than these incidents, the very essence of the play, the tragic gloom in lives doomed by an inevitable fate, Synge found

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while living with the Aran Islanders.

I could not help feeling that I was talking with men who were under a judgment of death. I knew that every one of them would be drowned in the sea in a few years and battered naked on the rocks, or would die in a few years in his own cottage and be buried with another fearful scene in the graveyard I had come from. 35

Although *Riders to the Sea* may well be titled Synge's masterpiece, critics have erred in ranking it with Shakespeare's tragedies. In the first place it is not tragedy in the sense of a protagonist who determines his destiny by an act of the will as in *King Lear*, but rather it resembles the Greek tragedy in which a resistless fate, here identified with nature in the person of the sea, carries the characters to their doom. We see no conflict, only the reaction of Maurya to her misfortune. But if in conceiving tragedy according to the philosophy of nature,

Synge missed the tragedy determined by a flaw in character, he certainly found it in reality. And might not the tragedy of one confronting Nature's blows be as dramatically sound as one defeated by a tragic fault?

Again, the action instead of progressing to a crisis, merely rearranges a situation. There is no suspense; one knows almost at the start that the ominous white boards will serve for Bartley instead of the lost Michael. And if the audience consider as they listen, they realize that the events related on the stage are not given time to occur off stage. But despite these acknowledged faults the little play mesmerizes an audience in its intensity, so that while Maurya's disclosure of her strange vision is foreseen, yet it comes as a wonderfully dramatic shock.

It is believed that The Tinker's Wedding, a two-act play, was the first he ever conceived. At any rate it was written early, and since Synge later rewrote it, it may be conjectured that originally it was a one-act play. That it should have
remained. The slight tale recounted in "At a Wicklow Fair," of the tinkers who bargained with a priest to marry them for half a sovereign and a tin gallon can, is not complex enough for a long play. But Synge again displays his skill and ingenuity when he changes the excuse for the lack of the can. In the tale an ass is supposed to have kicked it out of shape, while in the play Mary Byrne takes it to buy her "pint." Synge also conceived the broadly farcical finale. While the play, in its rollicking sardonic humor, is certainly not an invective against the Irish priesthood, it cannot be classed, in emotion or technique, with the moving one-act dramas that preceded it in production.

Synge's second change of genre from the two-act to the three-act form was more fortunate. George Moore said that it was only with the Well of the Saints that he felt "that a man of genius had been born unto Ireland." Although a source for the play cannot be found in the journals there

are many suggestions. Synge, while with Mórteen in Aran, visited a holy well that was famous for cures of blindness; in Wicklow he heard of the old man who cursed because his hair, the pride and dignity of his age, had been cut off, and probably this anecdote was responsible for Martin Doul's happiness at the prospect of having a long beard; and the thought of Timmy the Smith plucking live geese came from Aran where he saw women on their knees engaged in this lively occupation. Wicklow, as it did for *In the Shadow of the Glen* and *The Tinker's Wedding* supplied the landscape for this play, a landscape that is alive in its sensuous reality. "I'm smelling the furze a while back sprouting on the hill, and if you'd hold your tongue you'd hear the lambs of Grianan, though it's near drowned their crying is with the full river making noises in the glen."

The *Well of the Saints*, like the plays that were written earlier, treats one idea with little action. In it Synge well expresses his belief that drama should portray the world of reality
and the world of the imagination. The play might be called a tragic-comedy, for although it is rich in ironical humor, there is tragedy in the incapacity of the two blind people to realize their dream. In this play as in Riders to the Sea the audience is aware of the outcome, but far from detracting from the interest, all the more poignant becomes the scene in which Martin tries to find Mary amongst the village girls, all the more awful the mutual horror at their first sight of each other and the ridicule of the crowd, all the more pitiful their quarrel in disillusionment.

Most of the Irish condemned The Playboy of the Western World as a libel on the Irish name. Nothing like that could happen in Ireland was their cry. Yet Synge records in his journals a parallel case told him in Aran.

He often tells me about a Connaught man who killed his father with the blow of a spade when he was in passion, and then fled to this island and threw himself on the mercy of some of the natives...In spite of a reward which was of-
ferred, the island was incorruptible.37

This instinctive desire to protect the criminal, as Synge goes on to say, abounds in the West. He said that the story "in its essence" was probable, that if he had conceived the idea himself, he would not have hesitated to put it in a play. He was not generalizing from a single case; from his life with the people he knew his plot was possible in certain circumstances.

In a sudden burst of anger at the reporter who harried him on The Playboy's first night Synge called his play an extravaganza. But later in the week, in a more sober moment, he corrected this impression in a letter to the Irish Times writing: "although parts of it are, or are meant to be, extravagant comedy, still a great deal that is in it and a great deal more that is behind it is perfectly serious when looked at in a certain light...There are...several sides to the Playboy."38 In his pref-

ace to the play Synge calls for both reality and joy in the drama, and in this drama there is a wonderful if strange combination of these elements. In dramatizing the rise to self-esteem of a shy young lad through the glory that is given him for his supposed crime Synge shows his keen analysis of the Celtic temperament which in its flights of imagination confuses the fancied with the real. With this in mind, the objection that the play is immoral because it favorably depicts patricide, becomes ridiculous. The Mayo villagers have merely lost sight of their ethical ideals until the third act in which Christy, seeing his dream world dissolving about him, jolts them back to reality in his attempt to kill his father before their eyes. Quite understandable, however, is the anger of sensitive Irish nationalists of the day, for in the somewhat cynical portrayal of the Irish character, they saw a threat to their political ambitions and an insult to their intellectual powers.

But the element of joy is just as strong.
Sometimes it is a little violent as when Christy Mahon carried away by his imagination refers to the "drift of chosen females from the Eastern World." But most of the time the humor is healthy and sane, revealing itself in some of literature's well-remembered scenes: Michael James bestowing his blessing on Christy and Pegeen, the Playboy wooing Pegeen, and Christy giving an account of his deed.

In this play for the first time Synge presents a plot that moves progressively, each scene proceeding from the previous one in harmonious blending. But in the effort to keep the play moving Synge made a few mistakes. Sometimes the action is clumsy—the Widow Quin soliloquizing for a weak curtain scene for the second act; sometimes the action is not quite believable—the Playboy ready for the strain of the races in the last act when only the night before he was presented in the first act as worn and dirty from his sleepless days and nights on the road. These flaws however are greatly compensated for by the deft
manner in which the playwright keeps Old Mahon lurking in the second and third acts as a preparation for his final entrance. Happily this device bridges some of the awkward gaps in the movement.

We need not look in the journals for Synge's last play, *Deirdre of the Sorrows*. In this he deviated from type. Perhaps he felt he had exhausted his dramatic expression of Irish peasant life, and had even considered a play on Dublin slum life but had not developed a plot. But although Synge dramatized the legend of the queenly Deirdre in spirit he remained close to his peasant drama. Indeed the noble Deirdre and the sons of Usna are, despite all appearances, strangely akin to the two blind beggars and the lonesome woman of the glen, for Synge was not interested in the rural life as of his own time, but only as it was a survival of the life of the old-time, pre-Christian Gael. When this aspect of Synge's art is understood it is not difficult to see how he so completely neglected one phase of Irish life—the
religious. He was not anti-religious; it was just that for him, even though Catholicity was deep in the hearts of the people he observed, there was more zest, more scope for his brooding, for his sardonic humor, in his view of the ancient Celtic life that was dominated by fate, nature and illusory dreams.

It can be said that while Synge was no doubt indebted to the continent for a few of his sources and for assistance in dramatic craftsmanship; that while Yeats and the new native theatre encouraged his type of themes and dramatic form, that it was the personality of the playwright working upon the life he observed and the tales he heard in his travels in rural Ireland that was responsible in greatest measure for the themes of Synge's six plays.
CHAPTER III
CHARACTERS

However interesting be the themes used by a dramatist it is usually the characters of drama that demand our greatest attention. They are the flesh and blood realities that give life to an inanimate plot; they are the motivation for bare incident or the resisting or responding receivers of the forces of nature and fate. Playwrights are excused and often even commended for using another's plot if they people their plays with vital, arresting figures, and conversely, the best story, the most engaging theme is wasted if the characters are dull and lifeless.

Most critics agree that Synge created exciting characters. They are also agreed that these characters are the result, fortunate or unfortunate according to the critic, of Synge's magic combination of the real and the imaginative. Narrowly Irish nationalist critics who saw in
Synge's plays an unfavorable picture of Irish life ascribed the "reality" to foreign prototypes or influences and the "imaginative" to the cynical, brooding side of Synge's nature. Others in Synge's time and today have hailed his characters as truly representative of Irish peasant life. But this chapter will not be primarily concerned with the relative Irishness of his characters. It will be our purpose rather to analyze his conception of the drama in relation to the characters he has portrayed; to see to what extent the characters in his drama, which he claims must incorporate joy and primitive strength, were influenced by his foreign experiences, his close association with the Abbey Theatre, his own personality, and his life with the Irish peasants of the mainland and the Aran Islands.

Although the themes of Synge's plays bear the marks of his years on the continent in some of their sources and in their superior craftsmanship, the characters show little evidence of this
experience. It may be that his avid reading of the French classics universalized what might have remained provincial Irish types, for certainly some characters of his like Maurya and Nora Burke, as Irish as they are, have been lifted out of Aran and Wicklow to become immensely human and worldwide in significance. Maurya is not only a fisherman's aged wife who has lost her sons to the sea but is representative of motherhood everywhere; in her dignity and resigned acceptance of fate she is akin to the characters of an Aeschylean tragedy. Nora Burke is not only a lonesome woman of the glens but another of a long line of dissatisfied, thwarted people; Martin and Mary Doul are two ugly blind beggars, but in their disillusionment they express the tortured minds of all who find reality hopelessly immeasurable to their dream. While Christy Mahon is intensely Irish in his "humbucking" he can be classed with literature's great liars, such as Corneille's Dorante, who came to believe in their lies and later fall
victim to them. Deirdre was taken from legend, but in her womanliness she appeals to all who know the glory and torment of great love.

