

The Theme of the Well of The Saints

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Abstract

The Well of the Saints, a three act drama has been written by Irish playwright J. M. Synge. This play was first performed at the Abbey Theatre by the Irish National Theatre Society in February 1905. The General theme stated at the beginning of the play is the illusion of life and the disillusionment with life. The illusion and disillusion form the idea of the Well of the Saints. The Well of the Saints is an ironical comedy on the theme of a man and his wife. The two are blind and earn their bread by begging alms. Naturally their supreme wish is to become able to see the world at large. Their sight is restored by saints. At the restoration of sight they find that the world is beautiful and they themselves are ugly. Then they are satisfied in losing their sight again. In this play Synge looks at humanity with a comic appreciation. This play “The well of the saints” like “The Shadow of the Glen” is based on a legend. Both Martin Doul and Mary Doul consider themselves the most beautiful couple and the finest man and woman. Both Martin Doul—the hero and Mary Doul—the heroine are utterly unconventional. This is the only play in English Literature dealing with two such figures—the blind male protagonist and the blind female protagonist. No other dramatist could be able to present dramatic action with the help of two disabled personages.

Key Words: The illusion of life and the disillusionment with life, Irony and Humor

Introduction

The superiority of this play over other plays becomes obvious due to dramatic action. “King Lear” of Shakespeare has been criticized for lack of dramatic action. Blindness has been a recurring theme of drama since the very beginnings. When blindness appears in a play it is always worthwhile to look for the broader significance. In Sophocles’s “Oedipus Rex”, the king’s blinding of himself at the end is symbolic because he has been blind to the truth throughout the play. The theme of

actual blindness appears in Shakespeare’s play as well. In “King Lear” the “imagery of mental blindness (Lear cannot see the truth about his daughters) is picked up in physical action. In John Millington Synge’s “The Well of the Saints” blindness is a dominant factor because the two main characters are blind in most of the play. The theme of a play may surpass the boundaries of political correctness in case it touches upon established stereotypes. Writing about blind people ridiculed by their fellow villagers is a sensitive topic. Synge’s play itself

contains references to common stereotypes, such as the association of physical deformity with wickedness and stupidity. Synge's play does not dramatise the sensitive issue of physical defect. Blindness in the play should rather be interpreted in a symbolic way, through which such themes as illusion and reality, the willing suspension of disbelief, the power of language and the role of religion and society can be explored. In the following paragraphs these issues will be considered in the light of the symbolic "blindness"-motif.

The alternating states of blindness and vision contribute to the symmetrical structure of the play. The beggar couple, Martin and Mary Doul are blind in the first act. They are deceived by their fellow villagers so that they believe that they are beautiful, while in fact, as the stage instruction states, they are old, ugly, "weather-beaten" beggars. At the end of Act I a Saint arrives who restores their sight with the help of some holy water from "the well of the saints." Throughout Act II Martin and Mary can see. With the restoration of their sight they are forced to face the world of down-to-earth reality. The setting also changes in this act from the roadside to Timmy's forge: "the setting and properties — the forge, the broken wheels, the boarded well — mark the couple's entry into the hard world of objectivity" (King 116). The Saint's wonder breaks the couple's previous world of imagination and the

encounter with reality results in despair and "an almost total estrangement between man and wife" (King 117). In Act III the symmetry of the play's structure becomes complete when the couples lose their sight again and willfully decide not to have it restored. Thus they willingly return to a world of illusion in which they can imagine for themselves their future beauty as old white-haired and white-bearded people. The setting is also the same as in Act I.

The observation of the play's structure already poses the problem of blindness and sight, which is reflected in the duality of illusion and reality. At first it may seem that the blind couple are innocent victims of the village people's deceit, thus the play evokes our pity for Martin and Mary. There are, however, several remarks by the characters which may suggest that the couple themselves have readily accepted the lies told by the villagers and did not make any effort to explore the truth. In Act I, for example, when Timmy is telling Martin about the arrival of the Saint and the wonder that is to happen, he says the following: "That's the truth, Martin Doul, and you may believe it now, for you're after believing a power of things weren't likely at all" (65). This is a clear indication of the fact that the village people, besides cheating the couple, also gave them hints that they did not know the truth. The following dialogue is also indicative of this:

MARTIN DOUL. It's the truth she's saying, and if bell-ringing is

a fine life, yet I'm thinking, maybe, it's better I am wedded with the beautiful dark woman of Ballinatone.

MOLLY BYRNE. [Scornfully] You're thinking that, God help you; but it's little you know of her at all.

.....

TIMMY. [Awkwardly] It's well you know the way she is; for the like of you do have great knowledge in the feeling of your hands. (69)

Timmy the smith's last remark suggests another possibility of learning the truth for the blind couple, the sense of touch. Other senses could also be involved in the process of cognition. The sense of hearing is touched upon in Martin's remark at the beginning of Act I:

"For you've a queer cracked voice, the Lord have mercy on you, if it's fine to look on you are itself" (61). Despite all such hits as those mentioned above the couple seem to have no doubt in the lies they were told, hence the surprise they get after their sight is recovered. From now on, it is worth examining two questions: how the blind couple's imaginary world is created and why.

