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# The modern Irish drama as represented by W.B. Yeates, J.M. Synge and P. Colum

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BOSTON UNIVERSITY

GRADUATE SCHOOL

Thesis

THE MODERN IRISH DRAMA

AS REPRESENTED BY

W. B. YEATS, J. M. SYNGE, AND P. COIUM

Submitted by

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AS REPRESENTED BY  
YEATS, SYNGE, COLEMAN

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THE MODERN IRISH DRAMA

AS REPRESENTED BY

W. B. YEATS, J. M. SYNGE, AND P. COLLIER

OLD IRELAND

Under the Milesian rule in Ireland many hundreds of years ago, even as far back as the third century, there existed in Ireland a social order and method of governing that were superior to those of all the nations of Western Europe. Among the public officials of this government were the poets, philosophers, scientists, historians, and musicians, who are commonly called bards. These men were highly respected for their knowledge, loved for their powers of entertainment, and feared for the sarcasm with which they punished those who displeased them. With such leaders as these; it is hardly a matter of wonder that a literature developed that had considerable merit. The clan system also contributed greatly to the literature of the period because the bard of each clan formed a great history out of the events that daily took place. Some writings of this age still exist in The Psalter of Tara, a collection of the annals of the country from its earliest period down to the third century; the Cuilmenn, the most wonderful literary treasure of the pre-Christian period; and a few fragments of the poems of Ossian, the greatest of the pagan poets.

With the advent of St. Patrick in the fifth century begins what is known as the Golden Age of Ireland. Following the conversion of Ireland by this great saint, monasteries sprang up in all parts of the land, and art, philosophy, and literature soon attained

a high degree of perfection. Although many manuscripts written during this time were destroyed by the invasions of the Danes and the English, a few still remain and may be seen in the libraries of Armagh, Dublin, London, Paris, and Rome. It is recorded that over two hundred poets, the greatest of them being Columbcille, attained distinction during this period. As time went on, missionaries went forth to convert the peoples of Europe. They went to Germany, France, Belgium, Scotland, England, Italy, and even Iceland, spreading not only Christianity but civilization as well. Thus it was that they earned the name given them by Agibert, Bishop of Paris, "Island of Saints and Scholars".

The invasion of Ireland by the Danes in the ninth century marks the decline of this brilliant epoch of achievement, for although the Danes were finally driven from the country two centuries later, their brutality and ignorance had, in the meantime, left their imprint on the formerly peaceful island. This work of destruction was carried on by the invasion of the Anglo-Normans in the twelfth century and has been continued by the British ever since. In spite of the repeated atrocities which the English have perpetrated in Ireland during the past eight centuries, and the brutality, treachery, and ruthless injustice with which they have always treated the people in their endeavor to subjugate the island, the Irish have never been conquered and have never ceased their courageous struggle for freedom. Due to this perpetual warfare, to the famines, and to the laws of England, which made it a criminal offense to educate the Catholics, the majority of the people have been kept in ignorance. Hence, few writers and little literature have appeared during these years.

### THE CELTIC RENAISSANCE

However, a somewhat brighter era was in store for these unhappy people. They were to experience once more, to a certain extent, some of the happiness and prosperity which the old Celts had enjoyed during the Golden Age.

In the first quarter of the nineteenth century, a new champion of the rights of Ireland arose in the person of Daniel O'Connell. With the ultimate aim in view of obtaining a repeal of the iniquitous Act of Union, passed in 1801, O'Connell bent all his powers of statesmanship and oratory to the purpose of uniting Ireland. His enthusiasm proved remarkably contagious, and in a few years he had the pleasure of seeing Ireland united once more as a nation.

Following the organization of The Loyal National Repeal Association by O'Connell, several similar societies sprang up. The most important of these new associations was "Young Ireland", which was formed by some young college graduates who had seceded from O'Connell's party. Taking for its motto, "Educate that you may be free," Young Ireland early established a newspaper, called the Nation, for the purpose of further awakening the spirit of Irish nationality. The interesting point about this newspaper from a literary point of view is that it decided to enlist the aid of the poets. The first of these poets was Thomas Davis, whose verse, Lament for the Death of Owen Roe O'Neill, probably his finest, constitutes the beginning of a series of national ballads and songs later known as The Spirit of the Nation. During this period poetry

poured in from all the different classes of Ireland, and their patriotic fervor, sincere emotion, and vigor won for them great admiration. The only poet of this group, however, whose work is likely to enjoy lasting fame is J. C. Mangan. Brought up in the midst of pure Irish culture and fed on Gaelic literature, this patriot found his inspiration in the legends of his country rather than in the patriotic revolt then going on. In this way Mangan has identified himself with the spirit of Ireland's past, and hence has been called the father of modern Irish poetry.