It is possible that while Synge did not rely on foreign sources for his characters, indirectly he may have been influenced by the plays he read. Loti's old woman may be remembered when Maurya is grief-stricken at the loss of all her sons, and the old woman from The Good Hope, the Dutch play that was mentioned earlier, is like Synge's character in her submission to the tragedy that has overtaken her. Although Synge claimed never to have read Lytton's Pilgrims of the Rhine it is quite likely that since this work was commonly found in nurseries of the time, Synge read or heard it as a boy, only to forget it later.

Perhaps subconsciously his memory of Lucille Tisseur, the "Maid of Malines" asserted itself when he thought of Mary Doul. Both the disfigured Lucille and the ugly Mary are believed to be "the beautiful dark woman;" both St. Amand and Martin, 39

Ibid., p. 190.
considering the voice the criterion of youth and beauty, pick another for their loved one when they regain their sight; both Lytton's people and the Douls find a wonderful calm and security in the darkness that finally envelops them.

To the Abbey Theatre with which he was so intimately connected Synge was more indebted for influences on his characterization. He was of one mind with them in their effort to banish that horrible figure, the "stage Irishman," who for years had been the butt of ridicule in every other land. Now this whiskey-loving, blundering, thickly-brouged caricature was to be banned because Ireland was awakening to a national consciousness. Yeats, AE, and the others of their school in direct antithesis portrayed the Irish peasant in their dramas as a person of another world, one constantly in a state of dreams, one carried away from the earth into fantasy and myth. Synge, however, struck the happy medium and like Lady Gregory preferred to keep his characters in close touch with reality --she in her homely, endearing people and he in
his vivid, robust ones. For Synge it was "Adieu, sweet Angus, Maeve, and Fand, Ye plumed yet skinny Shee, That poets played with hand in hand To learn their ecstasy."

Just as Shakespeare kept the actors of the Globe in mind when he wrote his plays, so did Synge remember, either consciously or unconsciously, the Abbey players. This group of Irish players, headed by the Fay brothers, was dedicated to a form of dramatic art that was foreign to the contemporary English stage with its high-sounding elocution, its exaggerated gesticulation, and its expensive "star" system. The Irish were interested in the French school which had developed a tradition of truthfulness and simplicity. They wished to effect a complete naturalness in their small theatre, and to do so they eliminated all unnecessary gestures, they lowered their voices to a conversational pitch but concentrated on distinct enunciation, and they initiated a democratic casting system, with the players alternating

in small and large parts. Synge's characters bear witness to this creed. There are colorful minor characters in *The Playboy* that would appeal to the talents of those who also played Christy and Pegeen; there is a dignity and simplicity of movement that keeps the attention of the audience directed to one or two characters at a time, by eliminating any background groups from the scene; there are no long rhetorical speeches, except perhaps in *Deirdre*, no soliloquies or declamations.

Synge worked constantly with the actors in rehearsal and knew them well. He never mentioned that any of the actors were models for his characters, but it is likely that William Fay's genius for comedy went into Christy Mahon, that Sara Allgood's versatility was accounted for in Molly Byrne, Lavachram, and the Widow Quin, and especially that Maire O'Neill was responsible for much of Pegeen and Deirdre. Synge was in love with Miss O'Neill when he created Pegeen, so it is no wonder that Pegeen combined the fire and softness of a
woman beloved. And when he was dying she daily played his Deirdre before him in his hospital room, suggesting by interpretation and opinion the womanly queen who valued love as earth's prize possession.

Since the drama as opposed to lyric poetry is one of the more "objective" arts, many dramatists manage to keep their personalities out of their plays. Synge is not one of these. All his plays in some way express his character and the people in them portray the varied aspects of his nature. In his own life Synge was somewhat of a recluse, preferring to wander off alone far from the main roads, where he would meet the simple people who appealed to his artistic sense. It was not the merely simple, unaffected man who appealed to him but the variations from ordinary manhood that attracted the melancholic, somewhat morbid side of his personality. He was a frail, often a sick man throughout his writing years, so it is not surprising that he hungered for the strong and the harsh. He was a courteous, silent
man whose violence was deep within him, but which at times blazed forth as it did in "A Question."

I asked if I got sick and died, would you With my black funeral go walking too, If you'd stand close to hear them talk or pray While I'm let down in that steep bank of clay.

And, No, you said, for if you saw a crew Of living idiots pressing round that new Oak coffin--they alive, I dead beneath That board--you'd rave and rend them with your teeth. 41

It is this same almost savage fire that prompts Martin Doul to dash the holy water from the Saint's hand before it can cure him a second time; it is this same vain clutching for what is slipping away that impels Christy Mahon to attempt before the villagers the crime for which he has been praised.

Beside this crude reality Synge's imagination and longing for the primitive were stirred by the tramp and tinkers he met in his travels. These types were abundant in Wicklow and it is likely

that in his home county, as a boy, he became acquainted with these colorful people who, in turn, roused the sardonic caustic humor of Sarah Casey and Michael Byrne, and the poetic gentleness of the tramp of *In The Shadow of the Glen*. He was not concerned with their morality; he had no wish to reform them. On Aran and elsewhere in Ireland he had been accepted by the people, but was always referred to as one of the "quality." He regretted the social distance between them, but this factor no doubt heightened his objectivity. He was the more able to show his characters preoccupied with their dreams, instead of expounding and moralizing like Ibsen who was incensed by small-town Norwegian minds. Sometimes their dreams became identified with his as when the tramp tells Nora of the fine mornings that will follow the cold nights, when Fergus tells Deirdre of the joy that is known only in Ireland, and when the Douls forget the misery of the present in their dream of the future.

It is in *The Playboy of the Western World* that Synge's imagination really takes flight. Into
Christy he pours all his humor, depicting a true country bumpkin, a "quiet simple fellow, with no man giving me head;" to him he gives his own gift of fiery imagination; to him, in the end, he transfers his own ability to laugh at the world, as when Christy leaves the Mayo public house saying, "You've turned me a likely gaffer in the end of all, the way I'll go romancing through a romping lifetime from this hour to the dawning of the judgment day."

On Aran Synge saw the islanders meet death daily, and in Riders to the Sea he expresses the grief and resignation of the people. But in Deirdre of the Sorrows the grave is a reality to him. The main character is largely autobiographical; both Synge and Deirdre knew the sweet tragedy of love; both dramatist and queen were doomed to die at the height of their power, for as Deirdre says: "Death should be a poor, untidy thing, though it's a queen that dies." Here fortunately, with Deirdre, Synge in his last play does not find the disillusionment that came to Nora Burke, to the
Douls and to Christy Mahon. At the time of his death he was able to forget his pessimism for in Deirdre "there is nothing grotesque but beauty only."

Despite the caustic and outraged criticism that came from nationalist quarters, Synge did find his characters among the Irish peasantry. It is true that tramps and tinkers are held in ill-repute by the ordinary peasant and that they are not representative of the usual lives of the rural Irishman, but Synge was not presenting a social document to the world, and as an artist he should be allowed the freedom accorded other writers. Synge was not interested so much in the Irish peasant as he existed in Synge's time, so it was quite natural that he turned to tinkers and tramps who, in their primitively simple lives, had kept the spirit of the Gael of ancient days. Thus his characters may lack some of the traits of the modern Irish, but on the whole they are expressive of the Celtic nature.

42
William B. Yeats, The Cutting of an Agate, p. 129.
Synge's belief that the drama should combine the real and the imaginative found actuality in his peasants, for perhaps the most outstanding characteristic of the Gaelic personality is a conflict of dream and reality. In all his plays the main figures either long for a life that is different from their own or find refuge from a harsh or uninteresting world by construing an imaginative one. Nora Burke, married to an old farmer and shut off from the world in a lonesome dwelling at the end of a glen, longs for youth and companionship, and when she is offered them in the unexpected form of the tramp, she, self-styled "a hard woman to please," is willing to endure the rigors of the open road to escape the boredom and desolation of her life in Dan Burke's cottage. Old Mary Byrne, having no one to listen to her grand stories of queens, goes off to find her joy in a "full pint," and although she knows Sarah Casey will be angry when she finds her tin can missing, Mary philosophically is willing to endure this, for "what's a little stroke on your
head beside sitting lonesome on a fine night, hearing the dogs barking, and the bats squeaking, and you saying over, it's a short while only till you die." Mary and Martin Doul, disillusioned by the realization of their ugliness, and the unkindness of the villagers cling to their refuge in the world of darkness where their imaginations, not distracted by night, conjure pleasant dreams for them. Pegeen, disgusted with the weak, spineless lads of Mayo, welcomes the Playboy, not because he has killed his father, but because in his poetic flights of fancy he embodies her ideal of a daring adventuresome spirit.

For the people of rural Ireland Synge found that life was an alternation of dream and rude awakening, at its height in Martin Doul.

Or a bad black day when I was roused up and found I was the like of the little children do be listening to the stories of an old woman, and do be dreaming after in the dark night that it's in grand houses of gold they are, with speckled horses to ride, and do be waking again, in a short while, and they
destroyed with the cold,
and thatch dripping, maybe, and the starved ass braying in the yard?

The consciousness of this awakening may account for much of the desolate feeling of the Gael. Nora Burke and Christy Mahon are alike in their dread of loneliness; Naisi and Deirdre both fear the waning of their love.

Akin to this feeling was another that Synge found in the Irish peasant—that anticipated emotion is more vivid than the actual. It is true that this feeling is universal, but anyone familiar with the Gaelic temperament knows how an almost boundless imagination heightens this quality in the Irish. Maurya is more passionately grief-stricken in her expectation of Bartley's death than when his body is carried in accompanied by the wail of the keen. In The Playboy of the Western World Christy and Pegeen spend the greater part of their famous love scene delighting each other in their descriptions of the ways they will make love.
CHRISTY: Let you wait, to hear me talking, till we're astray in Erris, when Good Friday's by, drinking a sup from a well, and making mighty kisses with our wetted mouths, or gaming in a gap of sunshine, with yourself stretched back unto your necklace, in the flowers of the earth.

