CHAPTER THREE
The ‘Syngean’ World of Mythology and Folklore: Ardour for Irish Myths and Legends

Function and Nature of Myth and Folklore: “Darwinism of Words”

In modern myth studies and anthropology, ‘myth’ usually refers to some sacred myth including cosmic and other origin myths. The term also includes sacred stories with cult status concerning the gods, which (in most primary cultures) were known and recited by persons with special communal status and used in connection with sacred rituals with a central place in social regulation, and so on. ‘Myth’ used in this technical sense is distinguished from heroic legend, national legends, folk stories and tales (such as ‘fairy tales’), and fables, as well as from all ‘high literature’ with named authors, including epic poetry, drama, and mythographic collections. M. H. Abrams says that most “myths are related to social rituals”—“set forms and procedures in sacred ceremonies” (170). “If the protagonist is a human being rather than a supernatural being,” the traditional story is usually called “a legend” (170). If the hereditary story concerns supernatural beings who are not gods, and the “story is not part of systematic mythology, it is usually classified as a folktale” (170).

In most ethnographic and anthropological literature, the term ‘mythology’ is used synonymously with sacred myth but in Robert M.

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24 The title has been taken from the twentieth century German philosopher Hans Blumenberg’s frequently quoted statement in his Work on Myth (1988). It suggests that myths evolve according to “Darwinism of Words” (qtd. in Abrams 171).
Wallace’s translation of Hans Blumenberg’s *Work on Myth*, it is used to designate theories of myth, such as those that try to account for the contents of various myths through psychological interpretation, linguistic interpretation, sociological interpretation, and so on. In other words, ‘mythology’ roughly means (in the present study) mythography, designating the work of ancient Celtic ‘mythographers’ or compilers of stories, who collected and wrote down orally transmitted myths, sacred stories and heroic legends; organized them into myth cycles, and often rationalized them with changes and interpolations.

A folktale is a story or legend handed down from generation to generation usually by oral retelling. It may have traces of main myth dealing with persons, places, and events or it may be in the form of a personal tale which moves around the exploits and courageous deeds by a local individual. Folktales often explain something that happens in nature or convey a certain truth about life which is related as fact and is intended to be taken as such by its audience. It is usually supported by evidence already known to the community in which it is told. Folklore developed, and continues even today, in communities, “in the form of oral jokes, stories, and varieties of wordplay . . .” (Abrams 100).

‘Myth’ is a derivative of Greek *mythos* which means anything uttered by word of mouth. ‘Myths’ have also been extended to denote

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25 The term ‘mythography’ is majorly used to refer to the study of myths and rituals in the broadest sense.
supernatural tales that are deliberately invented by their authors. Don

Cupitt, in *The World to Come* (1982), defines myth as:

. . . typically a traditional sacred story of anonymous
authorship and archetypal or universal significance which is
recounted in a certain community and is often linked with a
ritual; that it tells of the deeds of superhuman beings such as
gods, demigods, heroes, spirits or ghosts; that it is set outside
historical time in primal or eschatological [i.e. last, ultimate]
time or in the supernatural world, or may deal with comings
and goings between the supernatural world and the world of
human history. (qtd. in Coupe 6)

M. H. Abrams explains myth in its “central modern significance” (170) as:

. . . one story in a mythology – a system of hereditary stories
of ancient origin which were once believed to be true by a
particular cultural group, and which served to explain (in
terms of the intentions and actions of deities and other
supernatural beings) why the world is as it is and things
happen as they do, to provide a rationale for social customs
and observances, and to establish the sanctions for the rules by
which people conduct their lives. (170)

In general myth is a story which involves superhuman beings and their
supernatural activities.

Myth is always concerned with creation. Myth explains how
something came to exist. Myth embodies feeling and concepthence the Promethean or Herculean figure, or the idea of
Diana, or the story of Orpheus or Eurydice. Many myths or
quasi-myths are primitive explanations of the natural order
and cosmic forces. (Cuddon 526)

In common parlance the stories of deities and heroes, in any part of the
world, are referred to as myths and legends. Mythology, like religion, helps
human race to cope with the inexorability of reality and inescapable events
in one’s life. From time immemorial, it continues to serve as a need that is
not outmoded by scientific advances and rationality. For the continuance of
mythology and mythical practices over a period of time in cultural institutions, twentieth century German philosopher, Hans Blumenberg, finds out in his *Work on Myth* (1988), that for the continuance of myths in a community, the most important responsible factor is the flow of ‘substances’. These ‘substances’ include mythic icons and theoretical ideas and their flow in a certain community is guided by their compatibility with his ‘evolutionary substance-function model’. As stated by this model, myths evolve according to a “Darwinism of Words” (qtd. in Abrams 171), in which those forms and variations survive that tally most effectively with the changing social environment. Abrams says:

... Blumenberg proposes that the function of myth is to help human beings cope with the inexorability of given reality, a need that is not outmoded by scientific advances and rationality; that myths evolve according to a “Darwinism of words,” with those forms and variations surviving that prove able to cope most effectively with the changing social environment; and that myth is best conceived not as a collection of fixed and final stories, but as “a work”-an ongoing and ever-changing process that is expressed in oral and written narratives and includes the diverse ways in which these narratives are received and appropriated. (170-171)

In most ethnographic and anthropological literature, the term ‘myth’ is used synonymously with sacred myth but in Blumenberg’s *Work on Myth*, it is used to designate *theories* of myth, such as those that try to account for the contents of various myths through psychological interpretation, linguistic interpretation, sociological interpretation, and so on. However, the definition offered by Mircea Eliade relates mythology to religion:
A sacred history; it relates an event that took place in primordial time, . . . is always an account of a “creation”; it relates how something was produced, began to be. 

