

A CRITICAL STUDY OF THE CONTRIBUTION OF ABBEY THEATRE TO THE PROMOTION OF IRISH LITERATURE: WITH REFERENCE TO THE SELECTED WORKS OF WILLIAM BUTLER YEATS, JOHN MILLINGTON SYNGE AND GEORGE BERNARD SHAW

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Abstract. Ireland faced with a general lack of interest in Irish literature and a significant decline in the literary works produced for Ireland in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. The poor economic condition, sectarian conflicts between the Catholics and Protestants and the heated political disputes between the then Ireland with Britain didn't leave much room for the blossoming of literature embedded with romanticism and softer feelings. The popular literature in Ireland was heavily influenced by English culture, Modernism and materialistic elements. In the foreign theatres and on their stages, Irishmen at best became comical characters in perpetual drunken state and at worst became as indolent, lustful or dangerous figures. A circle of Celtic literary figures with W.B. Yeats leadership came together in order to remove the negative depiction of the Irish people in English literature and revive Irish literature and language through Romanticism and revival of ancient Irish legends with its heroes and heroines. They hoped to establish a national theatre that proved Ireland to be a civilized nation with proper culture which led to the establishment of The Abbey Theatre in Dublin. Among these literary figures W.B. Yeats, J.M. Synge and G.B. Shaw are the focus of this study due to the importance of their role in the life of the Theatre. This study also intends to evaluate the role of The Abbey Theatre in the promotion of literature through the selected works of the aforementioned dramatists and the impact of their literary works on the then Irish society. It seems due to the disagreement among the members of The Abbey, its partial dissolution, the poor economic condition and the outbreak of the World War II the Theatre was only partially successful in the fulfilment of its initial goals.

Key words: W.B. Yeats, J.M. Synge, G.B. Shaw, The Abbey Theatre, Irish literature, Ireland.

1. INTRODUCTION

Often in the world of literature, famous literary figures are introduced through their masterpieces in one particular genre while ignoring their lesser known literary works. While their masterpieces would be of considerable worth and a significant contribution to the world of literature, the renowned works do not always define the true extent of a poet's share in the advancement and progress of literature as a whole. W.B. Yeats, J.M. Synge and G.B. Shaw are perhaps fine examples of this ignorance. Yeats is widely known for his remarkable poetic skills and sometimes even referred to as the poet with prophetic poetry like *The Second Coming* in 1919.

Synge is known for his masterpiece, *The Playboy of the Western World*, which is still globally staged throughout the world and is applauded for its unique style. Shaw is globally known as a social reformist and anti-war author with famous plays *Arms and the Man* in 1894 and *Major Barbara* in 1905. While all mentioned facts about the three poets are undoubtedly irrefutable, they fail to depict other aspects of their contribution especially to the literature of Ireland in the early twentieth century. Although Yeats was a famous poet, he composed a number of dramas which brought about significant changes in the then Ireland. Many critics have disregarded his dramas as extensions of his poetry and of little dramatic value due to their melodious dialogues, heavy use of symbolism and imagination.

Synge spent many years in European countries and studied their language and music. As a journalist and literary critic, he was constantly exposed to their politics and popular literature. Some critics and even his peers like Yeats believed him to be an apolitical figure who simply disregarded the political climate and social issues in his homeland in favour of writing dramas based on stories and folklore he had collected during his visits to Aran Islands in Ireland. Nevertheless, Synge could be considered as a dramatist who fiercely criticised the constitution of Irish society and the harsh condition of Irishwomen's lives in the male-oriented society in hopes of reforming his society.

Shaw spent the majority of his life in London and became a social reformist who actively criticised the conventional norms of the British society through his satirical comedies. Shaw, certainly, became one of the most famous Anglo-Irish writers who contributed significantly to the English literature.

While he is known as a social reformist for England, he answered to The Abbey Theatre's calling to write for his fellow Irishmen once again. The Abbey Theatre is the first national theatre recognized and supported by the Irish Free State, Ireland's first governmental body after its liberation from the British rule. Shaw penned satirical comedies, *John Bull's Other Island* in 1904 and *O'Flaherty V.C* in 1914, solely for the Theatre's sake and subsequently for his fellow Irish countrymen. Although his collaboration with the Theatre was cut short through various factors, his role in the revival of the literary life in Ireland cannot be ignored.

Literary stagnation at the turn of the nineteenth century in Ireland could be defined from different angles. But the most probable causes to the dormant state of literature in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century in Ireland could be due to lack of effort on the Irish people's part. Knowing famous Irish dramatists, writers, poets and critics such as R.B. Sheridan, Bram Stoker, C.S. Lewis, Sean O'Casey, Oscar Wilde, W. B. Yeats, G. B. Shaw, J.M. Synge and James Joyce who lived during the nineteenth and twentieth century and many others who came before them, it is obvious that Ireland has never had any problem in nurturing intellectual figures. Ireland failed to provide the required context and opportunity for these literary figures due to political, religious and economic crises and forced them to look abroad for new chances. They had to exchange Dubliners for Londoners as their audience.

Shakespearean style, in later half of the nineteenth century, was outdated in comparison to the new style of problem plays fathered by Ibsen which swept throughout Europe. The obsolescence of literature in Ireland compared to other countries and the sense of nationalism triggered the first sparks of foundation of the Literary Theatre Society movement which later on changed in to Irish National Theatre Society. The movement put up an umbrella named The Abbey Theatre, under which it was hoped nationalistic ideas would be given a shelter and a chance to grow and express themselves.

Therefore, this study is conducted with the intention of reviewing the lesser known literary works of the three prominent literary figures -Yeats, Synge and Shaw- and the aspects of their contribution to the world of literature as the members of The Abbey Theatre that have not been given their due consideration adequately. Perhaps through analysing the overshadowed and lesser-known works of these

Anglo-Irish authors more light could be shed on the condition of the then Ireland. This study will further focus on analysing the role of these dramatists in promotion of the Irish literature in Ireland, a country whose literature was destined to be forgotten, and their purpose of the establishment of a national Theatre; a Theatre that shaped and was shaped by the circle of literary figures gathered in Ireland.