Mary and Martin Doul are shown not five or ten years after the advent of their second blindness, but immediately after, when they overcome the disillusionment of reality in planning for the happiness that old age's white hair and beard will bring them.

As a native Irishman and especially from his life with the people of Aran and the Wicklow glens Synge observed how intimately the Irish peasant was associated with nature. It is believed that the soft, extremely variable climate has been a large factor in molding the Irish personality, which contradictorily enough, is both carefree and tempestous, both intelligent and lacking in perseverance, both lovable and quarrel-
some. All of Synge's six plays reflect the powerful influence of Nature's moods and explain many of his characters. It is the bleak loneliness of the glen, the heavy mists, the bogs, that are as much a part of the dramatis personae as the flesh and blood characters of *In the Shadow of the Glen*, for we are ever aware that the atmosphere they embody is largely responsible for Nora's unhappiness and that it is representative of her own frustrated joy and longing for companionship. *In Riders to the Sea* it is the eternal cruelty of the sea that overpowers Maurya instead of some "tragic fault" in her character. And although Maurya is without this flaw that many drama critics deem necessary for tragedy of a high order, she is truly tragic in the manner of the Greek heroes, for as Fate decided the conflict in their lives, in the Irish play it is Nature in the shape of the vengeful deep that brings sorrow to the Aran mother. Surely in Maurya's haunting vision of the approaching doom and in her later dignity and resignation there is
depth of tragic emotion, for after all, cannot a character struggling against the elements be as majestic as one who cannot achieve success or happiness because of an inherent defect?

In the other plays Nature does not play such an important role, but still the characters are effected in some way. The three tinkers in _The Tinkers' Wedding_ joyously abound in the life of the open road, rollicking by day in the sunshine and sleeping in the ditch at night. For Mary Byrne the fine nights recalled stories of queens, and when no one would listen, because Sarah Casey preferred stealing pullets to poetry, unable to endure her loneliness, she felt impelled to drown her dreams of better things in a pint of porter. Mary and Martin Doul in their blindness are constantly imagining the wonderful beauty around them and are alive to every fragrance of every season. With their sight they are bitter at the dull grey-ness of the world. Deirdre, only half a queen, is a true child of Nature, in joyous abandonment at Sleive Fuadh, in an almost pagan attachment to
the glories of Alban where she and Naisi had seven happy years.

When Synge looked at Ireland it was not with the eyes of a lyricist or a spiritualist. Nature moved him deeply, but not into ecstasy. The people he saw in the same light; elemental and simple, romantic and realistic, like Nature. When he returned to Ireland he brought with him from the outside a distaste for the commonplace and a relish of the imaginative. It is thus easily understood why Synge turned to the folklore he found in Aran and Wicklow.

His characters exemplify this interest, for Synge in his attachment to folk literature was usually immune to the subtleties of character and created people who were not sophisticated enough for involved moral entanglements. Nora Burke is an enigma to many. Yeats in his preface to the first edition of The Well of the Saints speaks of Nora Burke who is "as melancholy as a curlew, driven to distraction by her own sensitiveness, her
own fineness." Although we do not claim that Nora, who says she married for a bit of a farm, and who tells the tramp about her husband: "He's after dying on me, God forgive him, and there I am now with a hundred sheep beyond on the hills and no turf drawn for the winter."--is a spiritual creature, yet it is difficult to agree with Daniel Corkery that Synge created "a piece of naturalistic flesh and blood, wearing her lusts upon her sleeve, a being all appetite and 44 not faculty." Nora after all is a peasant and must therefore concern herself with her means of livelihood. And should she be greatly censured for her seemingly heartless remark, when Maurya of Riders to the Sea, who of all Synge's women is the most unlike Nora, says to Bartley: "It's hard set we'll be surely the day you're drownd'd with the rest. What way will I live and the girls with me, and I an old woman looking for the grave?"

43 Ibid.,
44 Synge and Anglo-Irish Literature, p. 125.
It is true that Nora's melancholy and terrible loneliness conflict with the rough and comic qualities of the folk tale and keep the play quickly moving from one mood to another, from tragedy to comedy and back again, so that the audience is often confused in its emotional reaction. This is not Synge at his best, but it illustrates, if in an imperfect way, how Synge could not present his people merely in the broad impersonal way of folklore, how it was native to him to individualize and humanize the peasants of his plays. Nora Burke is alive to us in her frustration and wistful longing, and while we may not be able to rationalize her sudden decision to accompany the tramp out into the world, we feel that the mists and the bogs will be easier upon Nora's soul when she is with the gentle, most uncommonly poetic tramp that Synge presents. For the tramp, unlike grim old Dan Burke, has little of the folktale flavor, resembling more a knight of chivalry. Irish critics have claimed that even in Wicklow Synge could not have met such a tramp,
for the average Irish peasant shuns the habitual vagabond as a disreputable character. But it is to be remembered that Synge was not interested in portraying the usual, for does he not tell us explicitly so?

In all the circumstances of this tramp life there is a certain wildness that gives it romance and a peculiar value for those who look at life in Ireland with an eye that is aware of the arts also. In all the healthy movements of art, variations from the ordinary types of manhood are made interesting to the ordinary man, and in this way only the higher arts are universal.  

Certainly the broad rascality and brusque humor of the tinkers shows the influence of the folk tale, for although Mary Byrne has visions of a better life and Sarah Casey expresses a desire to have her irregular union with Michael Byrne made legitimate, in the end when they ludicrously tie up the priest (himself ridiculous enough) in a bag, we know that their loneliness and disap-

45 "Vagrants of Wicklow," Complete Works, p. 494.
pointment will be soon forgotten, for they are typical of the wild tinkers whom Synge met and heard about in Wicklow.

Similarly, the villagers of The Well of the Saints in their cruel mockery of the blind people who have just regained their sight are characteristic of the crudeness of folk literature, Martin Doul himself is something like Synge's informant and teacher, Pat Dirane, who in his frequent relish of the coarse and vulgar belongs to that brand of literature. But in this play, unlike The Tinkerer's Wedding, the main figures, especially Martin, outstep the bonds of the folk tale to become well defined characters instead of nameless personalities. Mary is the essence of complacency and self-centeredness; even while she is waiting for the saint to cure her she is anxious to have her shawl to look her best. Martin is indeed a copious character, disagreeably wanton when alone with Molly, cowardly in his fear of the villagers, and lyrical in his vivid impressions of nature and in his dreams of others. The play is thought
to be written over a longer period of time than any of the others, so it is easy to believe from the full rounded characters of this play that Synge, as he himself so often stated, achieved more fortunate results when his characters mellowed over a more lengthy period of time.

In *The Playboy of the Western World* Synge portrays characters that illustrate the Gael's delight in vivid personality and that in their variety and range resemble a Shakespearean play. Michael James, Synge may have met several times in his travels, for the proprietors of public houses were held in great esteem by the country-folk. He may have easily met any number of Shawn Keoghs for with emigration claiming a large percentage of the young men, there were apt to be many of his type—ignorant, cowardly, and as Pegeen says, "a middling kind of a scarecrow, with no savagery or fine words in him at all." Pegeen combines many of the traits that Synge must have found in the girls he met and learned to know as he became a part of intimate family
groups in Aran and on the mainland. She has the Celtic fire in her grand scorn of Shawn who is eternally afraid of Father Reilly; in her anger at the interference of the Widow Quin; and later in her disillusionment when she resorts to burning Christy with the turf; she has the Irish cleverness when she scares Christy into thinking that the other girls might report him to the "polis," in order to keep him for herself; and most fortunately, she has the Gaelic tenderness that is so charming in the love scene and so disarming in contrast, for as Pegeen herself says: "And to think it's me is talking sweetly, Christy Mahon, and I the fright of seven townlands for my biting tongue."

But of all characters in this play it is the Playboy who commands attention. He is truly a rich personality and one who develops before our eager eyes. By his own description and from the Widow Quin and Pegeen recognizing him as weak in the beginning, we know him to be really a "bumpkin." But when the Mayo villagers look at him with awe on learning that he has murdered his
"da," a dormant hope awakens in Christy that here is a chance to take his place among the people. It is a little difficult to see why a dirty ignorant lad becomes their idol, unless one remembers how a curiosity would appeal to folk bored with the monotony of a peasant's life, how the Irish admire the spirited and the brave. And when the people find in him their athletic champion their praise knows no bounds. Michael James speaks for them all when he says in the last act: "A daring fellow is the jewel of the world, and a man did split his father's middle with a single clout, should have the bravery of ten, so may God and Mary and St. Patrick bless you, and increase you from this mortal day." In Christy himself we find the true poet, for after the matter of fact statement of his deed has roused the people, like a true "playboy" he enlarged his tale at each retelling, until in the last act he is no longer a cringing "lout," but even a lad conceited in his newly developed self-confidence: "for I'm mounted on the springtide of
the stars of luck, the way it'll be good for any to have me in the house." So surely did his poet's soul develop that when shortly later the villagers denounce him as a liar, he is able even in his disillusionment to face them in scorn, and we can believe that this episode will have changed his life. How different from Sarah Casey and Michael Byrne of *The Tinker's Wedding* who merely return after an incidental interruption to their life of the day before.

In *Deirdre of the Sorrows* we again find Synge concerned with arresting characters, and although in his illness he was unable to finish his play, yet he left characters who are as old as the legend but refreshingly new and alive. We would not say that Synge met a Conchubor among the Irish peasantry, but it is likely that he was influenced indirectly by his intimacy with the elderly people of Aran who had to fight for what they wanted and who in their simple lives knew the great sorrow that was Conchubor's--to be old and lonesome. He is indeed kingly in the
manner of the legend, mustering his forces when his throne and Emain are in peril, but so human in his starved affection and insistence to the end, in taking what he and others had bought at a great price; and so genuinely tragic in his realization that Naisi in his open grave, mourned by Deirdre, had still the better part.