After Mangan came a man by the name of Samuel Ferguson, who had one advantage over the former, namely, that he was a distinguished Gaelic scholar. The publication of two volumes of his verse, Jays of Western Gael, and Poems, gave a new impetus to the return to Irish legends, which is a marked feature of the Renaissance. Like Mangan, Ferguson wrote these poems in English. The time had not yet arrived for the poets to revive the use of their native Gaelic in their work.

In spite of the attainments of these two men, the title, "Father of the Revival", escaped them and descended upon Standish James O'Grady, a young Irish student, whose History of Ireland: Heroic Period, published in 1878, marks the starting point of the literary Revival. This work was produced as the result of the accidental discovery on the part of the young author that his country had a great past. The chief value of the book lies not so much in the truth of its facts, for such histories of Ireland had been written before, but rather in its stirring imaginative treatment of the old bardic tales. His power of narration is so

great that the gods, heroes, and kings that figure in these old tales are veritably made to live once more before you, and to perform again the wonderful feats which had made them famous. The work that especially shows O'Grady's powers as an historian is his story of Cu-culain, the chief epic of Irish literature.

In 1879 O'Grady, in his Essay on Early Bardic Literature, indignantly assails the English speaking literary world for their neglect of the wonderful old epics, to the number of one hundred, which are to be found in the ancient stories of Ireland, and makes an eloquent plea for their revival. His ardor and enthusiasm were not lost, for his revelation of this fountain of inspiration gained for him later the admiration and gratitude of the Irish writers who found refreshment there.

After completing his second volume of this Bardic History in 1880, O'Grady published several political essays, and another history, and then turned his genius to historical romance. Taking the sixteenth century for his setting, he produced Red Hugh's Captivity, The Flight of the Eagle, Ulrick the Ready, and other historical stories, which accomplished for the Elizabethan period what his History of Ireland had achieved for the bardic epoch. In illuminating these two great eras, O'Grady performed his greatest service to the Literary Revival.

Standish O'Grady, who revealed the wealth of material to be found in Irish history, merits certainly the largest portion of the praise which is to be given to the pioneers of the Literary Renaissance, but great honor is also due to the men who un-

covered another well of inspiration almost as rich as that of history, namely, the Celtic folk tales and songs, which were rapidly being obliterated as a result of the increasing Anglicisation of the country. In this field George Sigerson was the first to attain distinction. His book, Poets and Poetry of Munster, containing fifty beautiful Irish poems, constitutes the first noteworthy contribution to the Gaelic movement, another phase of the Renaissance, for the poetry is not only translated into English but also printed in the original Gaelic. By the time he was ready to publish his second book, Bards of the Gael and Gall, which appeared in 1897, he found the public eager to receive it. In this last collection Sigerson covers a period of over two thousand years and has selected poems from all the great epochs of history, beginning with the Milesians and concluding with the eighteenth century.

Though the progress of Sigerson was notable, Douglas Hyde was to go still further. Arguing that language is the symbol of nationality, Hyde and his followers exhorted the people to revive the Gaelic language. In The Literary History of Ireland, his most important literary work in English, Hyde traces the evolution of literature in Ireland, and thus makes accessible to the public facts which had been before only indefinitely conceded or else denied. Besides this book, Hyde has also made collections of old poems, which he has published for the most part in Irish, although he also followed Sigerson's plan of giving parallel versions to a certain extent. In this field Hyde rapidly became the leading authority of his day. His anthologies, Beside the Fire,

the Love Songs of Connacht, and Religious Songs of Connacht, are especially valuable for their accuracy and have had a strong influence on the revival. One of the most important services Hyde performed for his country was the freeing of the Anglo-Irish language from the vulgarities and absurdities with which novelists, such as Charles Lever, Samuel Lover, and Gerald Griffin, had defiled it in their creation of the "stage Irishman".

Another influence in this great movement is to be found in The Irish People, the journal of the Fenian movement, the political party, which succeeded the Young Irelanders. Like the Nation, this paper soon became a center of politico-literary activity. Unlike the Nation, however, its verse was marked by a sad plaintiveness indicative of the tone which was later characteristic of the poets of the Renaissance. This paper, together with certain independent writers, such as Aubrey de Vere and William Allingham, who had been connected with no political movement, but who had been writing on Irish themes, marks the transitional period in the history of the Literary Revival.