2. LITERATURE IN IRELAND

During the late nineteenth and early twentieth century Ireland enjoyed theatres, drama and art. But literature was an imported one especially from Britain. F. J. Fay, in his letter to Holloway, recounted one of the many difficulties regarding their audience's taste in style and theatre. He claimed that: "Here [in Ireland] the enthusiasts are in the minority." With this statement, he expressed the hardships that artists had to face "...to arouse Dubliners out of their lethargy to take a serious interest in the Arts."¹ Douglas Hyde is another Irish intellectual and political figure and a friend to the founders of Abbey Theatre who put many efforts in documenting Ireland's history and language in his books, namely *A Literary History of Ireland*. Hyde in one of the meetings of National Literary Society on 25 November 1892 presented the participants in the meeting with an inspiring speech in which he stated:

The Irish race is at present in a most anomalous position, imitating England and yet apparently hating it. How can it produce anything good in literature as long as it is actuated by motives so contradictory? Besides, I believe it is our Gaelic past which, the Irish race does not recognize it just at present, is really at the bottom of the Irish heart, and prevents us becoming citizens of the Empire.²

Literary wise "Irish literature had fallen into disrepute in Land League times; rarely did an educated man buy an Irish book."³ George Bernard Shaw expressed his disappointment in literature and culture of his motherland while he lived in Ireland during the 1850s and 1860s by saying: "There was no Gaelic league in those days, nor any sense that Ireland had in herself the seed of culture."⁴

It must be noted that, the amount of the Irish-composed literature was not non-existence but very low. There were playwrights in later nineteenth century who were able to attract enthusiastic audiences in Dublin. Playwrights such as James W. Whitbread (1848–1916) who although was an Englishman managing the Queen's Theatre, composed many patriotic melodramas based on Irish history. Another example could be Dion Boucicault (1820–90), who was born in Dublin and his plays were staged in London, America and Ireland. While Boucicault's plays were very well received, he didn't strive to infuse cultural values within them.

Irishman characters were mostly represented as comical characters in Irish plays, stereotypically known as the Stage Irishmen. Stage Irishmen characters were in general able to address all walks of life from peasants to the ascendancy as they represented qualities such as loyalty, bravery and patriotism. In the beginning, comic Stage Irishmen were portrayed as clever businessmen on the late Victorian London stages but later on due to the Great Famine and Fenian's hostile actions against Britain, Irishmen were presented as indolent and lustful or dangerous simonized figures. Of course, there were playwrights like O'Grady and Whitbread who tried to oppose such negative depictions by emphasizing the wittiness of Irishmen, their loyalty, physical gifts and vivacity in plays, *The Gommock* or *Sarsfield*. It was hoped that through the foundation of The Abbey Theatre, the Irish literary figures would gather together in a united front in order to counter the negative portrayal of the Irish people.

3. FORMATION OF THE ABBEY THEATRE

The idea of The Abbey Theatre was first proposed by Yeats and Lady Gregory supported him with enthusiasm. Although Yeats had spent most of his life in London, under the aesthetic and political doctrines of William Morris and influences of figures such as John O'Leary, Maud Gonne and other fellow nationalist such as Dr. Douglas Hyde, he developed an aggressive attitude towards the British rule. In contrast to Ireland, particularly the remote western regions which remained unspoiled by the British influence, Yeats "...associated England with everything he loathed about the

1. Robert Hogan and Michael J. O'Neill, Ed. *Joseph Holloway's Abbey Theatre: A Selection from his Unpublished Journal Impressions of a Dublin Playgoer*, Southern Illinois University Press: Carbondale, 1967, P. 34.

2. David Pierce, *Irish Writing in the Twentieth Century: A Reader*, Ireland: Cork University Press, 2000, P. 3.

3. Joseph Hone, *W.B. Yeats, 1865-1939*, London: The Macmillan Press LTD, 1943, P. 81.

4. Hesketh Pearson, *Bernard Shaw: His Life and Personality*, UK: House of Stratus, 1942-2014, P. 91.

modern world: with imperialism, with vulgar, godless materialism, with urban ugliness and squalor.”⁵ Simultaneously, he admired unspoiled lands, Ireland’s western regions, where people lived respecting age-old traditions and time-honoured beliefs.

Yeats was later on joined by Martyn, a strict Catholic at odds with Protestant England. And soon afterwards with Moore who was “...the son of an Irish patriot member of Parliament, was ready to turn his back on an England that did not properly appreciate his novels and even condescended to him on account of his Irish background.”⁶ Yeats believed Irish literature to be nothing more than propagandist verse labelled as Irish literature. He addressed the Irish literature as one in dire need of aid before it was completely lost as “the materialism of England and its vulgarity are surging up... [Ireland for] ... it is not Shakespeare England sends ... but musical farces.”⁷ The beginning of the movement leading to the foundation of the Abbey Theatre was marked in 1897. The year W.B. Yeats accompanied Edward Martyn for a visit at Count de Basterot house at Duras in Ireland where Lady Gregory had arrived earlier.

The visit concluded in Lady Gregory and Yeats’ exchange of thoughts over the function of Irish theatre and his desire to establish a theatre of their own. The unofficial and sincere decisions made in their first meeting, paved the way for a three-year-trial of producing plays composed by Irish playwrights in Ireland. At the end of the meeting, they decided on having a certain sum of money guaranteed in order to rent a theatre in Dublin to stage Martyn’s *Heather Field* and Yeats’ *Countess Cathleen*. Yeats and Edward Martyn published a formal letter which serves as the manifestation of The Abbey Theatre is as follows:

We propose to have performed in Dublin, in the spring of every year certain Celtic and Irish plays, which whatever be their degree of excellence will be written with a high ambition, and so to build up a Celtic and Irish school of dramatic literature. ...We will show that Ireland is not the home of buffoonery and of easy sentiment, as it has been represented, but the home of an ancient idealism. We are confident of

the support of all Irish people, who are weary of misrepresentation, in carrying out a work that is outside all the political questions that divide us.⁸

The degree of their success, however, didn’t extend as far as one would have expected due to three noteworthy issues: lack of experience and pre-planning, prioritization of self-interest and disagreeable audience that will be discussed in the following sections.