Again, we would not say that Synge knew a Deirdre in Wicklow. Throughout his travel books however he describes the young girls on their way to the Fairs, the young girls in the homes he visited, and the young girls in their red petticoats trooping to the village school for their lessons in Gaelic. We recognize Deirdre as a queen when she questions the shabby dwelling prepared for her return, but we enjoy her as a young girl from Alban running over the hills in joyous abandon, and we see in her the mark of the Irish peasant as she hesitates to leave the security of their childhood home. She is something like the Aran girls Synge found so engaging: "At one moment she is a simple peasant, at another
she seems to be looking out at the world with a sense of prehistoric disillusion." In Deirdre as in Christy Mahon, Synge presents a character in development, so that in the end we find a broken woman combining the wildness of a peasant's grief and the dignity of the sorrow of a queen. There is surely the mixture of reality and joy that Synge called for in drama in Deirdre's words before she joins Naisi in the grave, the mixture that leaves the hearer refreshed and peaceful in the manner of great tragedy. "I have put away sorrow like a shoe that is worn out and muddy, for it is I have had a life that will be envied by great companies...It is not a small thing to be rid of grey hairs, and the loosening of the teeth."

It is to be regretted that Synge, who pictured the Celtic character and Irish life so accurately in many respects, omitted from all but one of his plays one of the most outstanding qualities of the Irish peasant. Synge professed to

be interested in the common interests of life, but in forgetting the religion of the people he was forgetting the strongest bond that has united the Irish for centuries. It is true that as an artist it was not necessary for him to give a sociological study of Irish life nor to present the average and the typical. Synge explicitly disavowed any such aims. But in Ireland religion is such an integral part of every day life that Synge witnessed and lived with, that one wonders why it did not find its way into his work. In his notebooks he tells of the people going to Mass, of the priests who must go from island to island in the performance of their duties. Time and again he mentions the peace and dignity of the Aran Islanders, but he does not explain what is behind it.

Yet although he was untouched by the spiritual, Synge was not lacking in sympathy. Rather since he was indifferent to it he could not see why his Catholic countrymen should take offence when he presented the absurd priest of The Tink-
er's Wedding or the stiff saint who brings sight to the Douls. Even granting that Synge was not satirizing Irish priesthood and that the cleric who agreed to marry the tinkers for a shilling and a tin can is one of the "variations" Synge speaks of, we would wish that Synge had not stepped so far out of line. We would wish that the Playboy was not made to bandy the Sacred Name so freely, and that Michael James would not say, "and I liefer face the grave untimely and I seeing a score of grandsons growing up little gallant swearers by the name of God."

Despite this lack of spirituality it cannot be said that Synge's characters are immoral. They are rather amoral. Nora is not conscience-stricken but only concerned about her loneliness; Sarah Casey wants to be married not because she is concerned about her loose life, but only to satisfy a whim; and the Playboy does not tell his lie to deceive, but unconsciously as part of his poetic awakening. In Deirdre of the Sorrows there is the ever-present doom of Fate that belongs
to paganism and that Deirdre expresses when she tells Naisi before they leave Ireland: "It should be a sweet thing to have what is best and richest, if it's for a short space only."

It is only in *Riders to the Sea*, in the wonderful figure of the Aran mother that Synge came close to the heart of the people. She is as real as the grey sea that has taken all her sons, and with great imaginative power she utters the Christian concern for human life. "If it was a hundred horses, or a thousand horses you had itself, what is the price of a thousand horses against a son where there is one son only?" It is good to know that Synge who so often finds disillusionment can have Maurya say those beautiful words that express the Catholic resignation and peaceful hope in the face of death. "They're all together this time, and the end is come. May the Almighty God have mercy on Bartley's soul... and may He have mercy on my soul, Nora, and on the soul of every one is left living in the world."

From a study of the characters of Synge's
plays, it is easily seen that foreign influences are barely perceptible in Synge's men and women. The dramatist's personality and temperament have colored many of his characters and this accounts perhaps for their peculiarity; while in addition, Synge's life with the Aran Islanders and the peasants of the mainland is responsible for the combination of reality and imagination that his people possess and exhibit in his dramas.
CHAPTER IV

DIALOGUE

The themes and characters of Synge's plays are assuredly strikingly different and thought provoking, but it is his wonderful creation in Anglo-Irish dialogue that has won him fame. Critics have both lavishly praised and avidly protested against the plots and people he created, but they are practically unanimous in acclaiming the beauty of the language of the six plays. It is in this phase of his work that Synge amply demonstrates his belief that imagination is essential in drama. To the often starkly realistic incidents in his plays Synge has added a richly musical, often poetic dialogue that blends all the elements of his drama into a unified, distinctive whole.

In analysing the magic speech that flows from queen and peasant alike it is evident that the same factors that influenced Synge in conceiving his
themes and characters are responsible, but in different measure, for the dialogue of the plays. Here too is to be seen the result of Synge's foreign training and of the newly awakened interest in language brought about by the Celtic Renaissance; here too is to be seen the dramatist's educational background and his close observation of the speech of the Irish peasantry of the Aran Islands and of the mainland.

While in Paris Synge was in contact with the latest literary trends of the day. In all the branches of the arts there was a curious mixture of realism and aestheticism. The Naturalists sought reality in the dregs of human existence, and accordingly, the writers of the time filled their pages with language brutally frank and unadorned. Others at the opposite pole turned from the relish of reality to an exaggerated aestheticism that was concerned with an excessive regard for words and an artificial, "impressionistic" view of life. The Symbolists, such as Mallarmé, interested in beauty as a sensuous phenomenon, implicitly
believed that in literature form is more important than content.

Synge avowedly repudiated both of these modern tenets in the preface to *The Playboy of the Western World*.

In the modern literature of towns, however, richness is found only in sonnets, or prose poems, or in one or two elaborate books that are far away from the profound and common interests of life. One has, on one side, Mallarmé and Huysmans producing this literature; and on the other, Ibsen and Zola dealing with the reality of life in joyless and pallid words. On the stage one must have reality, and one must have joy; and that is why the intellectual modern drama has failed, and people have grown sick of the false joy of the musical comedy, that has been given them in place of the rich joy found only in what is superb and wild in reality.47

Yet, although Synge turned away from these modern writers, he was no doubt influenced by them to some extent, because in Ibsen and Zola he saw other firm

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believers in the appropriateness of the strong word and the clear-cut phrase, and in the adherents of "pure aesthetics" he found those who would sympathize with his belief in the necessity of highly-flavored language. Without the dialect, Maurya's words, "if it's only a bit of wet flour we do have to eat, and maybe a fish that would be stinking," might have come from one of Ibsen's people. When Christy Mahon in the poetic raptures of love speaks poetry so profuse as he tells Pegeen: "when the airs is warming in four months or five it's then yourself and me should be pacing Neifin in the dews of night, the time sweet smells do be rising and you'd see a little shiny new moon, maybe, sinking on the hills," he is not unlike Mallarmé who delighted in words that suggested sounds and pictures. Fortunately, however, Synge clearly perceived both the perfections and defects of these writers and, happily, for himself chose the middle course.

During his stay on the Continent, Synge, as we mentioned in an earlier chapter, read exhaus-
tively on Villon and the classical dramatists of the Seventeenth Century. Synge's poems bear witness to his affection for the French ballad writer, and while there is no direct evidence, it is quite probable that the pungent raciness of Villon found its way into the dialogue of Synge's plays. It is not difficult to remember the swashbuckling, cruderly romantic poetry of the gay medievalist when Mary Byrne tells Sarah:

But if it's flighty you are itself, you're a grand handsome woman, the glory of tinkers, the pride of Wicklow, the Beauty of Ballinacree. I wouldn't have you lying down and you lonesome to sleep this night in a dark ditch when the spring is coming in the trees; so let you sit down there by the big bough, and I'll be telling you the finest story you'd hear any place from Dundalk to Ballinacree, with great queens in it, making themselves matches from the start to the end, and they with shiny silks on them the length of the day, and white shifts for the night.

To Racine, Synge's literary idol, it is very probable that Synge is indebted for much of the
sharp, dramatic directness and the symmetry of his style. It was indeed fortunate that Synge was fond of Racine and the classics, because they provided a check for a powerful imagination, which, unrestrained, might have become too lyrical and irrelevant. That Synge might have met this pitfall is not pure conjecture, for at times Synge breaks through the bonds of classical restraint to lose himself in a flush of flowery language quite unsuited to characters like old Mary Byrne, who speaks of one who "quenched the flaming candles on the throne of God the time your shadow fell within the pillars of the chapel door," and Christy Mahon, "straining the bars of Paradise to lay eyes on the Lady Helen of Troy, and she abroad, pacing back and forward, with a nosegay in her golden shawl."

On the other hand, Synge's admiration for the classics may have made him overly conscious of the place of parallelisms and balance in his style. At times his usual, unlabored flow of dialogue is
hampered by his too obvious straining for proportion.

It's yourself you'll be calling God to help, in two weeks or three, when you'll be waking up in the dark night and thinking you see me coming with the sun on me, and I driving a high cart with Jaunting Jim going behind. It's lonesome and cold you'll be feeling the ditch where you'll be lying down that night, I'm telling you, and you hearing the old woman making a great noise in her sleep, and the bats squeaking in the trees.48

But certainly this is a minor defect when one remembers the beautifully measured prose and the colorful variety of Synge's dialogue.