The medium through which the blind couple's world of imagination is created is language. Most of Synge's critics appreciate the use of language in

his plays. In his most widely discussed play, The Playboy of the Western World, it is a central theme how language can be exploited to tell lies and construct a forged identity of the hero Christy Mahon, who has killed his tyrannical father. In The Well of the Saints language has a dominant role as well throughout the play.

Another part of the image is perhaps created by the blind beggars' own imagination of their beauty, contradicting even their actual physical experiences. One example besides the paradox between Mary's cracked voice and her imagined beauty, is the scene in which Mary explains how the rough weather makes her skin beautiful: "I've heard tell there isn't anything like the wet south wind does be blowing upon us for keeping a white beautiful skin – the like of my skin – on your neck and on your brows" (61).

In the last act the couple is no longer dependent on the community in creating their fantasy. They consciously create an imaginary beauty for themselves again with the help of words. They build up a new illusion about what King calls their "beauty-that-is-to-come" (124). However, the words referring to lying and talking in their dialogue indicate the verbal character of their imagination:

MARY DOUL. [Puzzled at joy of his voice] If you'd anything but lies to say you'd be talking yourself.

MARTIN DOUL. [Bursting with excitement] I've this to say, Mary Doul. I'll be letting my beard grow in a short while, a beautiful, long, white, silken, steamy beard; you wouldn't see the like of in the eastern world" (93-94)

Besides the possibility to create an illusory world through words, another remarkable characteristic of the play's language is its realism. Joseph Wood Krutch compares Synge to such authors as Homer and Shakespeare in his attitude to literature as being true and beautiful at the same time (95). Synge saw that the way to achieving "Truth" and "Beauty" in literature is to return to the folk roots of literature and to draw one's theme and language from simple people (Krutch 95). The beauty and poetic quality of the language is perhaps best illustrated by a passage in which Martin reflects upon the beauties of the world as seen or rather perceived by a blind man:

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 minds into a grand sky, and seeing lakes, and big rivers, and fine hills for taking the plough. (99)

Language in the play also functions

as a source of comedy through the semantic ambiguities in the dialogues pointed out by Mary C. King. King argues that in the play there is a divergence between word and referent (108). The comic ambiguities are mainly concerned with Mary's legendary beauty as related by the village folk. She is often likened to the most admired beauty of the village, the fair-haired and white-skinned Molly Byrne, whom Martin takes for his wife when his sight is restored. Thus there are remarks made by the blind Martin in Act I such as Mary was "plaiting her yellow hair" (61), while the reality is strikingly different. Another comic ambiguity in the text is that Mary is called "the beautiful dark woman" (62) which is in contrast with her "yellow hair," but the adjective "dark" also refers to "blind" in other parts of the play.

While it has been examined at some length how the divergence between reality and imagination is created by means of language.

The willing suspension of disbelief practiced by the blind couple can also be interpreted as a way of self-deception. As it has already been mentioned, Martin and Mary are first deceived by their fellow villagers, but since what they hear fits their imagination of their desired beauty they accept the lie without making much effort to question it. In Act I Martin expresses his longing for the recovery of his sight in order to make sure that his imaginary picture of

themselves is in fact true: "it'd be a grand thing if we could see ourselves for one hour, or a minute itself, the way we'd know surely we were the finest man and the finest woman of the seven counties of the east" (62). These sentences tell about Martin's conviction of the truth of their illusion and also about their hoping for a final certainty of its reality.

When their sight is restored at the end of Act I, Martin and Mary have to face reality as it is. Their recognition of their actual physical appearances and the deceit they were living in results in immediate disappointment and the rejection of each other, which is worsened by the villagers' ridiculing the poor beggars.

Act II follows the process at the end of which Martin and Mary decide to return to their world of illusion instead of facing the crude realities of life.

Although the Saint's cure gave the blind couple a chance of integrating into the society of the seeing people, they willingly decide in Act III to return to the state of illusion and blindness. In William's interpretation, the illusion of their own beauty gave Martin and Mary joy and self-respect, while the restoration of their sight revealed their ugliness and brought them near to destruction.

It is worth reflecting on the beggar

couple's choice of blindness instead of seeing reality.

Here a parallel can be drawn between the protagonists of the play and the Irish audience which harshly criticized the play at its first performance. Synge once said that "no drama can grow out of anything other than the fundamental realities of life" Martin and Mary, turned against this vision of reality in an idealistic way in the sense that they chose their "happiness in illusion"

Conclusion:

This close linking of the fibers of the plot through the symbols makes this play superior to other comedies of Synge. By choosing blind people as the protagonists of his play, Synge demonstrated the duality of illusion and reality present in everyday life. The theme of creative imagination and the willing suspension of disbelief are also present in his works and it offers a way of exploring the process of artistic creation as well. The theme of blindness gives us the possibility of observing the use of language in constructing real or imaginary worlds through this process of social interaction. Thus the significance of blindness in the play goes beyond the depiction of a physical defect and its treatment by society into the realm of the philosophical and psychological questions of perception and of being

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