4. DISAGREEMENTS IN THE ABBEY THEATRE

The theatre was mostly governed through a democratic system, i.e. any change or production should be put to the votes of the members in for votes. Once a play was written, the members of the board needed to read and evaluate wheatear the play could be staged or not. They needed to be very selective in their choices because of financial issues. Yeats took it upon himself to summon a meeting in which he nominated himself, Lady Gregory and Synge as directors with absolute control in managing the Theatre. Resultantly, Yeats had to face many disagreements from the actors and members like George Russell. In a letter to Yeats, he rephended his friend for his cutting words when Yeats addressed those who supported Russell as singing canaries and poultry farms. Russell in his letter wrote:

I think it a mistake which later on you may regret that you should lose time managing a business, bringing endless annoyance with no added influence. As a poet you could and would exercise an immense influence on your contemporaries, as a dramatist you lose influence.⁹

Disregarding the disagreements, Yeats continued his fight adamantly for the control of the theatre and in response to Russell in 1906, he wrote to him: “I have gathered the strong and capable about me... and all who love work better than idle talk will support me. It is a long fight, but that is the sport of it.”¹⁰

Even in the Society there was a collision of the ideologies which could be considered

5. David Holdeman, *The Cambridge Introduction to W. B. Yeats*, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006, P. 6.

6. Adrian Frazier, Shaun Richards, Ed. *The Cambridge Companion to Twentieth-Century Irish Drama*, United States and UK: Cambridge University Press, 2004, P. 38.

7. Lady Augusta Persse Gregory, *Our Irish Theatre: A Chapter of Autobiography*, New York And London: G. P. Putnam’s Sons, The Knickerbocker Press, 1913, P. 27.

8. Ibid, P. 8-9.

9. Joseph Hone, *W.B. Yeats, 1865-1939*, London: The Macmillan Press LTD, 1943, P, 209.

10. Ibid. P, 209.

understandable, if not expected. All plays were written under the condition that they would never pose an offence to national ideals. Naturally, there were differences in the judgments on what was offensive or not. The members of the theatre were composed of nationalist writers as well as Protestant landlords such as Lady Gregory who certainly preferred to hold onto her higher class of social standings compared to the members of humbler status who focused on celebrating their motherland. Moore expressed his desire for censorship, something that Yeats and Martyn didn't agree upon. Although they all agreed that a national theatre must be frequented by all classes, establishing boundaries and limitations was another matter. Moore claimed ecclesiastical censorship would protect the theatre from random public censorship that was loosely based on gossip that would sell more and bring more money.

The lack of clear outlines of the boundaries and valued merits for an independent theatre could be due to the lack of plan and experience of the founders. Lady Gregory was expected only to provide financial support while Yeats and Martyn took on the artistic side. They decided to recruit George Moore who claimed to be of more practical experience in theatre to compensate for this lack of experience as Moore in *Hail and Farewell* confidently wrote: "...of course they know nothing of Independent theater."¹¹ Even Moore himself was not as experienced as he believed himself to be.

As the years progressed, it seems that Yeats believed the theatre was moving away from its original aim and he started creating his literary works away from the theatre. Yeats' preferred style of poetic drama based on Irish myth and gods like *Countess Cathleen* and *On Baile's Strand* were slowly replaced by realistic plays such as *Shadow of the Gunman* by O'Casey in 1923. He even, in his famous article *The People's Theater*, addressed The Abbey's success as a kind of discouragement for it was the realistic style that prevailed in the Theatre. The published statement in 1897 by the founders had little to no inclination on the views of the founder that what exactly a national theatre should be. So naturally, the difference in the views and ideas among the members became more prominent as Martyn and Moore preferred Ibsen's style of drama while Yeats insisted on poetic dramatics.

The issue of self-interest seemed to be attributed to other members of the group as well which inevitably led to more disagreements. Benedict John Francombe addressed this problematic attitude within the movement in *The home of the living writer*: "It is fair to suggest that during the first three years of the experiment, the Irish Literary Theatre seemed like a private club set up for the pleasure of the founders with the work of the founders dominating the schedule."¹² Martyn's *Heather Field* and *Maeve* were declined for productions since early 1890s due to his lack of dramatic ability. It wasn't until the submission of his third play, *The Tale of the Town*, for the second season that the disagreement between the founders gained a stronger presence. Yeats and Moore rejected Martyn's play on the account of it being childish in parts that would bring about the means of ridicule for the Theatre. Then, to make the play presentable Yeats and Moore rewrote the play into *The Bending of the Bough* signed by Moore at the end, much to Martyn's discontent.

5. THE ABBEY'S AUDIENCE

Another factor that might have accelerated the semi-dissolution of the Society could be when Yeats tried to give authors the absolute authority of the production of a play and to employ the theory of the art for art's sake. The change of policy, from concentrating on the betterment of Ireland to prioritizing authors, caused many of the members to resign in bitterness and move to London or America. The change might have caused inconsistencies because each playwright had a different idea of Irishness based on his or her experience. One must remember that the blossoming of Ireland's literary life was greatly inspired by the rising of nationalistic spirits among people. The Irish Revival or Celtic Renaissance came about as a result of Irish people searching for their Irish culture and identity, one that was distinctly different from what was imposed on them through the English invasion. Then in order to revive the Irishness among the people, literary figures tried to express their own definitions about Ireland's ancient legend, people and their wealth in all forms of literature especially in drama. Their point of view regardless of their artistic value was often in contrast with which audiences identified themselves causing protests from the audiences.

6. W.B. YEATS ON A ROAD TO LITERARY NATIONALISM

11. George Moore, *Hail and Farewell*, Canada: Project Gutenberg, 2009, P, 24.

12. Benedict John Francombe, *The home of the living writer: the playwright and the Abbey Theatre*, Glasgow University, 1993, P. 41.

