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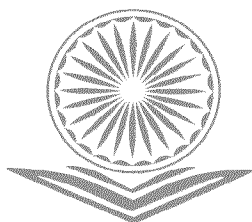
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25. The Shadow of the Glen: A Feminist Work

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Abstract

John Millington Synge was widely regarded as the most influential Irish dramatist of the twentieth century. He was an Irish playwright, poet, prose writer, and collector of folklore. He was one of the co-founders of the Abbey Theatre. He is best known for the play "The Playboy of the Western World". Synge wrote many well-known plays, including "Riders to the Sea", which is often considered to be his strongest literary work. Although he came from an Anglo-Irish background, his writings are mainly concerned with the world of the Roman Catholic peasants of rural Ireland. John Millington Synge's *The Shadow of the Glen* (originally titled *In the Shadow of the Glen*) premiered on October 8, 1903 as a production of the Irish National Theatre Society. Although it was the third play completed by Synge, it was the first to be produced, and it created an immediate controversy for the author and the National Theatre. Although the play's focus on a loveless and decaying marriage hardly represented a new subject for drama, many Irish nationalists saw Synge's play as nothing less than an affront to Irish femininity. This paper tries to highlight how Synge has treated feminism in his work particularly in *The Shadow of the Glen*.

Key Words: folk tale- fantasy-feminism- loneliness -loveless marriage-shadow-Glen

Introduction

'The Shadow of the Glen' dramatizes a folk-tale and popular fantasy, the story of the ageing husband who pretends to be dead in order to catch his young wife with her lover. Synge had heard a vision of this story in Irish from old Pat Dirane, a blind man in the Aran Islands.⁰¹ He had recorded it in his diary. It was Synge's third play to be completed, following 'When the Moon Has Set' and 'Riders to the Sea'. In the fall of 1902, Synge brought 'The Shadow of the Glen' (and 'Riders to the Sea') with him on a visit to Coole Park and showed both plays to Yeats and Lady Gregory. The plays were read with much approval.⁰² Unlike *Riders*, *The Shadow* was accepted immediately by the Irish actors.⁰³ *Shadow* was produced along with Yeats' 'The King's Threshold' by W.G. Fay at Irish National Theatre Society at Molesworth Hall on October 8, 1903. It was published by Yeats in *Samhain* in December 1904.

Three extracts from Synge's account of the Aran Islands are more important than the others as they provided Synge with the raw material for three of his plays. The first extract relates a story told to Synge by an old man called Pat Dirane. It is a story of an unfaithful wife.

It was within this extraordinary Wicklow landscape that he chose to dramatize the story of the unfaithful wife. In Synge's version the shanachie becomes the Tramp, the old man and his young wife are characterized as Dan Burke and Nora Burke, the lover is an ineffectual young shepherd named Michael Dara. He is contrasted with a former lover of Nora- One Patch Darcy, a powerful and virile shepherd who had recently gone mad and died. Synge's play differs from the folk tale in that the adultery and the murder of the lover are omitted, and as its conclusion Nora, driven out of her home by her husband, is forced to seek a new life with the Tramp.

The extension or projection of the play takes place in several dimensions. The most important is language, that is powerfully suggest the strange and numinous atmosphere of the Glen; for Synge, though he would have no truck with Yeats' fairy world, was intensely aware of the genius of lonely places.⁰⁴ Character is revealed bit by bit, more often in speech than in the occasional significant gesture or smile. The mysterious heroic figure of the dead Patch Darcy is linked, ironically, to the other characters by the sheep imagery; and Darcy, Dan, Nora, are all gathered under the Glen's shadow by the recurrent queer; which has overtones of the fey, the supra-natural, as well as derangement of the mind.