As a result of the collapse of the Parnell movement in the last quarter of the century, the political tension was lessened and the intellectual forces, which had been strengthening during the early eighties now broke forth. The new era in poetry came in. In 1889 the first books of various young poets, such as Katharine Tynan, M. B. Yeats, and William Larminie, were published and attracted much attention. Previously to this the Southwark Irish Literary Club had been founded in London in 1883 by P. A. Fahy, and a brother association, The Pan-Celtic Society in Dublin

was created in 1888. As the literary work of these two associations was not great, it remained for The Irish Literary Society in London, and the Irish National Literary Society in Dublin, to crystallize the movement. And in the members of these two organizations we can see represented the forces to which we owe the Literary Revival, for Michael Johnson, Stopford Brooke, Alice Milligan, Katharine Tynan, and John Todhunter belonged to the former; while Sigerson, Hyde, Standish O'Grady, Yeats, and William Jarminie were members of the latter.

Although these societies set out with the idea of lecturing on Celtic subjects, of encouraging unknown writers, and of publishing the works of writers neglected before, they did not accomplish much as a split in the societies soon developed. Due to this division, which was a result of a conflict between the older men and the younger men as to what national literature consisted of, most of the greatest work has been done outside of these organizations. The societies still exist, however, as groups interested in the literature being produced, but not for creative purposes, as was originally intended.

Thus it was that the Literary Revival came about. Since then the movement has grown healthily in the field of poetry, and has spread into other branches of literature, notably into drama, which will engage our attention for the rest of this paper.

### THE DRAMATIC MOVEMENT

By some critics the Dramatic Movement is considered the greatest of all the literary movements of the Renaissance. Whether or not this judgment is correct, the drama has the distinction of being the most universally known of all the branches of the modern Irish literature.

A peculiar feature of Irish drama, which ought not to be slighted and which ought to add somewhat to its interest, is its exceptional history. Outside of dialogues, and the plays of certain Irishmen, such as Congreve and Goldsmith, whose work was not typically Irish, no drama had ever been produced in Ireland up to the time of the last quarter of the nineteenth century. The plays, therefore, that are written during this latter part of the century have the unusual honor at this late date of being the first plays of a nation.

The idea of having a small theatre in Dublin similar to The Independent Theatre in London, in which drama of true literary worth--uncommercial drama, as it is sometimes called--could be produced, originated with W. B. Yeats, after the production at the Avenue Theatre, London, in 1894, of his play, Land of Heart's Desire. With the enlistment of Edward Martyn, another Irish dramatist, who discovered that London held no market for his plays any more than for Yeats, and later of George Moore, a novelist, who was a cousin of Martyn, Yeats formed the nucleus of the first phase of the Dramatic Movement. After some other writers had pledged their support, chief among whom were Lady Gregory, A. E., and John

Eglinton, the Irish Literary Theatre was established in 1899 under the auspices of the National Literary Society, which planned to exist experimentally for three years.

In connection with this inception of the Irish Dramatic Movement, Lloyd R. Morris, in The Celtic Dawn, states that this new development of the Literary Revival was the result of two antagonistic forces at work in the English theatre of this period. Ernest Boyd, in Ireland's Literary Renaissance, also agrees with this point. Morris elaborates more, however, and goes on to say that the translation of the plays of Ibsen started literary men to thinking seriously of the function of the theatre, and to hoping "for a drama which, besides revealing a serious reading of life, would be graced, like that of Ibsen, by literary distinction." An association, The Independent Theater, was soon formed for the purpose of producing plays that had an intellectual, rather than an emotional appeal, as a result. However, in their anxiety to produce life accurately, these men carried realism to the extreme, and against this naturalism in production and content, which became the prevailing mode in both the "commercial" and "intellectual" theatre, there was an almost immediate revolt, which took the form symbolism. The chief exponent of symbolism at this particular time was Maurice Maeterlinck. As this symbolism soon became attached to the poetic drama, the "modern movement" became divided into two parties--one in favor of naturalism and the intellectual drama, like Ibsen, and the other in favor of the poetic drama and symbolism, like Maeterlinck. Out of this separation, Morris thinks, the Irish Dramatic Movement grew, for Yeats was an admirer of Mae-

terlinck and his symbolical drama, and therefore was opposed to the naturalism of the commercial theatre. Out of this separation, also, may be seen the cause of the disruption of Irish Literary Theatre, although Morris does not mention it, for Martyn was an admirer of Ibsen, who, as we have seen, was directly opposed to Maeterlinck.