Yeats hoped through the establishment of an apolitical theatre he could prepare a stage where by relying on Ireland's proud ancient history or legends people would enjoy original Irish literature. He wished to give a new life to the kind of literature which would be free of Modernism or propagandist English culture that would solely focus on ancient Irish roots; a literature that did not concern itself with the new popular political, religious or economic developments. He wished to appeal to the sense of spirituality and traditional old beliefs in the Irish people. In order to realize his hopes for the revival of Irish literature, Yeats set out to gather Irish dramatists and encourage them to honour and celebrate their motherland once more. His efforts yield multiple successful productions with minimal obstacles for the first few years.

One of the most important factors that directed Yeats towards nationalism was his meeting with Maud Gonne. That is not to say that the young Yeats didn't care for his country but Maud Gonne's impression on Yeats acted as a catalyst. It was O'Leary that brought Maud Gonne along to Bedford Park. For Yeats, Maud Gonne was the perfect beauty and his Helen, referring to Helen of Troy in Greek mythology. He described Maud Gonne in his poem No Second Troy as: "That nobleness made simple as a fire, With beauty like a tightened bow." Maud Gonne with her youth and beauty was mesmerising to the young Yeats and when she expressed her wish to act in a play, Yeats offered to write her *The Countess Cathleen* based on a story he had found while he was completing his *Fairy and Folk Tales*. The political spirit blown by Maud Gonne can be interpreted as the gradual literary enlivenment of The Abbey Theatre in the thought and mind of W.B. Yeats.

6.1. The Countess Cathleen of The Abbey Theatre

The very first play composed for the Theatre company in its initial year was a romantic drama *The Countess Cathleen* co-authored by Yeats and Lady Gregory. The play was the Theatre's first steps towards the revival of Irish literature. Its plot takes place in Ireland at the time of the famine that took the lives of many people and forced many to immigrate to Europe or America. It's a story in ancient times where a noble countess saves her starving peasants who were selling their souls to the devil for gold. *The Countess Cathleen* was the first drama Yeats composed with the spirit of nationalism and it was staged on the 8th of May 1899 in the hall of the Antient Concert Rooms in Dublin. After his first meeting with Maud Gonne, Yeats was deeply

enamoured by the fire and spirit in the young lady and offered to write her a patriotic play based on Irish legends.

Regardless of the original intention of the composition of the play, *The Countess Cathleen* brought about much excitement and sensation weeks before and after its performance in late nineteenth century. The excitement prior to the performance of *The Countess Cathleen* was mostly due to F. Hugh O'Donnell's pamphlet, *Souls for Gold*, which harshly criticized the play for its insults toward the Irish people and Christianity. Cardinal Logue in Ireland's Church, influenced by O'Donnell's pamphlet, advised Catholic followers to shun the heretical entertainment. During the performance of the play a group of Catholic students hooted in protest to the depiction of the peasants because the majority of the Catholic population in Ireland were consisted of peasants. In a period inflamed with religious tension, it was hard for the suppressed Catholics to accept a play written by a Protestant author in which they were depicted as weak people who would sell their soul to the devil for gold.

The main objections and protests to the play seem to mainly focus on two aspects namely: thievery and sacrilege. Thievery was considered one of the most heinous crimes and punishable by death in then Ireland because after the Great Famine stealing a sheep from a family wouldn't have simply put them at a disadvantage but would have probably caused the whole family starve to death. In *The Countess Cathleen* some of the peasants contemplated on robbery or had stolen from others in order to provide for themselves even at the expense of the other's life.

If one were to disregard the sacrilegious action of selling souls to the devil, there is another issue more social in nature than religious. As it is mentioned before many of the lower class people or peasant were Catholics living under the rule of the Protestant minority. It seems that Yeats in his play didn't try to bridge the rather huge social gap between Ireland's Protestant ascendancy and her Catholic peasantry. Here, the highly cultured countess suffers spiritually and her worries are only soothed by music while the starving peasants witness the death of their neighbours and struggle to survive the famine.

Unlike the Catholics who believed that the values of the mortal realm have no merit in the afterlife, Yeats sometimes applied the same values to both worlds; causing one of the rifts between himself and some of the Catholic audience. His audience was enraged because even in the afterlife, Yeats prioritized the

wealthy people over the poor. In his drama, the two merchant devils put different prices on the peasants' souls by adding up their crimes. But when they were to put price on the soul of the countess, the price was five hundred thousand crowns whereas the price for the soul of a peasant, the Porter, was only a hundred crowns. Even at the end, God perceived the soul of the countess too valuable to be sent to hell and brought her to heaven.

Yeats defended his play, *The Countess Cathleen*, as a purely symbolic one because in his opinion literature was the expression of universal truths. But contrary to the poet's claim, it's possible that the play contains some historical context of Ireland. In the opening of the play Countess Cathleen appears with her two attendants claiming to be lost. This was true for Irish lords and ladies who would get lost in their own land should they have gone out of their mansion. What made symbolism an important element in most of Yeats' works could be attributed to an occult known as Golden Dawn. The occult's main focus was on spirituality that bordered on what they believed to be magic and sorcery. Yeats had put great stress on the use of the elements of romanticism in his literary works but his occupation with the occult seem to blurred the fine line between imagination and magic at times.

Yeats did not favour Modernism in music and literature, believing that modern music had put limitations on dramatic texts. He believed in the importance of the speech in a dramatic production and perhaps it is due to the emphasis that many critics such as Edmund Wilson categorized Yeats' plays simply as the extension of his poetry with few dramatic values. Yeats' development as a dramatist was a gradual progress and for the composition of his early plays, *The Countess Cathleen* and specially *Cathleen ni Houlihan*, he heavily relied on Lady Gregory's contribution. The issue was that, Yeats was inherently a poet who composed his literary works with a heavy dose of symbolism to enhance the depth of interpretation of each line.