Even before Synge returned to Ireland he must have been influenced by the use of dialect in the literature of the period. In Germany the peasant playwrights were overlooking the accepted literary German when they wrote their plays, and Synge became acquainted with this drama in his tour of Germany. In France, Loti wrote in the

48 Tinker's Wedding, Complete Works, p. 184.
Breton dialect his *Pecheur d'Islande*, the work that Synge read and admired, and that, as we have seen before, interested him in immortalizing the dialect of the Aran Islanders as Loti had that of the Breton fisher-folk. In addition, it is also true that "his philological studies in Paris and his intimacy with such French writers as Maupassant and George Sand had revealed to him...the artistic beauty of dialect." 49

It was indeed fortunate that Synge wrote during the stage of Irish history that gave new hope to those concerned with the preservation of the Gaelic culture. Dr. Hyde and the Gaelic League worked industriously and fruitfully to reestablish the teaching of the native language in the schools, to reawaken a pride in the centuries of half-forgotten Celtic arts, and to encourage the development of a strong, modern Irish literature. Dr. Hyde himself wrote many plays in Gaelic, and collected, from written and oral sources, the wonderful poems that have appeared as the Love 49

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Songs of Connacht and the Religious Songs of Connacht. Synge, a staunch supporter of the Gaelic League, was interested in Dr. Hyde's work and was thoroughly conversant with the volumes mentioned above, volumes that are rich with the figures and music that Synge himself employed so plentifully.

All the figures of the Irish Literary Renaissance with whom Synge was in contact were anxious that the new literature be written in a vital, fresh language. It was well-nigh impossible to reach a large enough audience so soon in the Gaelic tongue, since most of the patrons of the arts were English speaking. Yeats, Synge's "discoverer" and impetus to his work in Ireland, constantly affirmed the need of a powerful and individual speech for great literature. With Dr. Hyde writing in the Anglo-Irish idiom, Yeats and other Abbey playwrights successfully followed suit. Lady Gregory, after studying the speech of the Aran Islanders and that of the people of her own district, wrote with such ease and grace that Synge, groping for expression, expressed his joy in the
lead that was given him. "When my Cuchulain of Muirthemne came out, he said to Mr. Yeats he had been amazed to find in it the dialect he had been trying to master. He wrote to me: 'Your Cuchulain is a part of my daily bread.'" In this environment and encouraged by the sensitive and careful speech of the Fay brothers and their Irish born players, Synge, after his first success in the Anglo-Irish idiom, was no doubt stimulated to continue writing in the wonderful language he had mastered.

Synge's knowledge of Gaelic was not merely superimposed upon him when he came to the Aran Islands, for although by birth and training he belonged to the Ascendancy, his parents were true patriots, and as he tells us in his Preface to the Playboy, much of the language he uses in the plays was "spoken in my own nursery before I could read the newspapers." Nor was this early beginning later forgotten, for at Trinity College

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51 _Complete Works_, p. 3.
we find him carrying off prizes in Gaelic. He
had in fact a native ability in language, learn-
ing, while in college, several Continental tongues
and winning honors in Hebrew. It is more than
likely that Synge's familiarity with Hebrew lit-
erature is in part responsible for the concrete
imagery of such phrases as Christy's, "with the
dusts of August making mudstains in the gullet
of my throat," and for the eloquent simplicity of
many passages that testify to Synge's belief in
the value of the combination of reality and joy
in drama. Maurya's curtain speech has surely in
it that true exaltation of spirit that only trag-
edy can give.

Michael has a clean burial
in the far north, by the
grace of the Almighty God.
Bartley will have a fine
coffin out of the white
boards, and a deep grave
surely. What more can we
want than that? No man at
all can be living for ever,
and we must be satisfied.

One of the most powerful influences on Synge's
art was his thorough musical training. He was mas-
ter of the flute, the piano, and the violin; he took with him from Trinity College a sound knowledge of musical theory, and planned to follow a career in music. Even remembering the influence of Racine, it is difficult to say what Synge's speech would have been without the rigorous discipline exacted by this queen of arts, because by nature he was not ruled by reason, but by emotion. It is true he had a wonderful gift for contemplation, as so many pages of his Aran Islands reveal, but it was not the contemplation of an essentially objective mind, except that he was concerned with the "profound and common interests of life" wherever he met them, but rather the contemplation of one who was moved by the pain and beauty of the world around him. Consequently, his idea that "in a good play every speech should be as fully flavoured as a nut or apple," runs away with him, and he loses himself in high sounding figures and involved sentences, substituting for the tasty "nut" and the

Preface to Playboy, Complete Works, p. 4.
succulent "apple" some rare exotic spice foreign to the reality he wanted to portray. Surely such a high-sounding exclamation as, "what did I want crawling forward to scorch my understanding at her flaming brow?" is too much to expect of even the awakened Playboy. With passages such as this in mind it is easy to agree with Daniel Corkery that without Synge's musical background "one cannot think that his work would have been but a shapeless mass." To the casual reader or audience the effect of Synge's musical background is more apparent in the truly melodious prose pattern of the plays. One cannot but remember the musician when the tramp speaks to Nora: "Come along with me now, lady of the house, and it's not my blather you'll be hearing only, but you'll be hearing the herons crying out over the black lakes, and you'll be hearing the grouse and the owls with them, and the larks and the big thrushes when the days are warm." One cannot help but be lulled into Martin Doul's dream world with such soft music

as Mary hears from Martin's lips:

Ah, it's ourselves had finer sights than the like of them, I'm telling you, when we were sitting a while back hearing the birds and bees humming in every weed of the ditch, or when we'd be smelling the sweet, beautiful smell does be rising in the warm nights, when you do hear the swift flying things racing in the air, till we'd be looking up in our own minds into a grand sky, and seeing lakes, and big rivers, and fine hills for taking the plough.

Synge's work on the whole is that of a master craftsman, who labored over his speech until he had achieved the effect he wanted. Padriac Colum once spoke to Synge about the splendor of the dialogue of his plays to receive the reply, "but if you were to see it when it comes out first, it's just bald!" It is all to his credit that he was usually able to conceal this careful workmanship in a prose dialogue notable for its rhythm, now lilting, now flowing,

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54 The Road Round Ireland, p. 364.
now majestic. Although one cannot justly say that the language of the plays, considered chronologically, follows a steady upward line of development, yet the quality of the dialogue varies. There is the speech of the dreamer, the wanderer, the lonely soul in *In the Shadow of the Glen*, the speech of the folk-tale in *The Tinker's Wedding*, the speech of exhilarated youth in the *Playboy*, and the more direct and therefore more dramatic speech of simplicity and strength in *Riders to the Sea* and parts of *Deirdre*. A comparison of the *Playboy*'s lyrical outbursts with the dramatic compactness of the following excerpt from the first act of *Deirdre* illustrates the breadth of Synge's power in language. Naisi and his brothers are demanding entrance to Lavarcham's house.

LAVARCHAM. You cannot come in... There is no one let in here, and no young girl with us.

NAISI. Let us in from the great storm. Let us in and we will go further when the cloud will rise.

LAVARCHAM. Go round east to the shed and you'll have
shelter. You cannot come in.

NAISI. Open the door or we will burst it.

OLD WOMAN. Let them in, and keep Deirdre in her room tonight.

It may be possible that Synge was more influenced by his recent contact with Loti's "wailing grace" when he wrote In the Shadow of the Glen, that his personal romance with Maire O'Neill colored the Playboy with extravagant figures and an overdose of adjectives, that the doom of death and his affection for the Elizabethans who dealt with the stronger, more violent passions, shook him into the virulent speech found even in an unfinished Deirdre. But knowing Synge's painstaking method of writing, why should we begrudge him an artist's due; why should we not say that he matched his dialogue to his theme, that with an instinct that seldom failed he managed to pass from unbounded lyricism to strictly dramatic speech when it suited his plans. That he was not always successful, it is true,
that he often scaled the heights is more important.

For Synge nature was a vital phenomenon that touched nearly every page he wrote. It was a sounding box for his own emotions and those of his characters, so it is not surprising that the images and figures in his dialogue are bound up with the elements. In keeping with his practice, Synge was untouched by what he termed the often "inhuman" verse of Shelley and Coleridge, preferring Wordsworth, the poet of "common life," above all other English poets because "he was more at one with nature." Synge's prose is rich in nature in all its aspects; its gay frivolity in the simile from the Playboy, "grinning your ears off like the moon of May;" its power and dread in Riders to the Sea where "that wind is raising the sea, and there was a star up against the moon, and it rising in the night;" its loneliness and terror in the tramp's description of "crossing the hills when the fog is on them, the time a little stick would seem as big as your

arm, and a rabbit as big as a bay horse, and a
stack of turf as big as a towering church;" its
serenity in Martin Doul's "hearing a soft wind
turning round the little leaves of the spring
and feeling the sun;" its romance in Deirdre's
"waking with the smell of June in the tops of
the grasses, and listening to the birds in the
branches that are highest."

Whatever effect Synge's foreign training and
personal background had on the dialogue of his
plays, there is no doubt about the importance
of the influence of the years he spent with the
rural people of Ireland. In the Preface to the
Playboy he mentions his debt to these people.

All art is a collaboration;
and there is little doubt
that in the happy ages of
literature, striking and
beautiful phrases were as
ready to the story-teller's
or the playwright's hand, as
the rich cloaks and dresses
of his time. It is probable
that when the Elizabethan
dramatist took his ink-horn
and sat down to his work he
used many phrases that he had
just heard, as he sat at dinner,
from his mother or his children.
In Ireland, those of us who know the people have the same privilege.56

In regard to Synge's "collaboration" with the people it has been often remarked that Synge was not always fair because he represented the people of Wicklow, Aran and Ulster as speaking one common dialect. It is true that Synge's characters talk alike, that Deirdre the queen speaks in the "patois" of the tinkers, but critics are not justified in claiming that Deirdre of the Sorrows should have been written in the "Ulster dialect," and that Synge should have distinguished between the speech of Aran and that of Wicklow. Father O'Leary, a recognized critic of Irish speech, affirms this. "Before the advent of the Gaelic League it was an admitted fact that there were three or four dialects of Irish. A close scrutiny of the dialects has shown that they are all one dialect. A still closer scrutiny will show that the 'provincialisms' are just as imaginary as the

56 Complete Works, p. 3.
The main difference that exists is one of pronunciation, not of syntax, and certainly Synge should be granted the freedom of the artist in producing a language that is modeled on the Gaelic and the beautiful Anglo-Irish he heard in his travels in Ireland.