According to Morris, what Yeats desired in his new theatre was "the upbuilding of a school of Irish dramatists whose work would contain either a vision or a criticism of life clothed in beautiful language. He hoped that the race consciousness of the Irish people would become articulate in the work of a theatre of art, and that it would be the center of an intellectual and emotional tradition." What Martyn desired in the new theatre, I have found no record of, although we do know that he, too, was eager for a theatre in which dramas which would not be immediately successful commercially could be produced.

Inasmuch as Yeats, Martyn, and Moore were united primarily in a revolt against English theatrical conditions, it is easy to see that the production of folk plays was not one of their aims. As they state themselves in various places, they were consciously moved by the examples of the Théâtre Libre and the Freie Bühne, as well as by that of The Independent Theatre, to create a similar house in Dublin and to do for Ireland what Ibsen had done for Norway. Although this little group was bound together by a single purpose, they were not agreed on the type of drama which they wished to have produced, for Yeats desired that this theatre should be distinctly different from The Independent Theatre in London, and

that poetic dramas based on national legends should be produced, while Martyn and Moore favored the production of social and psychological dramas. During the three years of its existence, therefore, both were produced--Yeats's The Countess Cathleen, Alice Milligan's The Last Feast of Fianna, and Diarmuid and Grania, by Yeats and Moore in collaboration, representing the former type, and Martyn's The Heather Field, Moore's adaptation of Martyn's The Tale of a Town, The Bending of the Bough, and Martyn's Maeve, representing the latter type. Douglas Hyde's Casad-an-Sugan (The Twisting of the Rope) was also played at this time and marks a decided revolution in Irish drama in that it was the first play written in Gaelic to be produced upon the stage.

As you will notice, no folk play has been heard of during this time. Due to its failure to appear, and to the comparative unimportance of poetic drama at this time, Yeats severed his connection with the theatre at the end of the experimental period. The work of Martyn and Moore had given the theatre its tone during this short time, and with them, especially with Martyn, therefore, the movement must be identified. Two good dramas, The Heather Field and Maeve, Martyn gave to Ireland then of the type he desired to see flourish there. He is the only Irish writer who felt the dramatic possibilities of contemporary life in Ireland outside of the peasantry, and for this reason, as well as for the fact that his material was more slender and harder to reach than that of other writers, he deserves great admiration. His work further deserves commendation, for it is marked by originality of theme, an intimate knowledge of Irish life, especially of the middle and

upper classes, a feeling for effective situation, and nobility of intention, although it lacks dramatic finish. The work of Moore, however, is of a poorer grade. In regard to him Charles Keygandt, in Irish Plays and Playwrights, besides mentioning his lack of dramatic art and unfitness as a writer of plays, says: "His best plays are but the good journeyman work of one who is a skilled literary craftsman."

With the separation of the founders in 1901 of the Dramatic Movement, however, the Irish Literary Theatre did not die. With the occasional aid of amateur organizations, especially of The Players' Club and The Independent Theatre Company, Martyn has continued since 1902 to follow his original plan, and to encourage the production of Scandinavian and Russian dramas. His success in obtaining a small company of players in 1914 with which to revive the Irish Literary Theatre leads us to hope that his perseverance will not meet with failure after all, but rather that his efforts will yet be rewarded.

The popular opinion that the second phase of the Irish Dramatic Movement, the Irish National Dramatic Company, was a development of the Irish Literary Theatre is strongly doubted by Boyd, who claims that it is difficult to believe that a new company dealing with folk drama could grow out of one which contained no trace of it. He is more inclined to believe that this new theatre owed its origin to an entirely separate group--a group which was already in existence before Yeats added to it his support.

Prior to 1902 J. G. and F. J. Fay, actors of native genius, who had been acting in various amateur companies, brought to-

gether a small company of men with talents similar to their own. In traveling about the country, the Fay brothers came in contact with A. E., who encouraged them to found the Irish National Theatre. The idea appealed to them, and they immediately decided to carry the project out. They did so with the object in mind of fostering a purely national drama, which was to be acted by Irish players, and interpreted according to the Irish, rather than the English, tradition. It was about this time that Yeats and Lady Gregory discovered them, and, finding that their views coincided with their own, joined them. The company, now being enlarged and strengthened, took the name of the Irish National Dramatic Company.