While this skill made Yeats into a well-reputed poet, the technique proved to be an obstacle in the communication between his drama and the audience. Yeats "...remained too much the aesthete to generate convincing peasant dialogue in prose,"¹³ but Lady Gregory had honed her diction skills while gathering folklores among the peasants, therefore, she was better at communicating an idea with the common

audience than Yeats. David Holdeman, in *The Cambridge Introduction to W. B. Yeats*, acknowledges the fact that Yeats' play "... owes much to Lady Gregory, whom textual evidence identifies as author of most of the play's actual words."¹⁴

What these two plays hold in common is the assertive power of a woman over all. If the plays were to be analyzed from political standpoint, the heroines symbolise the rule of the English Queen over the islands, a fact that was not appreciated by some nationalists. But considering Yeats' insistence on spirituality and romanticism, the plays strongly resonate with the poet's feelings for his patriotic beloved, Maud Gonne. The plays were soon followed by a peasant comedy composed with Lady Gregory's help, *The Pot of Broth* in 1902. The comedy was followed by a one-act play morality written in prose, *The Hour-Glass* in 1903. It told the tale of a scholarly atheist who regains his faith after meeting a fool.

Next, Yeats presented *The King's Threshold*, *On Baile's Strand* and *The Shadowy Waters* with the difference that now these dramas staged stronger male dominance instead of feminine, which was appreciated readily by the general and increased his success as a dramatist. In the following years, however, Yeats lost his intense passion for nationalism when his beloved married John MacBride in 1908. Then Yeats' idea of romanticism lost its glow to the more politic and realistic works such as O'Casey's *Shadow of the Gunman*. The audience was no longer very interested in works that weren't involved in the current political climate. As a result, Yeats lost interest in composing any more dramas for the Theatre in the following years and most of his time was consumed in his struggle with the theatre's financial crisis and the Theatre's American and London tours.

It wasn't until the rebellion of the Irish people 1916 against England, known as the Easter Rising, that the spirit of nationalism was given life once again in his works. The rebellion lasted for six days and the nationalists didn't succeed to win independence from England. During the rebellion MacBride was arrested and executed as one of the rebel leaders, leaving Maud Gonne a widower. It must be noted that the cooperation within The Abbey Theatre was not limited to the production of drama. Under the influence of Abbey Theatre, Yeats even tried his

13. David Holdeman, *The Cambridge Introduction to W. B. Yeats*, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006, P, 42.

14. Ibid. P, 41.

hands in writing poems. Pomes produced during the meetings of the Abbey were of more political nature mixed with nationalism and brute realism which were against Yeats' personal principles.

7. J.M. SYNGE ON THE WAY TO THE THEATRE

It was in Paris that Synge was introduced to W.B. Yeats and Maud Gonne in 1898 which became a turning point in Synge's making as a literary figure. Yeats discouraged his endeavours in making a name as a critic of literature and encouraged him to visit Aran Islands in Ireland to learn Gaelic language while collecting Irish folk. Synge followed Yeats' advice and visited the Aran Islands in May, 1898 which led to the composition of his book, *The Aran Islands*. Synge's famous play, *The Playboy of the Western World*, and his other dramas were composed based on *The Aran Islands*. Prior to his trip to the Aran Islands Synge's health deteriorated further and he was diagnosed with Hodgkins disease, a type of cancer.

Synge's poor health shadowed not only his life but perhaps his works as well. Most of his dramas such as *Riders to the Sea*, *In the Shadow of the Glen*, *The Well of the Saints*, *The Playboy of the Western World* and *The Tinker's Wedding* contain a shade of dark gloom, morbid thoughts, struggle and death. His continuous illness, according to Yeats, made him a better observer, an attentive listener and sharpened his imagination. Yeats further commented that "...what blindness did for Homer, lameness for Hephaestus. . . , bad health did for him by making him ask no more of life than that it should keep him living."¹⁵

Synge's major contribution to the Irish literature seems to be his active collaboration in The Abbey Theatre. It seems that The Abbey provided sufficient opportunity for Synge to discover his abilities as a dramatist and, in turn, he took active role in the compositions and productions of the plays. He began to write plays which were focused on the peasant life where he witnessed on Aran Islands. Throughout his works, he had tried to immortalize the lifestyle of Gaelic culture which was unavoidably doomed to fade away. It is said that Synge tried to depict hopes, dreams, hardships, perils, sufferings, love and passion of the Irish peasants through their own daily language.

During his visits to the Aran Islands, Synge lived among the peasants. He listened to their patterns of speech and collected their native stories. He observed their daily lives, weddings, funerals and the local colour. As a result, it could be said that his style of writing resembled realism but it was mingled with imagination. After Moore's and Martyn's departure from The Abbey's circle in 1904, Synge became one of the board members of the company until his death.

Synge took Yeats' advice into consideration and began his study of Irish life and culture before joining the Theatre. He visited Aran Islands and immersed himself in the nature and dialect native to the Aran Islands. He valued the genuine of peasantry life away from the fast progressing modernism as he had very little interest in the modern age of industrialism. He believed that Modernism was robbing life from literature and it had left dramas devoid of their intense passion. With the exception of *Riders to the Sea* and *Deirdre of the Sorrows*, all his plays are pregnant with a heavy dose of irony. He criticized Irish people but never offered either any solution or sympathy.

In his second drama, *The Shadow of the Glen*, written for The Abbey, the dramatist criticized the deplorable and unfair condition of women in the eastern rural parts of Ireland. During those times, women rarely had much of a choice in choosing their life partners because men were either unable to marry due to poverty. As a result, women were condemned to a lonely life in hard and monotonous condition. The issue is boldly depicted through the characters of Nora and Dan in these plays, where Dan prefers to pretend he is dead rather than having Nora's company. As it was mentioned before, the dramatist always mingled his works with imagination; therefore, the character of the Tramp in *The Shadow of the Glen* seems to be his imaginative touch in this play. Through this character, Synge suggested a possible romance and liberation from a life full of frustrations. "He [the Tramp] is a wanderer who appreciates free life and nature. Although rootless, he understands all the moods of rural culture."¹⁶

Unlike Yeats, Synge felt that conceiving a drama mostly based on mysticism and ancient legends could not become a representative of Irish peasant life in reality. He strongly emphasized on the close representation of reality on the stage so that he could

¹⁵. W.B. Yeats, *Synge and the Ireland of his Time*, Ireland: The Cuala Press, 1911, P, 13.

