

## The Theme of *The Shadow of the Glen*

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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" which caused riots during its opening run at the Abbey theatre. 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. The resulting confrontations established the author's volatile relationship with the nationalist community in Ireland and set the stage for the more massive and far-reaching conflict.

**Key Words:** John Millington, Synge, *The Shadow of the Glen*, etc.

### Introduction:

The shadow of the glen is a one act play. It is a commentary on the loveless marriage of the Irish peasants. It is the time of evening when it is raining. A woman marries an old farmer for sake of money. She takes all money from the farmer and declares him dead. She goes to tell the neighbor that her husband is dead and she starts to talk with Tramp but actually the old farmer is alive. The Tramp is left with the supposedly dead man and he is perplexed.

To the utter surprise of the Tramp the dead man throws off his sheet. The Tramp is afraid. The old farmer tells him that he was not dead. Then he takes Tramp into secret

and lies down again. But he has got his stick ready to deal with the young man, the supposed lover of his wife. He knows that his bad wife will bring that particular young man back to dispose of his body. When his bad wife comes, the old farmer asks her to leave his cottage forever. The woman goes out with the Tramp. The scene closes with the old farmer and the young man, a supposed lover of his bad wife. They are drinking together by the fire. The old man's anger dies down. The other is really an innocent young man.

*The Shadow of the Glen* is a one-act play written by the Irish playwright J. M. Synge and first performed at the Moles worth Hall,

Dublin, on October 8, 1903. It was the first of Synge's plays to be performed on stage. It is set in an isolated cottage in County Wick low

A tramp seeking shelter in the Burkes' isolated farmhouse finds Nora tending to the corpse of Dan. Nora goes out to find Michael, and Dan reveals to the tramp that his death is a mere ruse. He plays dead again when Nora and Michael return, but leaps up in protest when Michael proposes to Nora. Dan kicks Nora out to wander the roads and she leaves with the tramp, who promises her a life of freedom.

J. M. Synge burst on to the scene in 1903 when his first play *The Shadow of the Glen* caused a stir among audiences and critics alike during its opening run in Dublin. Over the next two years Synge produced another two plays: *Riders to the Sea* (1904), which is considered to be one of the greatest one-act plays in the history of modern drama; and *The Well of the Saints* (1905) which celebrates the imagination and heroism of the dissident who refuses to be coerced into conformity at the behest of the moral majority. Synge may well have drawn on the lessons of the latter play when in 1907 he became notorious as the author of *The Playboy of the Western World* which caused riots in the Abbey Theatre and brought his work to the attention of the wider world for the first time. Two other plays, *The Tinker's Wedding* written in 1907 and *Deirdre of the Sorrows* staged posthumously in 1910 complete the canon of Synge's plays.

In *The Shadow of the Glen* one can already trace the ways in which narration affects the characters' perception of themselves and

their relationship to space while altering at the same time our perception of dramatic character and space. This one-act play makes use of a single set, a cottage kitchen, in which dramatic action unfolds in the form of a primarily linguistic activity. The topology of the play is simple: the mimetic (represented) space is identified with the inside, whereas the digenetic is identified with the outside, which is never seen but only reported. The latter is constantly referred to by the characters; it tends to "replace the space verbally." Yet the tension between the two is maintained as long as the opposition between the values that they embody is not resolved for Nora, who is caught in-between. The cottage, mimetic space, signifies a complicated set of values associated with marriage. It functions both as an institutional area and a private space and as such it is deeply contradictory. Its contradictory character pertains to the conflict between the emotional demands resulting from the private aspect of marriage and the inexorably institutional logic which determines marriage in the last analysis. Marriage here, as in *The Playboy*, is presented as a force of social and individual stabilization. Synge's argument is that the tying down of the individual through and within marriage into a fixed position is a socially sanctioned but nonetheless, severe form of restraint. It works against the natural human urge to move as a nomad.

Nora's explanation of her motives for marrying a man so unlike her, clearly brings into focus the combination of material comfort and psychological security that marriage offers:

Nora: "What way would I live, and I an old woman if I didn't marry a man

with a bit of farm, and cows on it, and sheep on the back hills?" (10)

Yet, her submission to the demands of the social at the expense of her emotional life inevitably affects the way she relates to the cottage. This comes to signify the strictly institutional aspect of marriage since, as a private space, where emotional and sexual needs should ideally be met; it has nothing to offer her. Nora's lack of sexual fulfillment becomes clear in her reference to her husband in the following lines:

"Maybe cold would be no sign of death with the like of him, for he was always cold, every day since I knew him — and every night, stranger" — Nora (35).

Moreover, the "quiet life" it embodies has inhibited her development by fragmenting it into a small number of routine movements. Housework fixes her into the interior while life outside follows its course:

*The Shadow of the Glen* depicts Nora Burke in the kitchen of her cottage. It is a typical Irish peasant cottage, with a turf fire and a table in the center of the room. A front door and a small door to a bedroom are upstage. On a bed against the back wall lies a body covered with a white sheet. The stage directions indicate that there are cakes, glasses, and whiskey on the table, "as if for a wake."

As Nora is clearing things and lighting candles, there is a knock at the door.

Removing a lot of money from the table, she answers it. She is greeted by a stranger, who says that he is walking to the fair and asks whether he may come out of the rain and stay the night. She consents readily.

The stranger is startled by the sight of the corpse on the bed. Nora tells him that it is her husband and he died only hours before. When he asks why she has not laid him out or arranged him formally, she tells him that he cursed her, or anybody else, who might touch his body if he were to die suddenly.

As they talk, Nora describes her husband's sudden illness and the great melodrama of his death throes. She offers the Tramp whiskey and one of her husband's tobacco pipes. When he asks why she is not afraid to let him in when no man is around and she is so far from neighbors, she says that she is not afraid of "beggar or bishop or any man of you at all." They discover that they have a friend in common, one Patch Darcy. The stranger tells of being frightened by weird noises as he walked alone among the hills. He later learned that they were caused by Darcy, who had gone mad and died of exposure in the hills. Nora says that Darcy had had the habit of stopping in for a visit when he passed her glen and it had kept her from being lonely.

The mention of loneliness reminds Nora to ask whether the Tramp has seen anyone on the path. When he says that he did see a young man trying to control a herd of sheep, Nora quickly asks him to stay and watch the corpse while she finds him. She wants to spread the word that her husband has died. When the tramp offers to go, she declines, clearly wanting to see the young.

Nora leaves. The tramp sits before the fire. Behind him, the sheet begins to move, and the corpse begins to rise. When he finally notices this, the tramp leaps up in terror. The "corpse," trying to calm him, reveals that he is not dead after all.

**Conclusion:**

The shadow of the glen, a tragic-comedy aroused much protest when it was first produced in Dublin in 1903. Irish nationalist considered Irish women more virtuous than English women. When Synge made Nora Burke unfaithful to her husband it was felt that Synge was maligning Ireland and there

was uproar in the theatre.

The Shadow of the Glen is a comedy with happy ending for both the sets. Nora and Tramps find happiness in mating. Dan and Michael both find happiness in peace and they drink together and are very much reconciled.

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