During the first year of its life this company performed A. E.'s only drama, Deirdre, and Yeats's Kathleen ni Houlihan. Due to the charming acting of the company the plays were immensely successful. Urged on by this triumph, the company moved the following year to the Antient Concert Rooms, the place in which the Irish Literary Theatre first appeared. This time four new plays were added to the program, three of which belonged to the then new school, and the fourth, The Laying of the Foundations, by Frederick Ryan, to Martyn's school. The Pot of Broth, by Yeats, indicated the comedies and farces which were later to be associated so closely with Lady Gregory; The Pacing Jug, by James H. Cousins, was a peasant drama; and The Sleep of the King, another of his plays, belonged to the poetic drama.

At the end of this second year, which was also very successful, the National Theatre might be said to have become firmly established, for a talented company had been gathered, and a group of

writers who were particularly fitted to write plays suitable to the abilities of the actors had also become attached. Thus, the outline of the special work these men were to do was already drawn, being shaped essentially by the Fays, as their ability to interpret only plays of the above-named types limited the possibilities of the drama to be written for their production. This was both their strength and their weakness--their strength, inasmuch as they accomplished this particular work extraordinarily well, and their weakness, in that it limited the types of drama for their theatre.

In 1903 The Irish National Theatre Company supplanted the Irish National Theatre, and Yeats was elected president. Although the new society claimed that it was to continue the work of the Irish Literary Theatre, it was in reality planning to carry on the work of the Fays, who remained with the company until 1908, during which time, due largely to their influence and that of J. M. Synge, the theatre enjoyed its greatest success.

In this same year Yeats's poetic plays, The King's Threshold and The Shadowy Waters appeared, as well as Synge's In the Shadow of the Glen and Padraic Colum's Broken Soil. The appearance of these last two dramas marked the introduction of what some critics consider the two most notable of the new dramatists, both followers of the peasant drama, but both entirely dissimilar in their method of treating it.

The fame of the company had now extended so that the Irish Literary Society invited them to England. Here their talent attracted much favorable criticism, especially that of Miss A. E. F. Horniman, who bestowed upon them an annual subsidy and

furnished them the Abbey Theatre, rent free, for six years. Since 1904, therefore, Ireland has had a national theatre with a permanent place of performance. The fact was given further emphasis by the adoption in 1905 of the name, The National Theatre Society, under which it has existed ever since.

The notoriety caused by the performance of the *Playboy of the Western World* in 1907 ushers in the third phase of the Dramatic Movement. Due to the prominence given the Abbey Theatre as a result of the conflict of opinions regarding the merits of this play by Synge, numerous young dramatists were attracted to the movement. Although some of them had talent, many of them did not. The outcome of it all was, therefore, that while some really good creative work has appeared since, such as the comedies and farces of Lady Gregory, the most prolific dramatist in Ireland, and William Boyle; the peasant drama of melodramatic tendency of Seumas O'Kelly, which was the field in which most of these new dramatists worked more unsuccessfully than O'Kelly; the folk plays of George Fitzmaurice, whom Boyd considers the legitimate successor of Synge and Colum; the idealistic realism of the plays of Lord Dunsany; and the peasant plays of Rutherford Mayne, the sole representative of the Ulster Literary Theatre, a branch of the Abbey Theatre; the majority of the new dramas are simply imitations of the work of Synge and Colum and are distinctive simply for their financial success.

Much as it is to be deplored, the fact remains that the over-production of conventionalised peasant plays, and the growth of commercialism, have brought about a change in the Abbey Theatre,

which is rapidly declining. Boyd claims, and his claim seems both sound and reasonable to me, that the division of forces is the cause now, as in the beginning, of the weakness of the Dramatic Movement, and states that only a united, determined group can resist the evils with which this particular branch of the Celtic Renaissance is now surrounded. His conclusion, I believe, is worthy of note:

"But its existence, now threatened, may be strengthened if the mistakes of the past are understood. Too much indiscriminate enthusiasm has not only been largely responsible for the fatal popularity of the "Abbey" drama, but it has served to concentrate attention upon the successes, literary or otherwise, of the Movement, to the exclusion of all else. But its failures are important, and never more so than now, when certain successes have conspired for its ruin. National drama cannot live by such specialisation as has produced the stereotyped peasant play. It must embrace a wider field. The united forces of the two streams into which the Dramatic Revival originally diverged, with the consequent concentration of all minor activities, can alone assure the future of the Irish National Theatre."