¹⁶. Inas Abdul-Munem, *J. M. Synge's Plays: The Creation of Irish Cultural Identity*, Iraq: Al-Azzawi Anbar University, P, 8.

show the society and its vices but that is where similarities between his plays and modern problem plays come to an end. Drama for Synge was "...like the symphony, [it] does not teach or prove anything."¹⁷ Synge, throughout his works, remained focused solely on the lives of the peasants and wrote what he believed to be real. Synge's disregard for politics, religion or the protests of The Abbey's audience made him a perfect partner for Yeats. Synge fulfilled Yeats' expectations of a play as he once stated them in his *Advice to Playwrights* that: "we do not desire propagandist plays, nor plays written mainly to serve some obvious moral purpose;... but [plays] with realities of emotion and character that become self-evident when made vivid to the imagination."¹⁸

Much to Yeats' delight, Synge refused to intentionally propagate for any political party or figure, even though his family was Unionists. He renounced his family's vigorous and unreasoning loyalty to Unionist politics for a temperate Nationalism. He treated the religious factions with the same passivity. Synge considered himself as an atheist and found his new religion in nationalism. "Soon after I had relinquished the Kingdom of God I began to take a real interest in the kingdom of Ireland.... [and] ...everything Irish became sacred."¹⁹

7.1.Synge's *In the Shadow of the Glen* and *The Playboy of the Western World*

Synge began writing dramas only when he joined The Abbey. Much like Lady Gregory and Douglas Hyde, Synge tried to use native languages and dialects in his plays. He endeavoured to depict Ireland and her people in his plays but the representation was twisted with irony and criticism. While Synge presented the peasantry life of Irish people, he reproved them for their morals especially in *The Playboy of the Western World* and *In the Shadow of Glen*. The Abbey's audience, in turn, accused him of misrepresentation and abuse of peasantry life. They refused to accept or even tolerate criticisms made by a playwright who was neither Catholic nor Gaelic. Their protests, however, did not deter Synge from his love for Ireland and her liberation.

While composing *In the Shadow of Glen*, Synge focused on the condition of young women in rural

communities where they were forced into arranged marriages with much older men. Synge had a firsthand experience of what age difference meant in marriage when he lived among the peasants and he wished to create an awareness of women's problems among the Irish people. It must be noted that the majority of the rural communities were Catholic with strong opinions about marriage and family constitution. By criticizing the Irish people who forced their young women into loveless and childless marriages, Synge not only reproved the society but challenged the Catholic's beliefs as well.

In the Shadow of the Glen shares some similarities with Ibsen's problem play, *A Doll's House*. Both plays focus on women's rights and both female characters in the plays choose to go against the norms of their societies. Synge's play opens into a room in a house with a family of two: Daniel Burke, an elderly farmer, and Nora, his much younger wife. Daniel pretends to be dead and eavesdrops on Nora in order to prove her an adulterous wife. The plot of the play is based on a real story Synge encountered during his stay on Aran Islands and unlike Synge's play, the story ends with the old husband killing his wife and a young man. Synge grants Nora an individual freedom and a chance of finding love, things that rural Catholics denied their women, when Nora left her house with the Tramp in search of her own destiny. It seems Synge wished to liberate Irish people from the old conventions through provocation but the result was not what he had expected.

The production of *In the Shadow of the Glen* in the Irish National Theatre Society resulted in a series of hostile and vehemently negative political reactions from Irish press, political figures and especially the Irish National Theatre Society's audience. Nationalists, playwrights and actors like Douglas Hyde, Maud Gonne, Dudley Digges and Maire Quinn who had participated in the previous productions of the Theatre, walked out of the Theatre in protest and a few of the Irish actors resigned. In the following day, *The Irish Times* published a disapproving review of the play:

Mr. Synge has distinct power, both in irony and dialogue, but surely he could display them better in showing in some other way -the way that should

¹⁷. J.M. Synge, *Tinker's wedding*, Project Gutenberg, 1904, P, 7.

¹⁸. Lady Augusta Persse Gregory, *Our Irish Theatre: A Chapter of Autobiography*, New York And London: The Knickerbocker Press, 1913, P, 102.

¹⁹. Christopher Murray, *Twentieth-Century Irish Drama: Mirror Up to Nation*, England: Manchester University Press, 1997, P, 66.

above all cast no slur on Irish womanhood - the wrong of mercenary marriage.²⁰

The majority of the protests against the play among the nationalist audience were focused on Synge's insult to Catholicism and the purity of Irish Catholic womanhood. Another nationalist member of the company, Arthur Griffith, published his review of the play and openly scorned Synge for the misrepresentation of the Irish life:

Men and women in Ireland marry lacking love, and live mostly in a dull level of amity. Sometimes they do not – sometimes the woman lives in bitterness – sometimes she dies of a broken heart – but she does not go away with the tramp.²¹

It is quite interesting that Griffith admitted the truth of women's harsh predicament in Ireland but refused to accept or consider any other solution besides living in bitterness or dying of a broken heart. Synge hoped through criticism in his comedy the Irish people would rouse from their easy complacency of the women's hardship and provoke them into action. Unfortunately, his efforts were ignored and instead the audience focused on maintaining the outdated traditions. Through all the sensations, Yeats stood his ground in Synge's support and defended him. He believed that regardless of their difference in style, Synge has upheld the spirit of an Irish revivalist throughout his works. Yeats believed that a "... play to be suitable for performance at the Abbey should contain some criticism of life, founded on the experience or personal observation of the writer, or some vision of life, of Irish life by preference."²²

The only play globally known as Synge's masterpiece is *The Playboy of the Western World* staged in 1907 in the Abbey Theatre. The play created an uncontrollable wave of protests and riots in The Abbey the magnitude of which overshadowed the protests to Synge's first play, *In the Shadow of Glen*. *The Playboy of the Western World* could be considered as a more condensed version of the first play in three acts accompanied with harsher criticism. The audience's hauls of indignation were not limited only to protests and negative reviews from the Irish press and critics but Yeats had to request assistance in order to maintain order and safety against the audience. He presented Nora and

Pegeen as young women with rebellious characters against the male-oriented society who strived to achieve romantic liberty. Indeed, Synge had tried to draw attention to women's lack of freedom and their hardship in conventional society and wrote the plays with the intention of provoking its audience in *The Abbey*.

