John M. Synge's Plays and His Seeking for the Good Shepherd

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Synge obtained a book of Darwin's when he was fourteen years old. He was quite shocked to find that Darwin's work related to the knowledge he had acquired through his study of natural history. He discovered a new truth outside his mother's religious system, and felt that the foundation of his mother's belief was broken by the truth. But at the same time Synge, who had never been released from the grip of his mother's Christian faith, knew himself to be an atheist. He also knew what atheists really were.

He wrote in his *Autobiography*,

> It seemed that I was become in a moment the playfellow of Judas.[1)]

In a few weeks Synge regained his composure and turned his attention to works of Christian evidence. But his mind had already been changed by Darwin.

He wrote,

> Soon afterwards I turned my attention to works of Christian evidence, reading them at first with pleasure, soon with doubt, and at last in some cases with derision.[2)]

He had confidence that there was freedom and truth outside Chistianity. He abandoned his Christian faith when he was 16 or 17 years old. But he could not open his mind to his mother who belived in the Second Coming of Christ.

He wrote,

> By the time I was sixteen or seventeen I had renounced Christianity after a good deal of wobbling, although I do not think I avowed my decision quite soon. I felt a sort of shame in being thought an infidel, a term which I have always used as a reproach. . . . [3]

We can learn from the quoted passage that he felt "a sort of shame" when he thought himself to be a pagan. He was too sensitive to open his mind to others, and kept his decision in the back of his mind.

He was accustomed to being in solitude and was fond of the solitude in nature, as he was brought up in place in the country, isolated from society---the woods of Rathfarnham, Glanmore Castle, the glen of Glendalough, and others. While he was being educated by his mother, he was not allowed to associate with the country people except for the Protestants whom his mother chose. But he was allowed to play or watch birds in beautiful, wide nature.

Though he could do as he pleased in the restricted world, he was not satisfied. He felt that parental authority and the narrow routine of his family kept him penning into a prejudicial view and restricted his life. And he found serious problems in the way of his mother's life. She was surviving on revenue from the land and keeping her life in the narrow association of a minority of Protestants. He must have felt that her life was conservative and lifeless, where as there was freedom in country life. In fact, he was moved by the country people's poor but vivid lives.

In his *Autobiography*, he wrote,

> Till I was twenty-three I never met or at least knew a man or woman who shared my opinions.[4]

After he graduated from Trinity College, he went to Germany to be a violinist at the end of July 1893, beginning a new stage in his life. In Germany he first met with people who shared his opinions.

He had been in solitude and had felt loneliness in Ireland since he had abandoned his Christian faith about eight years prior.

I believe that Synge drew a line between the outside, country life and the inside, narrow routine of his family, Synge considered the country life to be a free, vivid, and imaginative world. He desired to live in the outside world, away from his family. It was only by living in the outside, lonely world that he thought he could protect his freedom.

For Synge, the inside world was conservative, lifeless, and restricted. Synge closely related this world with the religious life and/or the modern, urban life.

In *Riders to the Sea*, we are moved by the mysterious, and often cruel relationship between people and nature.

In the end of this play, Maurya, the central figure, says,

> They're all gone now, and there isn't anything more the sea can do to me....I'll have no call now to be up crying and praying when the wind breaks from the south, and you can hear the surf is in the east, and the surf is in the west, making a great stir with the two noises, and they hitting one on the other. I'll have no call now to be going down and getting Holy Water in the dark nights after Samhain, and I won't care what way the sea is when the other women will be keening.[5]

Maurya receives cruel treatment from nature, and is crying alone in the depths of despair, illustrating the mysterious relation between nature and people.

We know that Maurya's despair and grief were based on Synge's own experience. While he was travelling in the Aran Islands, Synge met with a strange scene. It was a young man's funeral.