WILLIAM BUTLER YEATS

Although Yeats did not permanently turn to drama until he was well along in years, his interest in it dates from his youth. In fact, the first work he published, The Island of Statues: An Arcadian Fairy Tale in Two Acts, followed by Mosada, a Dramatic Poem, both of which were never intended to be produced, however, show his leaning toward dramatic writing. His increased interest in drama and his development in subordinating the poetic to the dramatic art, which he never perfectly attained, grow simultaneously with the rise of the theatre. Yeats's growth in his second field of endeavor, however, must not be supposed to be the result of the development of the theatre, but rather that "the Dramatic Movement was the occasion, not the cause", as Boyd puts it.

As I have already mentioned, Yeats planned to make his dramas national through writing poetic plays based on the legends, folk-tales, and mythology of Ireland, which he gained from his own experience and the works of Sir Samuel Ferguson, who had done the most with Irish legend; William Allingham, who wrote of Irish fairies; and the poets of the Young Ireland group, especially Davis. This plan of Yeats was a fortunate one inasmuch as it coincided with the natural tendency of his genius, and when he has most closely followed this plan, he has done his best work.

The chief contribution of Yeats to drama is his poetic drama, Deirdre, which is based on one of the most famous and beautiful of the Irish folk-tales. The plot centers about the attempt of Conchubar, a king who was about to marry Deirdre when Naisi, a young lover met and carried her off, to get possession

of the beautiful young girl by treacherously murdering her husband. This tragedy is generally considered the most dramatic of all the plays Yeats has written, due to its material and treatment. Another of its attractions is to be found in the really great poetry which is found within it. In criticising this play, Morris says, "In compressing the tragedy within the limits of a single episode, he (Yeats) has immeasurably increased the dramatic power of the legend." His further comment, "A bold and effective stroke of dramatic technique is the psychological parallelism with which Yeats has invested his play," refers to the story, brought out in the play, of a similar tragedy which once before had taken place in the very house in which Deirdre and Maisi now find themselves, and in which they are to be similarly betrayed and meet their death.

The most noteworthy of the other poetic plays of Yeats are The Countess Cathleen, The Land of Heart's Desire, and The Shadowy Waters. All three dramas are pervaded by the same mystery, the same weird imagination, and the same symbolical poetry that is characteristic of much of Yeats's other work. It seems to me, however, that the cause for the flatness of these plays dramatically is due to this very symbolical language in which this author most enjoys clothing his ideas, for the figurative speech has the effect of lessening the intensity of the action. Perhaps Yeats deliberately intended to do this, for it was his aim to rid the drama of what he called its theatricality. Among these plays, The Land of Heart's Desire has been most often produced, although as reading material The Countess Cathleen made the greatest appeal to me because its theme was stronger.

Two other types of plays Yeats has attempted, although his success here has not been so great. In Cathleen ni Houlihan we find the best example of his prose dramas, and in The Hour Glass we discover the best illustration of his morality plays. Both of these works make very delightful reading, for their rhythmical language and strange, yet beautiful, themes win our commendation. The first of the two, because of its patriotic allegory, has been the most popular of Yeats's dramas in Ireland.

Contrary to the desire of Yeats, his project to start a school of poetic drama has not proved successful, for other dramatists who have attempted to follow his lead have lacked his genius and, therefore, have been unable to produce anything of much merit. As a result, therefore, Yeats, besides being the first writer of poetic dramas in Ireland, also remains its sole representative in the field of modern Irish drama.

JOHN HILLINGTON SYNGE

By many critics Synge is considered the greatest dramatic genius that Ireland has produced during the Literary Revival, although by others his work is found to be faulty. In order to give one a basis for judging Synge and his work, therefore, I shall review his life briefly.

John Hillington Synge was born at Rathfarnham, near Dublin, in 1871. As his childhood was spent to some extent in County Wicklow, through whose mountains he enjoyed roaming, the young man came in contact there with the peasants, from whom he learned a certain amount of Irish. His chief delight at this time, however, was the study of music and, upon completing his course at Trinity College, Dublin, he decided to go to Germany in order to study it more thoroughly. After a few years, giving up the idea of becoming a professional musician, Synge wandered through France and Italy, finally settling down in Paris to study French and to attempt a certain amount of literary criticism and journalistic work. It was at this place that Yeats happened to chance upon him one day and succeeded in persuading him to return to Ireland in order to take part in the Celtic Renaissance, which was then going on.