It seems to Synge, even the riots and protests were the lesser of the two evils compared to blind acceptance of the old conventions. In the following day of the production of *The Playboy of the Western World*, Synge in a letter wrote to Molly Allgood, the actress who performed as Pegeen Mike in the play: "It is better any day to have the row we had last night, than to have your play fizzling out in half-hearted applause. Now we'll be talked about."²³ *The Playboy of the Western World* followed on the heels of the Synge's first controversially play, *In the Shadow of Glen*, on much larger scale. The play faced widespread hostile protests and harsh criticisms from the audience, nationalists and the press during and the following day of the play's production. The play was considered as a scandal upon the character of Irish people, insult to the Catholics and abuse of the virtue of Irish womanhood. By staging plays like *In the Shadow of Glen* and *The Playboy of the Western World* in a theatre proclaimed as the national Theatre of Ireland, the members of The Abbey had inadvertently depicted the Irish people as violent characters with loose familial constitution and a poor culture as a whole.

8. G.B. SHAW AND THE ABBEY THEATRE'S CALLING

This far in the study, the actions, decisions and roles of the two important members of The Abbey, W.B. Yeats and J.M. Synge, have been reviewed and discussed. These two literary figures were not the only members of significant importance during the life of the Theatre, but their actions as the co-directors of The Abbey's board became a deciding factor for its future. Yeats the poet, planted the corner stone of The Abbey. Synge the peasantry writer, prepared The Abbey for modernization but the baton did not reach to Shaw the social reformist. G.B. Shaw was a famous Anglo-Irish dramatist who

²⁰. Nicholas Grene, *The politics of Irish drama: Plays in context from Bouicault to Friel*, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2004, P, 74.

²¹. Kelly Hill, *Nation and Freedom in Ireland's National Theatre*, US: FSU Digital Library, 2013, P, 28.

²². Lady Augusta Persse Gregory, *Our Irish Theatre: A Chapter of Autobiography*, New York And London: The Knickerbocker Press, 1913, P, 102.

²³. Nicholas Grene, *The politics of Irish drama: Plays in context from Bouicault to Friel*, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2004, P, 79.

could have brought The Abbey into a new era but many elements prevented the transition.

The Theatre had already secured a name for itself among the Irish and English; many renowned political and literary figures were invited to the first productions of The Abbey and gained the focus of the Irish press as well as English and American press abroad. But the Theatre needed more productions in order to secure a stronger foothold in the literary world. With this thought in mind, Yeats called in a favour from a friend who had secured a reputable name for himself as a critic and dramatist. If Shaw became part of the revival movement in The Abbey, his fame could have boosted the Theatre's reputation even further, a very desirable outcome.

The presence of another well-known literary figure would have added to the Theatre's creditability in important literary and political circles. Although the Theatre had a mostly successful beginning, the economic slump and political tension between Dublin and London had devastating effects on The Abbey. The internal conflicts and clash of ideologies accelerated the deterioration of the Theatre further to the point that closure became a real threat. Shaw accepted to support The Abbey with his plays and he composed two plays, *John Bull's Other Island* in 1904 and *O'Flaherty V.C* in 1914, specifically for the Theatre and subsequently for Ireland. But the results were a far cry from what had been expected and hoped for.

While employing Shaw's collaboration, Yeats did not take into consideration the difference between his point of view and dramatic style with that of his friend's. Where Yeats preferred the world of imagination, Irish mythology and poetic drama, Shaw prioritized realism, problem plays and argumentative plays. Shaw often accompanied and softened his didactic plays along with comic elements to the whole play, as is the case for *John Bull's Other Island*. The characters, like Tom Broadbent, in this play provide much comical instances where although the readers may laugh at, but they also need to pause and think of the other side of the coin which shows the bitter reality.

This awareness is necessary because if they were not aware of the reality, they won't be able to laugh at how this dramatist masterfully ridiculed serious subjects of the day. The readers would laugh at the well developed speeches of the characters but there

would also be a pause with a terrible silence when the gloomy reality sinks in their minds. In *John Bull's Other Island's* preface titled as *Preface for Politicians* Shaw remarked: "I thought it would be good for them [the Irish] to be shown very clearly that the loudest laugh they could raise at the expense of the absurdest Englishman was not really a laugh on their side."²⁴

Yeats asked for a play infused with nationalistic spirit but what he received was a problem play which not only questioned the actions of the Englishmen but that of the Irishmen's as well. In *John Bull's Other Island*, intended for The Abbey, the actions and thoughts of the Irish nationalists were questioned and they were regarded as individuals with unrealistic ideologies and dreams in the modern world. The members of The Abbey initially were more of a romantic movement with nature and Irish myth as the central theme to their productions so that they could unite their fellow Irishmen regardless of their religion and social classes. The last thing Yeats wanted was to call his audience dreamers and passives towards the affairs of Ireland. Therefore, in a letter he politely rejected *John Bull's Other Island* by accentuating the positive points in this comedy:

You have said things in this play which are entirely true about Ireland, things which nobody has ever said before, and these are the very things which are most part of the action. ... I do not consider the play dangerous. There may be a phrase, but I cannot think of one at this moment. ... You have laughed at all the things that are ripe for laughter... I don't mean to say that there won't be indignation about one thing or another, and a great deal of talk about it all, but I mean that we can play it, and survive to play something else.²⁵

8.1. The Abbey Theatre and Shaw's *O'Flaherty V.C*.

The Theatre's struggle with financial issues still continued and keeping its doors open became a losing battle. Since the Theatre couldn't support itself merely by relying on its Irish audience, the reliance on London tours became vital means of meeting its expenses. But the outbreak of the World War I decisively brought about a slump in the economics not only in Ireland but in England as well. In September of 1914, Yeats and Lady Gregory wrote a letter to the *Irish Times* requesting help and stated that the Theatre would soon face financial

24. G.B. Shaw, *John Bull's Other Island, Preface for Politicians*, 1906, P, 6.

25. Stanley Weintraub, *Shaw's People: Victoria to Churchill*, US: Pennsylvania State University, 1996, P, 102.

crisis which would inadvertently affect the economy in Dublin. In the letter they declared that: "Leaving aside the loss to the artistic life of Dublin, it would be a considerable industrial loss, and throw many people out of employment at a time when employment is difficult to find."²⁶

Yeats asked Shaw for another play in order to aid the sinking Theatre. In the autumn of the same year another major event was also happening. The British army was pushing Ireland for recruiting a huge number of recruitments. The Abbey Theatre also published an announcement in the *Freeman's Journal* informing the public of the production of *O'Flaherty V.C., an Interlude in the Great War of 1914*. But why is the conjunction of these two events of importance? The answer lies with Shaw's opposition against wars. As a social reformer, one of Shaw's eye-catching activities was condemning the reasons and people who entice the act of war.