In *The Aran Islands*, Synge wrote,

> The men broke up an old coffin that was in the place into which the new one had to be lowered. When a number of blackened boards and pieces of bone had been thrown up with the clay, a skull was lifted out and placed upon a gravestone. Immediately the old woman, the mother of the dead man, took it up in her hands, and carried it away by herself. Then she sat down and put it in her lap---it was the skull of her own mother---and began keening and shrieking over it with wildest lamentation.[6]

After Synge experienced the strange scene at the funeral, he wrote the following,

> I knew that every one of the men would be drowned in the sea in a few years and battered naked on the rocks, or would die in his own cottage and be buried with another fearful scene in the graveyard I had come from.[7]

For the islanders, "life" is too weak, too fragile. Nature is so merciless that they can not endure; their patience is gone. But they must endure their misfortune, because "life" forces them to live. At the end of *Riders to the Sea*, Maurya's keen is produced from lamentation and sorrow over the old islander. All that they can do is receive the cruel treatments of nature and to survive. The world of this play consists of the hopeless fighting against a nature that comes to an end.

If we try to gain a better understanding of this drama, we need go a step further and change our viewpoint from his experience in the Aran Islands. We need to set our eyes on the relationship of the characters ; we can find a different nature from the one depicted in this play.

Nora, Maurya's younger daughter, says,

> The young priest says he's known the like of it. 'If it's Michael's they are,' says he, 'you can tell herself he's got a clean burial by the grace of God, and if they're not his, let no one say a word about them, for she'll be getting her death,' says he, 'with crying and lamenting.'[8]

She takes the priest on trust; she cannot doubt the priest. She does not bear her own standard of judgement. Her world is different from Mauya's world. Maurya lives a lonely life, but she has her own standard of judgement. I believe if Nora were a Christian, Maurya would be a pagan.

In his book *A Critical Study of the Play*, Nicholas Grene says about *Riders to the Sea*,

> Synge's sophistication involves a familiarity with ideas and attitudes beyond the range of the island situation. The relationship between Christian and pagan becomes an issue of the play; variations of resentment and resignation make up a complex of emotions aligning it with the great tragedies.[9]

In *The Shadow of the Glen*, besides the relationship between nature and peole, the problem of Synge's faith and loneliness clearly emerges. Thomas J. Morrisey, in his monograph *The Good Shepherd and the Anti-Christ in Synge's 'The Shadow of the Glen'* deals with the problem of his Christian faith.

Morrissey says,

> Synge creates his own version of the primal Christian myth---the death and resurrection.[10]

Morrissey divides the word of this play into two parts. The first part includes Dan and Michael who are "the nominal Christians," "purveyors of spiritual death," and the "anti-Christ."[11] The second part includes Patch Darcy and the Tramp who are true Christians

and exemplify the concept of life-in-death.

Patch Darcy died wandering alone in the mountains like a mad man. But his forgiving and self-sacrificing spirit is handed down from person to person and continues to live in their minds.

About Patch Darcy, Nora says,

> He was a great man surely, stranger, and isn't it a grand thing when you hear a living man saying a good word of a dead man, and he mad dying.[12]

On the contrary, Nora's speech, which constitutes a charactristic feature of Dan's death-in-life, is as follows,

> Maybe cold would be not sign of death with the like of him, for he was always cold, every day since I knew him, ---and every night, stranger.[13]

Morrissey comments on Dan's death-in-life as follows,

> The surface humor is enriched by Synge's depiction of Dan as a distorted type of Christ. Dan's pretended death and ressurection constitute a parody of Christ's passion and rising, a parody which is the basis of the comic debasement of Christianity as practiced in Wicklow.[14]

The shadow, of course, means a feeling of uneasiness for old age and death. But besides this problem of our life, it is also possible for us to think that the shadow suggests the debasement of Christianity and the epoch of spiritual disorder and darkness to come. Dan Bark's aim of apparent death is to make his wife's faithful love clear and to expose a scandal. His resurrection imposes a penalty upon his unfaithful wife. Dan Bark who has a scandalous faith, embodies the death of the religious environment.

The Good Shepherd, the true Christ, died alone and outside as

Patch Darcy does. The Bad Shepherd, the mock Christ, still lives, as Dan does, inside man.

Nora wavers between them. At last she decides to go positively into the lonely, outside world of life-in-death. She can find salvation in the outside world.

Synge preferred to live in the lonely world separated from society rather than in the dead world without the Good Shepherd. Jesus Christ, who offered himself in sacrifice and died alone as a Good Shepherd, must have been all hope to Synge.