After making a few visits to the Aran Islands, and traveling through Wicklow, Kerry, and Connemara, as he had made up his mind to write peasant dramas, Synge began to produce his plays, the first of which, In the Shadow of the Glen, appeared in 1903. His other plays, Riders of the Sea, The Well of the Saints, The Playboy of the Western World, The Tinkers' Wedding, and Deirdre of the Sorrows, came out at intervals up to the time of his death in 1909.

The admirable qualities that favorable critics find in his dramas are his skillful and artistic use of the peasant idiom, his fine sense of dramatic effectiveness, his boisterous humor, to which particular characteristic his supporters trace, and upon which they excuse, the many charges that have been brought against him, and his intense joy of life.

Some of the most common defects of which Synge has been accused are his irreverence, which Boyd carelessly dismisses as a "scruple" in the minds of the critics, and his misrepresentation of peasant life.

While I am willing to concede that Synge's works show an unusual mastery of dramatic technique, and a very effective use of the peasant idiom, which he has recreated and enriched, I am not so eager to approve of the plays themselves with the exception of Riders to the Sea, which is considered the most perfect little tragedy that has been written in Ireland, and Deirdre, which was left unfinished.

Let us consider his plays for a moment. The charge has been brought against In the Shadow of the Glen, The Playboy of the Western World, and, to an even greater extent, The Tinker's Wedding, that they are irreverent. Although I can appreciate the attitude from which this accusation is made, I do feel that Synge has a right to portray irreverent characters if he so chooses because they represent a type of man who exists in the world, although I am firmly inclined to believe that there are fewer men of this class to be found in Ireland than elsewhere, for the Irish people, particularly the Catholics, have suffered too much

on behalf of their religion during the past four centuries, and it has therefore grown too sacred to them for any of them to ever betray it now and to treat it lightly. A better charge to bring against these plays, therefore, is their lack of fidelity to life. Here, indeed, Synge is at fault, for he professes that his plays are portraits of peasant life, from which we reasonably conclude that we are going to see characters typical of the Irish peasantry, whereas, in reality, his dramas are based on wild stories that he has heard told by the peasants, which certainly cannot be considered representative of Irish life any more than the murder stories that daily appear in our newspapers can be deemed characteristic of the entire American nation, or even a division of it. Another phase of this matter is that in The Tinkers' Wedding Synge has given us a plot dealing with gypsies, for the name of "tinker" is the one which the Irish gypsy bears, and has included that also under the title of a peasant drama, which constitutes, together with his exaggerated portrayal of the priest in the same play, more misrepresentation.

A further criticism of Synge is limited solely to The Playboy of the Western World. In this drama the author depicts as his hero an exceedingly timid young man, with little in his make-up to recommend him, who makes an attempt to kill his father. Believing that he has succeeded, the boy runs away. The wondering respect which he is given by several peasants with whom he comes in contact leads him to brag about his deed, and thus increases his own self-admiration. Upon the reappearance of his father, the boy makes two other unsuccessful attempts to kill him, after which, as

his father humbly asks him to come back and live with him, the admirable young hero goes forth in glory, driving his poor wounded father before. Some people consider this a farce and find it extremely amusing. In my opinion, however, disregarding the fact that the theme is ill-suited to farcical treatment, the play is decidedly immoral in the sense that the emotions it depicts are not the ones which would universally be felt by ordinary human beings under similar conditions. Even if the young man really did experience the feelings with which he is clothed in the play, the work still would not be right, for in such a case the hero would be an unnatural human character, and with them art is not supposed to deal.

Synge has been credited with having admirably understood the peasants, but in my estimation this author does not deserve such praise, for if he sympathised with them, as an artist should sympathize with his characters, he could not have drawn them as he did, and if he did not sympathise with them, he should not have taken them for his subject at all because his work was sure to be misrepresentative under such circumstances.

Taking all these matters into consideration, therefore, I cannot believe that Synge's plays, with the exception of Riders to the Sea, and possibly Deirdre, will long endure except as fine pieces of dramatic technique. His biography later on, I think, will read somewhat like that of Byron, whose intense popularity in some directions during life gradually faded into comparative insignificance.

PADRAIC COLUM

While Synge is credited with having defined the limits of peasant drama in one direction, Padraic Colum, considered by Boyd only second in importance to Synge, is given the honor of marking out its course in another direction. Strictly speaking, Colum was the first true peasant dramatist, for he is the first one to "dramatize the realities of rural life in Ireland".