Again the dance between the politics and literature made its grand entrance when Shaw, in the zenith of recruitment drive in Ireland, wrote a play about war titled as *O'Flaherty V.C., an Interlude in the Great War of 1914*. Naturally, problems were bound to happen in the process of production of the play. The British authorities in Ireland were concerned how the play was directly related to the recruitment program in Ireland. They were concerned that during the tensions resulted from the war the smallest of the sparks would interrupt the recruitment drive, strengthen the anti-war oppositions, cause a reduction in the numbers of volunteers and provoke Sinn Fein grope into causing troubles. They thought Shaw's *O'Flaherty V.C.* in The Abbey Theatre would be interpreted as either 1) too much recruiting in Ireland or 2) as an anti-recruiting statement in England. In both cases, none of the interpretation favoured the recruiting for the military that was in dire need of new recruits.

The reactions to the play definitely surprised Shaw, not because he didn't expect any negative reactions to the play but from the people who reacted negatively. Initially Shaw was concerned the play would face a hostile reception from The Abbey's nationalist audience because the main character of the play was a young Irishman, O'Flaherty, who was eager to leave his own nation and fight in the war for England. In the play, Shaw not only sent a young Irishman to fight for the English but O'Flaherty's mother who seemed to be a nationalist was criticized

as well. She believed that without the Irish intellectual figures in England, the English wouldn't have been able to even read. Although exaggerated, her claim has a truth to it as many prominent Irish intellectual figures aided the literary progress in England. Mrs. O'Flaherty's exaggerations devaluated her nationalist identity and through her Shaw criticized the Irish nationalists with unrealistic ideologies.

Shaw's tactics in criticizing the war, the recruiting of the Irish for the British army and criticizing the Irish nationalist for their impractical ideologies placed the Theatre in a really hard position. The Abbey desperately needed new plays to prevent its closure but with Shaw's *O'Flaherty V.C.* the Theatre was left isolated from both Irish and English audience. The Abbey couldn't appeal to the English because the play criticized war and the British army and the Irish nationalists would have offered no support as they were at the receiving end of Shaw's mockery as well. At the end with the military urgings, Yeats' withdrawal from the conflict and the inconveniences that the press caused for the Theatre, it was decided that Shaw's *O'Flaherty V.C.* to be taken off The Abbey's list of productions and the Abbey lost its chance in employing Shaw's further collaboration.

9. CONCLUSION

The Abbey Theatre was established with the hopes of presenting the world an Ireland with a rich culture and to liberate the Irish literature from the English influence. The members of The Abbey wished to show England that their culture was by no means inferior to theirs for they were very well capable of building a Celtic and Irish school of dramatic literature. The first two and three seasons of the production could be considered more or less a success during a time when people hardly bothered to pick up a literary book while they were struggling to provide themselves with the basic subsistence.

The early members of the Irish National Theatre Society, Yeats, Lady Gregory, Martyn and Moore, were able to successfully attract the attention of the press in Ireland and abroad. Many literary, political and patriotic figures joined them in an effort to revive the Celtic culture, literature and language through peaceful means; a literary nationalist movement that aimed to celebrate and honour Ireland as an independent nation through not the acts of violence and bloodshed but art and romance.

26. Lauren Arrington, *The Censorship of O'Flaherty V.C.*, "Project Muse: Today's Research, Tomorrow's Inspiration", University of Liverpool, 2012, P, 86.

Their theatrical company fulfilled its aim until the formal opening of The Abbey as the company's own Theatre. The united front that the intellectual figures and nationalist had already created became the victim of the clash between the ideologies.

Yeats and Lady Gregory insisted on continuing the production of the poetic dramas with peasantry life, folklore, mythology and imagination as their main subject, whereas Moore and Martyn intended to connect Ireland to other European countries through the production of the popular problem plays fathered by Ibsen. In the face of criticism and resistances in the Theatre, Yeats became more and more uncompromising which drove out major contributors and nationalist members of the Theatre namely Maud Gonne, George Russell and some of the actors. Yeats found a new ally in Synge and his unique dramatic style which focused on the peasantry life of the Irish people.

Synge's dramas brought about major sensations throughout Dublin and provided a much needed ground for heated discussions either in praise or condemnation of his works. The reactions to the productions of The Abbey could be interpreted differently from different viewpoint: the Theatre had failed Ireland in unification of her people regardless of their religion and political tendencies. The Catholics were enraged due to the Theatre's insult to their families, traditions and scandalous depiction of Irishwomen. The nationalists were furious that The Abbey would ruin all their efforts in presenting themselves as decent, peaceful and law-abiding citizens only to portray them the exact opposite in *The Playboy of the Western World*. Considering the political climate of the then Ireland and the tension between the Protestants and The Catholics, the reactions were quite understandable.

On the other hand, the Theatre had gained a significant foothold in the literary world in comparison to other theatres in Dublin, The Queen's and the Gaiety theatre. Prior to the establishment of The Abbey, theatres staged English dramas and unintentionally or not promoted the English culture among the Irish. The Abbey's Theatrical Company made many tours to England and America and promoted their own Irish literature and culture among the foreigners. Unfortunately, the beginning of the World War I severely crippled the Theatre's progress by plugging Ireland with economic depression and a suffocating period for the literary figures like G.B. Shaw whose works were not given permission for production. It seems against all the odds, The Abbey Theatre was able to continue its

role as Ireland's National Theatre and secure its position even to this day so that it could retell the history of Ireland, the struggles of her people for freedom and preservation of their art and culture for the future generations.

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