It is time we examine the speech of the Irish peasant of Synge's day and compare it with that of the characters of Synge's six plays. The Irish brogue has been contemptuously regarded as the speech of a boorish people who were either too ignorant or incapable of mastering the "refined" tongue of their Anglo-Saxon neighbors. It is to be remembered, however, that it was the ancestors of these same neighbors who in Tudor days forced the English language upon the Irish. It is, therefore, in Eastern Ireland where the English colonized heavily that we find not an illiterate "brogue," but the "pure" speech of Shakespearian literature, for this speech was preserved unadulterated by the native Celts and the very Irish

Irish Prose Composition, p. 16.
descendants of the English settlers, who after Elizabeth's time were far from the hub of the ever-varying English speech.

Synge's spelling does not indicate the pronunciation of his words, but that he strove to keep his dialogue in line with the "reality" of the spoken word is very plain from his remark about *In The Shadow of the Glen*: "I got more aid than any learning could have given me from a chink in the floor of the old Wicklow house where I was staying, that let me hear what was being said by the servant girls in the kitchen." Also, the Abbey Players, Irish by birth, pronounced Synge's words as the Irish of Dublin would have expected; with "ketch" for "catch," "tache" for "teach," "nayther" for "neither," and "art" for "earth."

Synge also uses some of the old English expressions that have been retained in the Anglo-Irish; the use of "afeard" for "afraid" as Pegeen says, "I'd be afeard to do that;" the frequency

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58 Preface to *Playboy, Complete Works*, p. 3.
of the word "again;" the words, "I won't care what way the sea is when the other women will be keening;" the substitution of "leifer" for "rather;" the infinitive of purpose expressed as "for to:"

"Aid me for to win Pegeen;" the use of "so" for "provided that" and "once" for "as soon as;" the appearance of words like "gullet" and "looney."

But it was from the Aran Islanders, who, far from modern day civilization, still spoke almost wholly in the Gaelic tongue, that Synge derived the wealth of Irish idioms that singularize his dialogue. "And whosoever has visited those districts himself knows they Synge and Yeats have learned it well." The influence of the Gaelic language on Synge is found in constructions and expressions borrowed from the Gaelic, and in direct, literal translations. There are words like "Pegeen," "girleen," "houseen," expressing the diminuative and composed of an English word plus the Gaelic suffix "een;" and on the other hand, the true Celtic names like Deirdre, Maurya, Sleive

Fuadh, Glen Masain, and Emain Macha.

Synge, for the most part, recognizes the Gaelic word order in his dialogue. In Gaelic, verbs can make sense without a nominative form, so it is not surprising to often find the verb given first place in a sentence, with the subject and object following. If another word is to be stressed, it is placed after the word "is," and the rest of the sentence forms a relative clause. It is to be noted that Synge follows the Gaelic further in omitting the relative pronoun from the clause. Maurya says, "There was Sheamus and his father, and his own father again, were lost in a dark night." If the object is emphasized it appears in this manner: "It's great jokes the people'll be making now, I'm thinking."

Throughout all six plays Synge used the present perfect tense according to the Gaelic language, which has a construction to denote a completed action as we know it in English, and another to denote action completed only a moment prior to the statement of it. In the Anglo-Irish the latter
type appears as a present tense with the word "after." Compare Maurya's words describing her lost family, "I've had a husband, and a husband's father," with those of her daughter who has just heard a sound from the sea; "There's some one after crying out by the seashore," and with those of Mary Doul ridiculing a frightened Martin: "and I'll be bearing in mind from this day the great hullabaloo he's after making from hearing a poor woman breathing quiet in her place." In The Aran Islands we find old Pat Dirane using this form when he tells Synge a story in Gaelic. "Then she took me in and told me her husband was after dying on her, and she was watching him that night."

In Kerry, as well as in Aran, Synge observed how the Irish express an habitual feeling or action. A young man traveling with him on the train said to him: "'We do have great sport every Friday and Saturday, seeing the old women howling in the

Complete Works, p. 341.
stations.'" Some form of "do be" or "do have" thus finds itself not infrequently in the plays, for Synge was well aware of this favorite Irish expression. Michael the tinker tells Sarah Casey, "It's the like of that name they do be putting on the horses they have below racing in Arklow." A few pages later Sarah says, "and we hard-working poor people do be making cans in the dark night."

The Irish have a decided preference for interrogative speech, not only in asking questions, but also in answering one question with another. This sparing use of "yes" and "no" is associated with the fact that there are no negative particles in Gaelic. In Synge's plays the dialogue is varied and heightened by his faithful reproduction of this peculiarity of language, for, what might be termed a "rhetorical question," emphasizes and strengthens the meaning in a way not possible with a direct answer. Well do we remember Mary Doul's bitterness at Molly Byrne when she answers Martin:

\[ \text{MARTIN DOUL. Isn't laughing a nice thing the time a woman's young?} \]

\[ \text{Ibid., p. 538.} \]
MARY DOUL. A nice thing, is it? A nice thing to hear a woman making a loud braying laugh the like to that?

There is, too, an idiomatic construction for a subordinate interrogative clause in the Anglo-Irish, because in Gaelic the dependent clause follows the word order of the principal clause and is introduced by the word "an," which indicates that a question follows. Accordingly, Pegeen says, "Look now is he roaring," and Maurya's daughter Cathleen questions, "Tell me is herself coming, Nora?" The imperative also is governed by the Gaelic which has such a simple form that in the Anglo-Irish "let you" precedes the verb. Mary Doul's words, "Let you not be telling lies to the Almighty God," illustrates a phraseology very common to the plays.

The dialogue spoken by Synge's characters reflects the scarcity of conjunctions in the Gaelic language and in the Anglo-Irish speech of the people he observed. The Gaelic word "agus--and" is substituted for all other conjunctions and even relative pronouns, so that subordinate clauses
become coordinate. Instead of the time clause we would expect, Naisi's words are "It's little we'll think of safety or the grave beyond it, and we resting in a little corner between the daytime and the long night;" instead of finding an adjective clause in the same young lover's comment, we read, "It should be a poor thing to see great lovers and they sleepy and old;" and instead of giving her reason in a common English causal clause, Sarah Casey explains to Michael why the opportune time for approaching the priest has come: "If you have the ring done, it's a great bargain we'll make now and he after drinking his glass." Synge also makes use of "the time" to introduce a time clause, as when Mary Byrne tells herself, "Few but a girl maybe would be in great fear the time her hour was come." Another expression common to the characters of the plays is "the way," taken directly from the Gaelic, and used for "so that." "I seen...I'd a face would be a great wonder when it'll have soft white hair falling around it, the way when I'm an old woman there won't be the like of me surely in
the seven counties of the east."

If the Irish tongue is sparing of conjunctions, it amply compensates with a wealth of prepositions, that, in their idiomatic English use, lend to the speech of the people a color and imaginative variety that Synge believed necessary to drama. The Gaelic preposition "ar" -- "on" is used in the expression "there is on me" to denote an emotion, especially an unpleasant one, such as Maurya feels, "Isn't it sorrow enough is on every one?" A favorite with the Celts is the word "beyond" which is often employed where another preposition might be expected. Deirdre describes Naisi, "and you standing out beyond your brothers are called the Flower of Ireland."

Even a cursory examination of the six plays reveals how much Synge gleaned of the realities of Irish peasant speech. Every page, almost every line, testifies to the dramatist's thorough absorption in his medium. There are innumerable turns of speech that are either idiomatic derivations or literal translations from the language
Synge heard in Aran. There are the words "in it" for the English "there" or "in existence," as "Will I be in it as soon as himself;" there is the continual appearance of "self," not as a reflexive, but meaning "even;" "We'd have a right to be gone, if it's a long way itself." This word is found in abundance as a reflexive pronoun too. "Himself" and "herself" correspond to "master" and "mistress," and along with "ourselves," are used as nominative and objective forms. Where the English would say "like me," the Anglo-Irish says "the like of me," just as Maurya tells Nora, "It's little the like of him knows of the sea." Synge too has noticed how the Irish confuse the word "right," so that it appears in the Playboy meaning "do well:" "You'd have a right to have him fresh and nourished," and in The Well of the Saints meaning "privilege:" "I'm thinking it's a good right ourselves have to be sitting blind."

Some words and expressions Synge took directly from the Gaelic. On Aran and in Kerry he was impressed with the courtesy of these simple people
and often heard "bean-a-tighe"--"lady of the house," applied to one whose hospitality had been enjoyed, so it is not surprising to hear the tramp address Nora Burke in this manner. On Aran too he heard the Gaelic word "cuid," meaning "bit" or "share of," used for the English "some," and in all six plays we find it as Sarah Casey uses it, "The like of that, Michael Byrne, when there is a bit of sun in it." Time and again in his conversations with Michael and Pat Dirane on the islands Synge heard the Gaelic "leigim orm"--"I let on me," and faithful to his observation, he has Christy, instead of saying "pretend," tell the Widow Quin, "He was letting on I was wanting a protector from the harshness of the world." Time and again he heard the weary fishermen tell of their exhaustion in the same phraseology as that used in the Playboy, "You've a right to be destroyed indeed, with your walking, and fighting, and facing the sun." In the same play we find "shut of," meaning "apart from," a translation of the Gaelic past participle "driudhte" with a prep-
position: "And for what is it you're wanting to get shut of me?" An old man on Aran, telling Synge a story in Gaelic said, "'It is time to sleep from this out.'" The last three words, the equivalent of "henceforth," are a literal translation of the Gaelic "as so amach," and are used by Conchubor: "and from this out you'll be my queen in Emain."

