

Significance of the Aran Islands in the Plays of J.M.Synge

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Synge's meeting with Yeats happened in France while Yeats was attending meetings of Irish League of the nationalist movement for freedom and Synge was travelling Germany and France still in search for his true vocation. He had thought that he should travel to Germany for the Germans naturally excelled in music and had produced great musicians and he had won a scholarship from Royal Academy of Music, Dublin. After having realized that, he could not attain the kind of excellence in music to make a mark or even earn a living by it, he came to Paris. Here he wrote some criticism of drama and poetry; he also did some translating work and taught English at the University. It was here that he met Yeats and told him to give up Paris and go to the Aran Islands. So he made several visits to the Aran Islands besides travelling the length and breadth of the country doing exactly what Yeats had suggested to him.

J. M. Synge went to the Aran Islands and his first visit in 1898 lasted from May 10th to June 25th with two weeks spent on the main island and four on the middle island. His book *The Aran Islands* is based on his first four visits. In 1907, he wrote to a journalist: "I look on *The Aran Islands* as piece of work-it was written before any of the plays. In writing out the talks of the people and their stories in this book-and in a certain number of articles on Wicklow peasants which I have not yet collected-I learned to write the peasant dialect and dialogue which I use in my play." (54) Synge sought to portray the fishing community and peasant life of the Aran Islands in a realistic light. Synge closely studied the local Hiberno-English dialect and faithfully reproduced it in the plays. All of Synge's major characters are modeled on people from the peasantry, the real representatives of the Irish Celts who kept Irish mythical notions alive. Capturing their dialect and energizing their stories, the lives of the people of Connemara, and the Aran Islands were brought to life through his six great plays: *In The Shadow of the Glen* (1903), *Riders to the Sea* (1904), *The Well of the Saints* (1905), *The Playboy of the Western World* (1907), *The Tinkers' Wedding* (1908), and his unfinished mythological drama *Deirdre of the Sorrows* (performed posthumously in 1910); as well as his travel journal of his time off the coast of Ireland entitled simply *The Aran Islands* (1907)

Synge visits the Aran Islands which is situated off the west coast of Ireland is quite barren and isolated. He makes four visits to this Island and every individual visit gives a deep insight to the dramatist. These islands are a group of three islands—Aranmor, the north island, about nine miles long; Inishmaan, the middle island, covering about three and half miles and the South Island, Inisheer, slightly smaller than the middle island. All of these three islands are situated to the south west of Galway. All three islands have very little ground and uncultivated since there are no bogs, all the turf burnt on the island is brought from Connemara. Kilonan, the main village on Aranmore, has nothing special now, which could distinguish it from the other villages because as the most villages on the west coast of Ireland, this one has also changed by the fishing industry. Changes are continuous on the other islands too but their antiquity is not much disturbed.

Synge does not belong to the Gaelic World but he adopts their dialect and their stories, and he uses them to create-the real and the fanciful, the traditional and the individual. In the words of Synge,

"For a long time I have felt that poetry roughly is of two kinds, the poetry of real life and the poetry of a land of fancy.. What is highest in poetry is always reached where the dreamer is leaning out to reality, or where the man of real life is lifted out in it, and in all the poets the greatest have both these elements, that is they are supremely engrossed with life and yet with the wildness of their fancy they are always passing out of what is simple and plain." (67)

He travelled up and down the whole country and went to the extreme west to the off shore Aran Islands to study and collect facts of the customs, the ways of life and their dialects, the influence of the elemental nature on their way of life, their problems and more significant individual occurrences; the little episodes and anecdotes, which he has recorded in his plays. A reader therefore finds the language of his plays to have a

peculiar quality mixed with the local Irish or Gaelic words and expressions. This also lends to it a dimension of mystic intensity like that of poetry.