In *The Well of the Saints*, I suggest, Synge realistically represents the divided two worlds and the conflict between them. The central person, Martin Doul, who is a blind begger, can hear nothing but killing and stealing. It seems to him that all daily accidents are killing and stealing. Of course he cannot see all the daily accidents as they really are. He is only able to see them in his imagination, and is, therefore, subject to his various moods and wild imaginings.

When the Saint restores sight to the blind Martin, he says to Martin,

> You'd do well to be thinking on the way sin has brought blindness to the world, and to be saying a prayer for your own sakes against false prophets and heathens. . . . [15]

And when the Saint hears Martin abuse his wife Mary in foul language, he says to them,

> May the Lord who has given you sight send a little sense into your heads, that way it won't be on your two selves you'll be looking---on two pitiful sinners of the earth---but on the splendour of the Spirit of God, you'll see an odd time shining out through the big hills, and steep streams falling to the sea. [16]

But we can find that there is a great disparity between the understanding of Martin and the understanding of the Saint. When Martin loses his sight again, he refuses to have his sight restored by the Saint. And he says,

> If I'm a poor dark sinner I've sharp ears, God help me, and it's well I heard the little splash of the water you had there in the can. Go on now, holy father, for if you're a fine saint itself, it's more sense is in a blind man, and more power maybe than you're thinking at all. Let you walk on now with your worn feet, and your welted knees, and your fasting, holy ways which have left you with a big head on you and a thin pitiful arm.[17]

He revolts against religious authority, and gets out of the community.

I believe that Synge created Martin Doul as a blind man who enjoys his imagination. On the contrary, the people who can see including the Saint, live in a world without imagination. They surround the saint whenever he comes and listen to his preach.

Sidnell comments in his monograph, *The Well of the Saints*,

> The saint is not a veiled form of either but rather an embodiment of a principle. Like a stream around a stone, the life of the community flows round him. . . .[18]

And he states at the end of the monograph,

> The understanding of the Saint and the different understanding of the People are presented with simplicity and clarity by Synge as the setting of the complex experience of Martin Doul.[19]

The people have no imagination and no standard of judgment. They hear the Saint preach, but they do not share his spiritual insight. At the climax, Martin goes with Mary, and by so doing, he chooses a lonely death in the south land rather than death-in-life in the north.

Augustine Martin, in his monograph *Playboy of the Western World : Christy Mahon and the Apothesis of Loneliness*,[20] poses the problem of loneliness.

Martin classifies the world of this play into two different parts, One group includes Old Mahon and Christy, which has Dionysiac freedom, energy, and excess. The other is the Apollonian group, including Shawn Keogh and Father Reilly, which has a rational, settled, well-ordered existence. There are pseudo-dionysians including Michael James, Philly, and Jimmy, who waver between the two positions. Shawn stands on the zenith of the Apollonians.

According to Martin's classification, Shawn is the most important person as opposed to Christy. When Christy performes the second patricide in the backyard of the public house, Shawn draws all the Apollonians and pseudo-dionysians bond to himself, and they form a close bond.

Patricia Meyer Spacks, in her monograph *The Making of the Playboy*,[21] illuminates a difference in character between Christy and Shawn.Shawn is always dominated by the priest, Father Reilly, so he cannot act on his own authority.

Spacks says,

> The primitive necessity of father-murder is stressed in *The Playboy* by the character of Shawn, who is totally unable to free himself from authority.[22]

As most of the ordinary Irish people are Roman Catholics, Father Reilly has authority and has great influence over them. All the people who live inside the community are more or less similar to Shawn.They are all insiders.

According to Martin's theory, Christy is an outsider who has Dionysiac freedom, but he does not recognize it. Dionysiac freedom is, so to speak, freedom to be in nature and "to be abroad in the darkness," Pegeen says, "with youself alone."[23]

Christy says,

> The like of a king, is it? And I after toiling, moiling, digging, dodging from the dawn till dusk with never sight of joy or sport saving only when I'd be abroad in the dark night poaching rabbits on hills, for I was a divil to poach, God forgive me, . . . and I near got six months for going with dung fork and stabbing a fish.[24]

Christy had his wish to be freed from the lonely life in nature. He wanted to leave the outside world and enter the inside community. He realized his wish with father-murder. Murdering his father is also the first step to overcoming his "loneliness" and having a new appreciation of the freedom in nature.