It is a striking fact that the year in which Synge's first play, In the Shadow of the Glen, appeared, marks also the entrance of Colum into the world of Irish drama with his play Broken Soil. Awakened by the enthusiasm of the Fay brothers, Colum wrote a great deal of dramatic plays of minor importance, such as The Kingdom of the Young, The Saxon Shillin', The Foleys, and Eoghan's Wife, before he settled down and produced his three greatest dramas, The Fiddler's House, which appeared in 1903, The Land, written in 1905, and Thomas Muskerry, which came out in 1910. Other charming trifles, which are less characteristic of Colum, however, are The Miracle of the Corn, The Destruction of the Hostel, and The Desert.

In The Land, the first of Colum's notable works to be published, Colum deals with the agrarian problem and the conflict between the lure of the city and the call of the land. The chief interest of this subdued yet poignant tragedy lies in this portrayal of a social problem prominent at this time in Ireland. The Fiddler's House, which is the title given to the revised version of Broken Soil, deals with a different phase of peasant life en-

tirely, namely, the spiritual and artistic aspect of it. And the last of Colum's great plays, Thomas Muskerry, centers about the patriarchal family system, which still remains a vital problem in rural Ireland today.

In reading these plays, I was more attracted by the plots in them than by the characters, language, or technique. Of the three plays The Fiddler's House made the smallest impression upon me. The plot of this drama and the language used in it, which seems to me to be much more stilted and less fluent than in the other two plays, both seem of inferior quality. On the whole, however, the plays were well written, true to life, and portray very dramatically three very vital aspects of peasant life in Ireland. The restraint and faithfulness of the pictures Colum paints Boyd considers suggestive of the work of Ibsen as well as their almost purely intellectual action. Only in the closer imitation of the melodramatic element in this famous writer do the later dramatists approach more closely to him than Colum.

Boyd's indication of Colum's place in Irish drama seems to me worth noting: "Without any predecessors of importance, he (Colum) shares with Synge the right to be considered the most original of our folk-dramatists. W. B. Yeats has said that Synge wrote of the peasant 'as he is to all the ages; of the folk-imagination as it has been shaped by centuries of life among fields or on fishing grounds.' If it be admitted that, in this manner, Synge transcended the limits popularly ascribed to the peasant play, then, indeed, Padraic Colum is the first of our peasant playwrights. Together their work completes, as it initiated, the dramatic realisation of peasant Ireland."

#### CONCLUSION

Although the noble work of creating a national Irish drama was begun by Yeats and his colleagues, the most prominent of whom was Martyn, the movement has been kept alive since by a swarm of young dramatists, the most noteworthy of whom are Synge and Colum, then Lady Gregory, William Boyle, T. C. Murray, Seumas O'Kelly, George Fitzmaurice, Lord Dunsany, and Putherford Payne, whose enthusiasm for the cause has definitely established the drama in Ireland. And if, as Boyd hopes, the decline in the quality of the Irish drama, due to the new standard of financial success and to the reassertion of commercialism even in those theatres set apart for the production of the uncommercial drama, is counteracted soon by the centralization of dramatic forces and by the reversion to the high standards set by the pioneers in the movement, we may yet see Ireland take her rightful place among the leaders of dramatic literature throughout the world.

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SUMMARY

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Due to the golden past in the history of Ireland, a revival of strong national feeling and of interest in the history, legends, songs, and language of Ireland took place in the nineteenth century after an interval of ten centuries. The result of this revival led to the production of a great many books, which covered all the branches of literature.

Particularly fruitful was the work done in poetry and in drama, which by some is considered the more important product of the two chief phases of Irish literature. Outstanding in the ranks of the new dramatists are three men--Yeats, Synge, and Colum. The first is noted not only for initiating the movement but also for his unsurpassed excellence in the field of poetic drama. The second is noteworthy for his unrivalled dramatic technique and originality in the field of the peasant drama. And the third is exceptional in an entirely different branch of peasant drama, namely, that of realistic portrayal of the actual conditions of peasant life.

Although many dramatists have sought to imitate these three geniuses, their efforts have proved unsuccessful. Due to the increased vogue of commercialised drama in Ireland, a decline in the quality of the work written has resulted. It is hoped, however, that in due time the original spirit of the pioneers of the movement will reassert itself and that Irish drama will then take its place permanently among the great dramatic literatures of the world.

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