Since Synge not only made extensive notes on the life and manners of the people he met and knew during his visit to Aran Islands and other travels, which he later published in a book form, but also used parts of the material for his plays. The group of islands known as the Aran Islands lies off the Western coast of southern Ireland. There are chiefly three islands. The North island is called Aranmor, about three miles in length and about half a mile in width; the middle one to its south is roundish in shape. It is called Innishmaan. It is smaller than Aranmor. The Southernmost is the smallest one and is called Innisheer. The chain of these islands is about thirty miles from main land County of Galway. It is not far away from County Clare and Connemara. Kilronan is the largest village on the island Aranmor and hub of activity. Modern fishing industry seems to have invaded and the old raw life and culture has undergone a sea change. Yet this is where Synge went and stayed like one of the native villagers and gathered his anecdotes from the people and made friends with the men and women of his island. His first impressions:

“I am in Aranmor, sitting over a turf fire, listening to a murmur of Gaelic that is rising over little house under my room. I met few people; but here and there a band of tall girls passed me on their way to Kilronan, and called out to me with humorous wonder, speaking English with a slight foreign intonation. The rain and cold seemed to have no influence on their vitality, and as they hurried passed me with eager laughter and great talking in Gaelic, they left masses of rock more desolate than before.”(144)

During his stay there he encountered several people and witnessed other social occasions or ceremonies like the burial of the dead typical of people there. An old and half blind man in his conversations with him revealed the people’s very primitive superstitions and belief in supernatural phenomena. He spoke the language so well and Synge was so impressed that he employed him to learn the local dialect. This old man once told him how the fairies had carried away his child. Yet in spite of the charm of the old man’s companionship he moved on to the next southern island Innishmaan, where Gaelic more commonly used, would be easy for him to pick up. Besides, life there was almost untouched by the corruption of the modern civilization.

“I have decided to move on to Innishmaan, where Gaelic is more generally used, and the life is perhaps the most primitive that is left in Europe. I spent all this last day with my blind guide, looking at the antiquities that abound on the island. Later in the day as the old man talked continually of the fairies and women they have taken, it seemed that there was a possible like between the wild mythology that is accepted on the island and the strange beauty of the women. I am settled at last on Innishmaan in small cottage. Early this morning the man of the house came over for me with four oared curagh (a special quality of boat) with four rowers...and we set off a little before noon. It gave me a moment of exquisite satisfaction to find myself moving away from civilization in this rude canoe of a model that has served primitive races since man first went on the sea. We landed at small pier, from which a rude truck leads up to the village between small fields and bare sheets of rock like those in Aranmor. The youngest son of my boatman, a boy of about seventeen, who is to be my teacher and guide was waiting for me at the pier and guided me to his house, while the men settled the curagh and followed slowly with my baggage.”(168)

Besides the beautiful sights of seascapes and forested mountain-sides and spreading valleys that captivated him he discovered several other material objects and things pertaining to the daily life of the people of the island. He describes these objects in the following words:

“Every article on these islands has an almost personal character. Which give this simple life something of the artistic beauty of medieval life. The curaghs and spinning-wheels. The tiny wooden barrels that are still much used in the place of earthenware, the home made cradles, churns, and baskets, are all full of individuality. Many sorts of fishing tackle, and oilskins of the men are upon the walls of the kitchen; and right overhead, under the thatch, there is a whole cow-skin from which they make pampooties (Long boots like the galoshes that are great help when one is to walk among the rocks or when one has to step into the surf).(178)

Among other things that he saw on these islands he happened to be there when the burial of an old woman, who lived in the house next to his, was to be performed. The neighbours did not think his presence throughout was required, but he was a witness to the whole proceedings, which he watched from the window of his room. And he has recorded his experience in the following words:

“After the Mass this morning an old woman was buried. She lived in the cottage next to mine, and more than once before noon I heard a faint echo of the keen (moaning sound of the mourners). I did not go to the wake (keeping vigil though the night to pray by the side of the dead) for fear my presence might jar upon the mourners, but all last evening I could hear the strokes of a hammer in the yard, where the next of kin labored slowly at the coffin. Today before the hour for the funeral, Poteen (alcoholic drink made from potatoes) was served to a number of men, and a portion was brought to me in my room. Then coffin was carried out, sewn loosely in sail-cloth, and held near the ground by three cross-poles lashed upon the top. As we moved down to the low eastern portion of the island, nearly all the men, and all the oldest women wearing petticoats over their heads, came out and joined in the procession. While the grave was being opened, the woman sat down among

the flat tombstones, and began the wild keen or crying for the dead. Each old woman, as she took her turn in the wild leading recitative, seemed possessed for the moment with a profound ecstasy of grief, swaying to and fro, while she called out to the dead with a perpetually recurring chant of sobs. The morning had been beautifully fine, but as they lowered the coffin into the grave, thunder rumbled overhead and hail-stones hissed among the bracken. In Innishmaan one is forced to believe in sympathy between man and Nature, and at this moment, when the thunder sounded a death peal of extraordinary grandeur about the voices of the women. I could see the faces near me sniff and drawn with emotion. When the coffin was in the grave, the keen broke out again more passionately than before. This grief of the keen is no personal complaint for the death of one woman over eight years, but seems to contain the whole passionate rage that lurks somewhere in every native of the island. In the cry of pain the inner consciousness of the people seems to play itself bare for an instant, and to reveal the mood of being who feel their isolation in the face of a universe that wars on them with winds and seas. They are usually silent, but in the presence of death all outward show of indifference or patience is forgotten, and they shriek with pitiable despair the horror of the fate to which they are doomed. Before they covered the coffin an old man kneeled down by the grave and repeated a smooth prayer for the dead. There was an irony in these words of atonement and catholic belief spoken by voices that were still hoarse with cries of pagan desperation. (182)

He goes on to describe in his diaries the very singular process of making kelp from broad fronted seaweeds and then trade it in villages or towns for their high content of sodium, and magnesium and their use in the manufacture of glass. Syngé then goes on to describe the rearing of horses, which too are then traded across on the mainland. Due to shortage of fodder and grazing land the horses were let loose on the grasslands on Connemara from June to September each year and then roped in and are brought back to Innishmaan. He has graphically described the process of loading the horses on to the boats to send them once again to the markets on the mainland for trading. Handling them is difficult because he says that in the whole place there is but one saddle and reins and a bit. So, they have to make do with halters prepared rope or heavy cord. Further on he recorded his meeting with a girl, who he thought was rather 'unusual'. She seemed unusual to him because even as a very young girl of fifteen or sixteen she could shift in moods as variable as being a playful and cheerful teenager of today and the next moment to reflect in her eyes the whole melancholic history of the old Irish race against the elements of Nature. He carried with him some very happy and interesting memories when he left this southern island and went back to the north island to Aranmor. The weather was bad and the sea rough on the day he had decided to leave. Even the local people forbade him from taking the boat. Some of them decided against traveling on such a wild day. He saw that the crew of his boat had already left for the pier, where the boat was harboured. He carried on with his plans and was able to cross the straits, or the 'sound', as it is called in those parts, the narrow sea running between the two islands safely. Looking across from his cottage his remembrances come back to him:

I am in the north island again, looking out with a singular sensation to cliffs across the sound. It is hard to believe that those hovels I can just see in the south are filled with people, whose lives have the strange quality that is found in the oldest poetry and legend. The charm which the people over there share with the birds and flower has been replaced here by the anxiety of men who are eager for gain. The eyes and expressions are different, though the faces are the same, and even the children here seem to have an indefinable modern quality that is absent from the men of Innishmaan.(190)

Syngé found something unique on the island that became the characterizing feature of his plays i.e., language to express his attitude and the attitudes of the Irish people. He discovered English language spoken by native Irish speakers, which resembled Irish intonation, syntax and in parts also vocabulary. The Aran Islands was lucky for Syngé as it provided him with a setting, an idiom, and a language to express his attitudes towards life in general and Irish life in particular. Syngé's interest in old Irish myths and folklore to rekindle the glory of Celtic Ireland can be seen in his plays. By making ample use of the Irish mythology and folklore, Syngé tried to revive the diminishing Celtic literature in his own unique way in his plays.

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