The potential solemnity of the work is retained, and amplified by eerie suggestion; the corpse has not been "tidied" because of the curse upon Nora if she touches him, and that might be transferred - such is the curse of curses- to the Tramp. There is a similar story told to Synge of a dying woman who forbade her daughter to touch her hair; a year later the daughter, acting on a hint, dug up the body and found that the hair had been used to conceal a hoard of sovereigns.⁰⁵

Patch Darcy moves uneasily in the background; we feel that Nora's whistle in the night might call him instead of Michael. The isolation of the cottage, the unpitying rain, is built up in Nora's which reveals, in the poetry, her own loneliness and passion. She has no illusions as to her future as a tramp's doxy. She makes her impassioned defence :

What way would a woman live in a lonesome place the like of this place, and she not making a talk with the men passing ?⁰⁶

We are left with the second and final reversal; the about - to-be wronged husband sits down to drink with his would - be betrayer. This is an almost Shavian twist, an expression of Synge's delighted irony. 'The Shadow of The Glen' is neither comedy nor tragedy; it has elements of comedy which are not fully exploited in the present, elements of tragedy which are,

perhaps, projected into the future after the curtain has fallen. Yet the irony of the ending is the only possible aesthetic resolution of the dilemma that the play presents. Husband and wife are held in a careful dramatic balance. On his side is convention, the practice of the late marriage, the union of January and May; his right, in a country where divorce is unknown, to turn her out of doors when her prospective unfaithfulness has been made known before witnesses. According to these lights he has not failed; he could still have given her,

The half of the dry bed, and good food in your mouth.

The loveless marriage has deprived Nora children, brought her to the horrors of loneliness on the hill-farm, to the unending drudgery of its work, to the man who was “cold” always. Patch Darcy is dead, no more than a memory; Michael Dara is a poor - humorous flicker of maternal tenderness for the old man.⁰⁷

And what way will yourself live from this day, with none to care you?

And yet the complexity, the essential femininity of Nora’s character is such that she herself does not understand it. Only the Tramp turned poet has anything to offer; and she knows that it will betray her; but it has been a fine bit of talk, and she will go with him. Nora we have already considered the poetry that responds to that of the Tramp, the woman’s realism that foresees her lot with him, and the woman’s dread of old age and the bitter exaltation of,⁰⁸

But you’ve a fine bit of talk, stranger, and it’s with yourself I’ll go.

The opening scene of the play demonstrates very clearly the down-to-earth, naturalistic nature of Nora. The Tramp is startled when he discovers that there is a corpse in the room, but Nora seems unconcerned even callous. ‘It doesn’t matter any way’, she shrugs. The opening scene also emphasizes Nora’s sexuality. she says of her husband, ‘he was always cold, every day since I knew him, and every night, stranger’.⁰⁹ She offers the Tramp whisky and her husband’s pipe and tobacco. At this point in the play, when she speaks of loneliness, her mood is sexually suggestive rather than melancholic. When the tramp says that most women, on such a dark night, would be afraid of him, Nora retorts, ‘I’ am thinking many would be a feared, but I never knew what way I’d be a feared of beggar or bishop or any man of you at all’.¹⁰

Along with the reflection of the sex horrors, Synge had encountered in his travels, it also carries another thematic burden, one which reflects the loneliness, sadness and alienation. Within this context, Nora is closer to Yeats’s description of her as a ‘woman melancholy as a curlew’. She is a creature intensely aware of the passing of time and the imminence of death. It is this tragic awareness that saves her from being merely a woman ‘wearing her lutes upon her sleeves’ she is trapped by her realization that no matter what course she takes in life, none seems to offer her the freedom she carves.

Conclusion

We may come to the conclusion that 'The Shadow of the Glen' seems innocent enough today, but we can understand why audiences of 1903 could find it objectionable. It is based upon a folklore - the jealous husband who feigns death to test the fidelity of his spouse. Synge gave it an application to its Irish setting which the folk tale did not have. In making Nora Burke a young girl married not only to a jealous husband but an old one "the like of a sick sheep closes to your ear", Synge was indeed making a pertinent observation on an Irish institution - the loveless marriage. Rural Ireland sees many marriages like Nora is because of a peculiar fact of Irish life, - the inability, or unwillingness, of men to marry until their youth has left them. We can cite many Irish writers, from the author of "The Midnight Court" in the eighteenth century to the author of "The Great Hunger" in the twentieth - have dramatized this tragic fact. For an imaginative girl like Nora, in whom the blood ran strong, such a life would have been frustrating enough. Synge transplanted his play to Glenmalur where the wildness and isolation of the setting and the sweeping fogs which blot out the rugged landscape would intensify her loneliness and exaggerate her desperate need for the companionship of a man more nearly her own age. The Shadow of the Glen is unquestionably a feminist work. However, it is no lifeless tract. The feminist theme of the play is embedded in the character of Nora Burke herself. She is its most developed and attractive character; she is feisty, tough, and fearless.

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