Synge's use of adjectives is of no small interest. In themselves they are not unusual; indeed, they are very elemental, coming as they do from the tongue of a simple people. But Synge had a special talent for selecting the choice, for skimming the cream from the everyday speech of the peasants. We become vitally interested in the most common words when we hear such combinations as "small joy," "poor way," and "little word," or when adjectives take the place of adverbs in "easy said" and "easy pleased."

It is necessary, though, to distinguish between the idioms and phrases Synge has taken from

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the Gaelic as he heard them spoken by the Irish peasants and his own images, similes and peculiar combinations. We know, for instance, from his travel journals that the Irish are fond of "power of" for "much" or "a great deal," and "at all" when they want to stress a point: "What is it ails you, at all?" But there are words like "queer" and "hard" that Synge's people use so abundantly and which are not particularly noticeable in Anglo-Irish speech. It is undoubtedly true that the Irish peasant, influenced so strongly by nature in all her aspects, would fill his speech with her every mood, so that we quite expect the profusion of images, similes and metaphors that the elements evoke in Synge's peasants. We can readily believe that Synge heard or could have heard a Wicklow glenswoman in oppressive and painful loneliness, speak of "the mists rolling down the bog...the winds crying out in the bits of broken trees...and the streams roaring with the rain." But it is a little difficult to conceive of the lad who would tell that he was "lone-
some as the moon of dawn" or speak of "poten-
tates" and "shying clods against the visage of
the stars." Yet, if Synge sometimes strained at
his figures of speech, he very often happened upon
such homely and vivid descriptions as a "big boast
of a man," "a grand eye for a woman," and "a queen
... making a stir to the edges of the seas."

It is evident, we hope, from the foregoing
pages that foreign and Continental influences
played only a minor, but not unimportant, part in
the development of Synge's skill in language; that
the Celtic Literary Renaissance fostered and en-
couraged activity in the Anglo-Irish medium; that
Synge, by temperament and training, naturally de-
veloped a concept of dramatic speech that embraced
reality and imagination; and that, perhaps above
all, the Irish peasantry provided the concrete
background and basis for a dialect that has won
Synge renown as the wonder of the "Western World."
CHAPTER V

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

In the foregoing chapters we have been concerned with analyzing Synge's concept of the drama as he expressed it in the themes, characters and dialogue of his six plays and as he professed it in the three prefaces to his plays and poems. After a study of his works there can be little argument over the definition of his idea of the drama as a combination of the real and the imaginative, for every plot, dealing though it does with the common things of life, is enhanced by a feeling for the subtle overtones of day by day existence; all the principal personages belong to the Irish peasantry, and yet they are each a colorful and intriguing variation of this class; and the language, while being home­ly and appropriate to glen and sea, has the ex­uberant imaginative quality of poetry.

Other writers have included these two diverse tendencies in their art, but to far different ef-
fect. Shakespeare was certainly a realist, not in selecting his themes from "common life," for his characters were, for the most part, drawn from the nobility, but in his keen analysis of a character; just as he was certainly a romantic is his lyric and dramatic poetry. Dante drew his people from the Florence of his day, but the scope and magnitude of his imagination outstepped the bonds of time. With Synge the combination of the real and the imaginative took on a different aspect. For him, reality in drama meant the portrayal of modern contemporary life, not as it was known in the city and in the social gatherings of the literati, but of a modern life that had escaped the artificiality and sophistication of urban civilization and had clung to the basic and elemental facts of human existence. Furthermore, for him, imagination in drama signified the selection of interesting deviations from this simple life and the creation of a medium which could properly express the overtones which stimulate the mind and heart. Thus, his plays, while a true and life-
like representation of a particular kind of life, could carry his reader or audience into an imaginative world where the dull and ordinary become the poetic without ceasing to be real.

It has been the purpose of this thesis, then, not so much to question the generally accepted opinion on Synge's concept of the drama, as to show how several factors were responsible for the development and realization of this concept by tracing these influences in the different aspects of his dramatic work. We have seen that the years Synge spent on the Continent later bore fruit in several phases of the plays; that Synge's association with the Celtic Literary Revival found eloquent reply in the plays produced under the auspices of the new Theatre; that his life and personality wound their way into the plays he penned; and that his travels on Aran and on the mainland, bringing him into intimate relationship with the Irish peasantry, cast the final and deciding note in the evolution of Synge's concept of the drama.

Many critics have studied and puzzled over
the philosophies and artistic creeds of various poets and playwrights of all ages and nationalities. Each of them has usually been interested in tracing through the works of a certain author a philosophy that was the result of a gradual synthesis of ideas garnered from innumerable sources in life, a philosophy that exhibited itself, in its several stages of development, in the successive works of the particular author. Anyone familiar with the poetry of Keats knows that his earlier attempts are truly the works of a young lad thrilled with the sensuous beauty of the world, while Lamia and The Eve of St. Agnes are the products of a mature genius who found that Beauty, the idol he worshipped, also touched the intellect and spirit.

But with John Synge it was different. The forces that molded his ideals had, for the most part, played their roles before he wrote his first play. He had, as we have seen, tried his hand at journalism and criticism with little satisfaction, when at the age of twenty-seven he left his lodgings in Paris for the comparatively crude life offered
by the Aran Islands. His dramatic writings cover a period of only eight years, and while they vary in the quality of their content and style, they cannot be said to fall into chronological categories. Instead, Synge displays the different facets of his genius in his six plays, and we find that sometimes an earlier play, like Riders to the Sea, surpasses in the amplitude of its vision the later Playboy of the Western World. Thus it is, that in this paper we have undertaken the study of Synge's conception of the drama, not with the belief that it was static and unchanging, but that the basic principals by which Synge labored remained fundamentally the same throughout his days of playwriting.

It is significant that Synge was not caught up in the current of modern literature that, abroad, flowed in many directions. Others of his time hailed Ibsen and Bjornsen as leaders in the movement against Victorian prudishness and sentimentality. Synge, too, was in sympathy with this revolt, and probably during his stay in Germany,
where he had become interested in the peasant drama that Hauptmann offered, he acquired a strong taste for drama that presented the elemental problems of human relations unadorned by superficial social conventions. This craving for the unvarnished truth accorded with Synge's philosophy, but the gloom and paralyzing horror of *Ghosts* and the undisguised propaganda of *A Doll's House* and *An Enemy of the People* were distasteful to him. Synge would not question the accuracy and artistic value of a play concerned with a young wife's revolt against her husband's smugness and self-satisfaction, for he himself created Nora Burke, the very antithesis of the average Irish farmer's wife; but he turned away from Ibsen's obvious moral censure and the language begotten by didacticism.

In fact, Synge was so imbued with the idea that the drama is serious only insofar as it nourishes the imagination that he eschewed the right of the dramatist to form judgments. But although Synge's belief in the necessity for aesthetic purity in drama is to be admired, we cannot but dis-
agree with him when we remember that Art in all its forms must appeal in some degree to the intellect as well as to the emotions; and it is the province of the intellect to decide about the relative truth of a piece of art, to judge the moral worth of the dramatist's characters and of his view of life. An artist can despise "ideas," but he cannot forget that his readers and audience have the right to accept and reject his work, as it possesses or lacks truth, and that he in turn has the obligation to check his imagination if it causes him to stray from what the mind deems sane and sound.

When Synge was in Paris he was in more direct contact with the tendency that, beginning as realism, degenerated into naturalism. Synge, as we have pointed out in earlier chapters, did not know these writers personally, nor did he relish their morbid, pessimistic view of life. We can say, however, that Synge was probably influenced in some measure by the frequent occurrence of this starkly realistic attitude among his literary contemporaries; that perhaps the themes, characters, and even
the dialogue of his plays, reflect his acquaintanceship with this phase of the literary art of the period.

At the time of Synge's stay in Paris, another very different group was working simultaneously with the Naturalists in the field of letters. But with the Symbolists, Huysmans and Mallarme, Synge had as little in common as he had with Zola. His imagination sometimes carried him far afield, but he never lost touch with common life, as did these Decadents, who like Wilde in England, revelled in juggling words and in contriving elaborately beautiful speech. Synge's themes and characters owe nothing to the influence of this group, but it is possible that his rich, varied, and wonderfully copious dialogue was in part the result of his admiration for the stylistic finesse and laborious work habits these writers displayed.

Although Synge was not fond of the type of literature considered above, he was certainly impressed with other writers with whom he came in contact while he was on the Continent. We have
noticed that not only did he consider Pierre Loti the greatest living prose writer, but that he so admired Loti's work with the Breton dialect that he wanted to do something similar in the Anglo-Irish dialect. We have already seen the similarities between Loti's tale of the sea and Synge's *Riders to the Sea*, noticing too that Synge's master hand made his work far superior in both theme and style to that of Loti. Another who appealed to Synge, and whom he met in his study of French literature, was François Villon. We cannot say that Synge borrowed any of his plots or characters from this colorful medievalist, but there is certainly evidence of Synge's affection for the ribald, laughing, poetic Villon in such plays as *The Tinker's Wedding* and *The Well of the Saints*.

In our study of the influences that are responsible for Synge's concept of the drama we have not forgotten Racine, the one whom Synge, time and again, claimed to be his favorite author. In this case, also, Synge did not attempt to model his plays on those of the seventeenth century classicist, but
it is not too much to say that Synge, consciously, in his meticulous striving for an uncluttered, simple art, and unconsciously, in his absorption of the grandeur and restrained dignity in the works of his famous predecessor, profited greatly from his intensive study and love of Racine.

