

Influence of Shakespeare on J.M. Synge's Vision & Dramatic Technique

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Abstract

John Millington Synge was a significant dramatist of twentieth century. The twentieth century drama in England has two strands. One is English and other is Irish. The tradition of modern comedy established by Oscar Wilde was furthered by George Bernard Shaw. But the class struggle came on the fore because of the Fabian socialistic attitude adopted by Shaw. J.M. Synge challenged the complacency of the audience in a similar way. But he used more of irony and more of primitive naturalism rather than paradox wit. George Bernard Shaw's plays were called by critics as discussion plays. These discussion plays were given dramatic life through the mastery of theatrical techniques which Shaw had learnt during his years as a dramatic critic.

Key Words: Shakespeare, J.M. Synge, vision, dramatic technique

INTRODUCTION

John Millington Synge was not a dramatic critic. After taking degree at Trinity College, Dublin he wandered some years on the continent chiefly in Paris and learnt lessons in realism. It was in Paris that W.B. Yeats met him in 1899. Yeats persuaded him to return to Ireland. Though Synge was born at Rathfarnham in the county of Dublin, Yeats spoke to him about the Aran Islands and Synge returned to Ireland—not to Dublin, nor to his village or birth place---but Aran Islands which were close to the main land of Ireland. Here Synge was inspired by the beauty of the surroundings as well as the humour and tragedy and poetry of the life of simple fisher folk. He was also charmed by the variety of the dialect of Celtic language spoken there. His first play, *The Shadow of the Glen* was produced by the Abbey theatre, Dublin at the behest of W.B. Yeats. He came to Dublin in 1904 - a year after the production of that play and soon afterwards he joined Lady Gregory and W. B. Yeats as a director of the Abbey Theatre. No one

knew at that time that Synge was suffering from cancer. Synge, though not a dramatic critic like Shaw learnt his dramatic technique like his friend Sean O Casey by reading Shakespeare and watching the play of Dion Boucicault. This reading of Shakespeare and watching the play of Dion Boucicault along with the memories of the life drama of the fisher folk of Aran Island provided him with a vision. It was a tragic-comic vision of life. His comedies are also under a shadow, the shadow of impending tragedy somewhere. For that matter the application of theatrical techniques by J.M. Synge was never professional. It was amateurish.

In his general attitude George Bernard Shaw represented the anti- Victorianism of the late Victorians. Shaw's long life should not obscure the fact that his first published play and some of his back plays published later belong to 18-19. J. M. Synge on the other hand began writing his plays in the first decade of the twentieth century. Therefore, he does not seem to have any truck with

anti-Victorianism of the late Victorians. He introduced the peasant plays, the low class plays on the stage with a new vigour of the twentieth century modernity. Other attempts to produce low class plays by the twentieth century dramatists like Galsworthy deserved respect for their humanity and intelligence. But they lack the vigour of primitive realism as well as the verbal and intellectual balance of J. M. Synge's plays.

Like Sean O'Casey and others John Millington Synge also belonged to Irish Literary Theatre. The Irish Literary theatre was founded in 1899 and Synge joined it just a year after and embellished the theatre till last with his final play *Deirdre of the Sorrows* which remains unfinished. His non-dramatic work included *The Aran Island, Poems and Translations, In Wicklow, West Kerry and Connemara*. His decisive event in Synge's life was his going to the Aran Island at the suggestion of W. B. Yeats. His Experiences in Aran Island and later in Ireland gave him the theme and style of his drama. He saw and felt deeply the life of the peasants wringing a hard-living from sea and soil. He saw both the tragedy and comedy of the soil. The dialogue from *The Tinker's Wedding* will not be out of place in showing both the aspects—the comedy on the surface and the tragedy of the plight of poor couple who have not even money to buy a ring.

Although Yeats brought Synge to get the feel of the soil by getting acquainted with the life of the lower strata of the society, there is a great deal of contrast between the approach of W. B. Yeats and that of J.M. Synge regarding the class consciousness. Their conception of the process of history is very different. From this fundamental

difference the contrasting nature between their plays on worker's class or the lower class arises. W. B. Yeats saw history as a series of Cycles in which slavery alternated with freedom. J. M. Synge on the other hand never believed in the cyclical theory of history propounded by Yeats. On the other hand, he let himself get saturated by the interpretation of history by **Marx**. He saw the twentieth century as a forward moving period with heroic potentiality for freedom or liberty. Yeats saw contemporary life as part of a cycle of descending kind in which the human personality was enslaved by the shackles of materialism, science and the so-called democracy which tantamounted to mobocracy. A kind of the second coming of Christ became necessary according to Yeats in order to do away with the shackles by the end of this century.

On the other hand J. M. Synge regarded materialism, science and democracy not as shackles but as weapons which would free man from the bondage of feudalism and capitalism. He mixed with the Marxist approach what he regarded the best element in Christianity and blended that with peasant ideals and Irish cultures. Synge, therefore, should be compared with Sean O'Casey, although the backgrounds of their plays were very different. The background of Sean O'Casey were the slums of Dublin whereas the background of J. M. Synge was the farms of Wicklow West, Kerry and sea-shore of Aran Island. But Sean O'Casey also mixed Christian and Irish element with his Marxist approach and he was inspired in doing that by J. M. Synge.

CONCLUSION

Synge's comic character are compared to Shakespeare's Falstaff and his associates

who could bring life common earthly humanity with a mingled grace of so-called virtuous and judging the world. Just as John Falstaff is active imposter, fool and adventurer and stands for disorder, bluffs and gambles. Synge's Christy Mahon of The Play Boy of The Western World stands for

chaos, bluffs and disorder. John Falstaff is the immortal comic creation of Shakespeare's play Henry IV. John Millington Synge developed his vision and dramatic technique by reading plays of Shakespeare

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