Martin says,

> The core of this comedy is Christy's loneliness. Synge went to great pains to enunciate this theme, to build it up gradually till it achieves full expression half-way through the play.[25]

In fact, we can find a number of expressions of Christy's loneliness.

Christy says to Pegeen in Act Ⅱ,

> I was lonesome all times and born lonesome, I'm thinking, as the moon of dawn.[26]

Perhaps most important to the play, then, is the fact that Christy wants to be freed from loneliness. When he knows he can work as a pot-boy at Pegeen's side, he says with fearful joy, "and I not lonesome from this mortal day."[27]

But following the second patricide in Act Ⅲ, Christy, after he is pulled the rope tight on his arm, is deeply impressed with the Apollonians and discovers that two different worlds exist. Then Christy hears Michael say apologetically,

> It is the will of God that all should guard their little cabins from the treachery of law, and what would my daughter be doing if I was ruined or was hanged itself?[28]

And hears Mahon say,

> ... but my son and myself will be going our own way, and we'll have great times from this out telling stories of the villainy or Mayo, and the fools is here.[29]

He recognizes "his true Dionysiac nature," Christy must break away from the Apollonian world.

Martin says,

> He has at last discovered his true Dionysiac nature, and in discovering it he has shaken off all domination and transfigured his lonesomeness into a posture of gay, predatory adventure.[30]

Christy is an outsider who has Dionysiac freedom. He is what is called "a stray sheep." But he is the stray sheep that has freedom in nature and energy of life. Freedom and energy are "the Good Shepherd" that remains in his mind.

At the end of this play, Pegeen says,

> Oh my grief, I've lost him surely. I've lost the only playboy of the western world.[31]

Her grief represents the hopeless cry of those who are impris-

oned in a flock of sheep that has lost "the Good Shepherd."

I believe that Synge was seeking "the Good Shepherd" in the lonely life outside, not in the inside community. In Synge's world, "the Good Shepherd" is freedom and exists outside of a flock of sheep, that is, a community. Secessions in the climax of *Riders to the Sea, The Shadow of the Glen, The Well of the Saints* and *The Playboy of the Western World* support Synge's seeking for his "Good Shepherd," his own "God" existing in loneliness.

Notes

1. Alan Price (ed.) *J. M. Synge : Collected Works II*, Colin Smythe, 1982. p. 11
2. ibid. p. 11
3. ibid. p. 11
4. ibid. p. 11
5. Ann Saddlemyer (ed.) *J. M. Synge : Collected Works III*, Colin Smythe, 1982. p. 25
6. *J. M. Synge : Collected Works II.* p. 16
7. ibid. p. 162
8. *J. M. Synge : Collected Works III.* p. 5
9. *Synge : A Critical study of the Plays*, Macmillan, 1975. p. 55
10. Zack Bowen (ed.) *Irish Renaissance Annual I*, Associated University Presses, Inc. 1980. p. 158
11. ibid. p. 158
12. *J. M. Synge : Collected Works III.* p. 47
13. ibid. p. 35
14. *Irish Renaissance Annual I*. p. 159
15. *J. M. Synge : Collected Works III.* p. 91
16. ibid. p. 101
17. ibid. p. 149

18. *Sunshine and the Moon's Delight, J. M. Synge 1871-1909*, Colin Smythe, 1972. p. 54
19. ibid. p. 58
20. ibid. p. 61-73
21. *The Playboy of the Western World--A Collection of Critical Essays*, Prentice-Hall, 1969 .
22. ibid. p. 83
23. Ann Saddlemyer (ed.) *J. M. Synge : Collected Works IV*, Colin Smythe, 1982. p. 83
24. ibid. p. 83
25. *Sunshine and the Moon's Delight--J. M. Synge 1871-1909*, p. 64
26. *J. M. Synge : Collected Works IV* , p. 111
27. ibid. p. 113
28. ibid. p. 173
29. *Sunshine and the Moon's Delight--J. M. Synge 1871-1909*, p. 71
30. *J. M. Synge: Collected Works IV* , p. 173