But if his Continental experiences bequeathed him little more than a heightened distaste for certain literary trends and a quickened interest in the possibilities that language offered, Synge's association with the Irish Literary Renaissance rendered him definite and concrete assistance. Although Synge was a staunch and loyal Gael, he was not an avid patriot in the manner of many of his colleagues; and yet, as an intimate of Yeats and Lady Gregory he shared their belief that the hope for Irish drama was in the Irish Literary Theatre. It was upon the advice of Yeats that Synge left Paris for the Aran Islands, and it was Yeats' encouragement and steadfast backing when the storm of protest greeted Synge's plays that enabled the new playwright to continue his work, unaltered by
the fire of public opinion. Synge, to be sure, had no part in the spirituality of the Yeatsian school, but we cannot deny that as a sponsor of Synge's plays Yeats was important to the perseverance and development of Synge's concept of the drama. As the leader of the newly formed Theatre Yeats was largely responsible for the dramatic creed of this group. That Synge agreed with the simple, basic requirements of the Irish Renaissance we know from the preface to his Poems and Translations.

The poetry of exaltation will be always the highest; but when men lose their poetic feeling for ordinary life, and cannot write poetry of ordinary things, their exalted poetry is likely to lose its strength of exaltation, in the way men cease to build beautiful churches when they have lost happiness in building shops... Even if we grant that exalted poetry can be kept successful by itself, the strong things of life are needed in poetry also, to show that what is exalted and tender is not made by feeble blood.63

We are heartily in accord with Dr. Morton

63 Ibid., p. 271.
Zabel's statement, applied to the above quotation.

It is difficult to believe that this plain-spoken fundamentalism was written down shortly after the activity of the Symbolists in Paris or of Pater's disciples in London, and by a man who had known both. To men less genuinely Irish than Synge and Yeats, their reversion to the elementary requirements of a national culture would have been impossible.64

Synge's writing was opportunely timed with the revival of the native tongue in popular and literary use. He admired Dr. Hyde and the work of the Gaelic League, and it is highly probable that without Dr. Hyde's collections from older Celtic literature, he would not have expressed so well the true Irish spirit. As it is, however, Synge, although he knew only the folk-poets and not the scholars rich in the fullness of the Gaelic tradition, in the stark clarity of his characters and dialogue, is anything but alien to the Irish mind. "John Synge's affinities were not with Renaissance, but with medieval art. And being medieval he is in line with the last poets

of the Gaelic literary tradition."

Unlike many famous dramatists whose personalities do not appear in their plays, Synge filled every play with some phase of his individuality. He was born and reared a member of the Ascendancy, and so we have not been too greatly surprised to find, except for Riders to the Sea, an almost complete lack of understanding or appreciation of the importance of religion in the lives of the Irish people. Yet, although Synge often laughed ironi-
cally, he was no cynic. Ill health shadowed his whole life, as it did blind Milton, and during his writing years the spectre of death was close beside him. No wonder, then, that he sought a vivid, wild, primitive life to portray, and that sometimes his deeply genuine emotion resulted in a seemingly callous outlook on life. His good friend Yeats says with truth: "All minds that have a wisdom come of tragic reality seem morbid to those that are accustomed to writers who have not faced reality at all." In Synge's own life re-


ality was a hard, merciless master that denied him love, health, and even a few short months to complete his _Deirdre_, and in the lives of his characters and in the themes of his plays Synge depicted his view of the glories and sorrows of life.

Synge's simplicity strikes the keynote of his character. He was truly interested in living people, not with the ulterior motive of the psychologist or preacher, but for the joy he experienced in observing men and women. He was apparently, though not really, an egotist, one so sure of the worth of his own art creed that other writers hardly existed for him at all. He was anxious to be independent, to let nothing, not even mob riots, stir his mind from its accustomed path; and so he developed a mental discipline that stood his drama in good stead. This quality of intensity permeated all his work and enabled him, not "to hold the mirror up to nature," but to utilize the daily events of life and to realize the humanity of his characters. If, sometimes,
his people are slightly out of balance, it is to be remembered that, "It takes time before one can recognize that their actuality is but an imagery poured from a mind intensely creative, that fact always falls into its true place in the poet's vision, never becoming merged in speculation, yet never leading him to forget that appearance is after all only a representation of something which lies behind."

It was the Aran Islands that awakened this mood of brooding intensity in Synge. Up to this time his genius had been prepared and conditioned by his education and by his experiences on the Continent, but it had lain dormant because it had found no fertile soil for the expression of its artistic cravings. It was in Ireland that Synge found the solid reality for which he yearned; it was on rock-bound Inishmann and in the glens of Wicklow that he discovered a people whose mind and heart he innately understood; it was there with the wild sea and the lonely bogs that he happened

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upon the primitive strength and the superb joy which he believed were essential to the fecundity of an almost sterile modern drama.

He found there a living language of extraordinary beauty and expressiveness, and a people who in their unceasing struggle with a barren soil and a merciless sea, had stood aside and let mankind go by them—full of strange stories and strange beliefs, still cherishing the inheritance of a half-forgotten poetry—a people with an almost barbarous force of passion, yet drilled by the long exigence of their relentless world into a kind of natural aristocracy. The discovery produced in him a regeneration almost physical. Old habits of mind and old ideals fell from him, and the new life became his natural medium of thought and expression.68

There are critics who would contest the sincerity of one who writes of an environment alien to his way of life, especially of one who made his home in the Latin Quarter of Paris and fraternized with the literary lights of the day. But although Synge was no peasant, he had never been

68 Ibid., p. 227.
an intimate member of the Continental art circle; and so while he took a big step in his conversion from Parisian aesthetics to Irish folklore, he was really finding himself and realizing latent possibilities when he came home to Ireland. By his background and training he was prepared to study the Irish peasant objectively, and by the plentitude of his deep personal sympathy he was ready to understand and appreciate the thoughts and emotions dominant in a people far from modern civilization.

Anyone who has read The Aran Islands can testify to Synge's faithful reproduction of everything he met in Ireland. We have found in the plays, under different circumstances of course, plots that are a development of folk tales he heard from his island friends, characters who are comparable to those he describes in his travel books, and whole passages of dialogue, taken almost verbatim from the speech of some humble peasant. Since he practically overlooked the spiritual aspect of Irish rural life, Synge saw this
life as a species of latter-day Paganism; he identified its moods with the phases of nature, and so it was not difficult for him, loving nature as he did, to conceive a peasant drama, overhung, as is Riders to the Sea, by a sense of inevitable doom, or one, such as The Tinker's Wedding, abounding in the spirit of the folk tale.

It is a matter of conjecture whether one, whose art embraced two such different plays as those mentioned above, would have remained on the same artistic plane, or whether he would have gone forward into new realms, if he had lived beyond his thirty-eight years. Certainly we would not be so rash as to agree with those who indiscriminately claim that Synge's plays span the farthest poles of human relations, for certainly there are fields of thought and emotion he left untouched. He was not moved by the Christian spirit of renunciation, he did not experience the quiet joy of peace, and he did not know the torment of souls racked by doubt and remorse, nor feel the glory that comes to those who are blessed with a vision of the larger, more
 spiritually satisfying realities.

Yet, if Synge falls short in these respects, we can consider his work in the light of the scope it covers, and we can be sure, that in his six plays he left the Irish Theatre a valuable inheritance. We can rightly say, too, that his comedy is refreshing and that his tragedy ennobles the mind and heart. In *Deirdre of the Sorrows*, where Synge passes from the luxurious lyricism of *The Playboy of the Western World* to a homely dramatic speech, we have a possible indication that Synge's future plays might have taken a more truly "serious" tone. But as it is, Synge's work stands out as a wonderful collaboration of his education and literary experiences, and of his deep, vital personality, with the peasant life he portrayed.

Now, only thirty-six years after his death, it is difficult to say whether Synge's dramatic art will abide, but the question is not, "if it be clever or forceful, analytical or brilliant, but merely one of the final appeal of Beauty, and by such an appeal there seems little question in
the matter." In his own time and after his death, the plays brooked rigorous mob censorship, but found after each production, both at home and abroad, new friends to acclaim the type of beauty represented in them. In Ireland, where inherited prejudice colored the political, social and literary life, Synge's controversial dramas were a step toward an enlightened and critical understanding.

In the Shadow of the Glen, Synge's first play to be produced, struck a new note in the literature of the Celtic Renaissance and brought the Abbey Theatre a reputation for free thinking, radical drama.

Its importance as a piece of drama, coming where and when it did, is that it so strongly brought back the feel of folk literature, its directness, and brought also back to the drama of those days, afflicted as it was either with the artificiality of the drawing room or the sophistication of 'poetic' playwrights, the free air of the hills,
as well as human souls
who felt reality only the
penalty of Adam. 70

Other Irish playwrights, such as Padriac Colum and Lennox Robinson, followed Synge with realistic peasant drama; John Masefield, Synge's English friend, continued, with his poignantly beautiful _Tragedy of Nan_, in a dialect of his own nation, the trend heralded by Synge's one-act play; and in the United States, Eugene O'Neill, striving, in _The Emperor Jones_, to dramatize the emotions of a primitive mind, has been slightly reminiscent of Irish peasant drama. Perhaps, Yeats, who "discovered" Synge but in no way influenced his dramatic technique, is the most interesting example of Synge's mark on his contemporaries, for Yeats' later work, quite free of his former vague, dreamy spiritualism, has that intensity that Synge was instrumental in restoring to English literature. Synge and those like him who believed that a play was a medium of art that could imaginatively and poetically express the realities of life through its theme, characters, and dialogue, have been

responsible for the revival in contemporary drama of this quality of poetic imagination, lost since the Elizabethans, which makes so recent a play as Tennessee William's *The Glass Menagerie* stand out from the current, cheap exhibitionist brand of realism, not as just a box office success, but as a distinct dramatic achievement.
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The thesis submitted by Mary Laurette Spehn has been read and approved by three members of the Department of English.

The final copies have been examined by the director of the thesis and the signature which appears below verifies the fact that any necessary changes have been incorporated, and that the thesis is now given final approval with reference to content, form, and mechanical accuracy.

The thesis is therefore accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Degree of Master of Arts.

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Date

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