(Eliade 5-6)

A parallel definition, concentrating on the supernatural element of myth is given by Carl Kerényi who describes it as:

. . . an immemorial and traditional body of material contained in tales about gods and god-like beings, heroic battles and journeys to the Underworld—mythologem is the best Greek word for them—tales already well-known but not unamenable to further reshaping. Myth is the movement of this material, it is something solid yet mobile, substantial and yet not static, capable of transformation. (Kerényi 2)

Thus the term as used in modern criticism indicates an area of meaning that is massive. It includes section of religion, folklore, anthropology, sociology, psycho-analysis and the fine arts. Though it has no concrete historical foundations, it has its roots in firm convictions and more often appeals to emotions than to reason. Kerényi comes very close to the meaning when he writes:

What is music? What is poetry? What is mythology? All questions on which no opinion is possible unless one already has a real feeling for these things. (Kerényi 1)

Mythology contains in its depths the very childhood of human intelligence. We can trace this down to the rudiments of the human imagination which are universal. A study in Comparative Mythology reveals the tendency of the mind at a given stage of development, subject to similar circumstances to produce similar myths. Such themes as the origin of the world, the land of the dead, fertility rites, virgin birth and the resurrected here have a world-wide distribution. There is no human race in the records of which their
archetypes cannot be located. Greek, Roman, Norse, Celtic, Hindu, Persian mythologies all contain these. The psychological force embodied in each of these themes, however, may differ from one mythology to the other. Mythology, hence, becomes a vital component of modern civilisation:

\[\ldots\text{a hard-worked active force; it is not an intellectual explanation or an artistic imagery, but a pragmatic charter of primitive faith and moral wisdom.}\] (Malinowski 23)

For the modern man, mythology is an indispensable asset. Though ethnologists protest that to consider these myths as embodiments of truth is a grave error, they all agree that they shed important light on the conditions and motives of the ancient man. Mythology may not explain the why and wherefore of things but it highlights the primary sources to which everything goes back. It provides us with the earliest records of the incipient history of the religious, social, aesthetic and spiritual resources of the prehistoric man. It helps us to follow the continuity of thought down the ages and to discern the systematic progress mankind. The old idea about myth is that the myth (the god-tale) is but a sublimated folk-tale. But that, however, is not often the case. Some folktales have surely been raised to myths, but myths have often, and, indeed, with change and advance of religion, have generally become folk-tales.

**Celtic Mythology and Folklore**

The aim of the present study is to provide readers with an understanding of popular mythological beliefs of the Irish peasantry and their idea of Irish folklores which contain supernatural events, paranormal characters, gods,
demigods and heroic actions of humans. It also includes the study and usage of written and collected Irish myths and tales by John Millington Synge in his six major plays through the words and actions of his peasant characters.

In Ireland, for the people with Celtic beliefs, it is the miraculous power of nature which underpinned all their beliefs and religious practices. Some of the most important divinities were those of the sun, thunder, fertility and water. Trees, mountains, rocks and springs were supposed to possess their own spirit or *numen*26. The natural world of the Celts is nowhere manifested more clearly than in the realms of religion, ritual and mythology.

Celts were a diverse group of tribal societies in Iron Age and Roman-era Europe, who spoke Celtic languages. Linguistically they survive in the modern Celtic speakers of Ireland, Scotland, the Isle of Man, Wales, Cornwall and Brittany (Cunliffe 202, 204-8). Celtic mythology is the mythology of Celtic polytheism which is commonly known as Celtic paganism and refers to the religious beliefs and practices adhered to by the Iron Age peoples of Western Europe (now known as the Celts), roughly between 500 BC and AD 500, spanning the Roman era, and in the case of the Insular Celts the British and Irish Iron Age. Like other Iron Age Europeans, the early Celts maintained a polytheistic mythology and

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26 The word *numen* is used by sociologists to refer to the idea of magical power residing in an object. It is a Latin term for the power of either a deity or a spirit that is present in places and objects, in the Roman religion. The many names for Italic gods may obscure this sense of a numinous presence in all the seemingly mundane actions of the natural world.
religious structure. Among Celts, those who were in close contact with Ancient Rome (such as the Gauls—people of Western Europe during the Iron Age and Roman era), their mythology could not survive the effects of Roman empire, their subsequent conversion to Christianity, and the loss of their Celtic languages. Their mythology has been preserved mostly through contemporary Roman and Christian sources. The Celtic people who maintained either their political or linguistic identities (such as the Gaels, Picts, and Brythonic tribes of Great Britain and Ireland) left small amount of their ancestral mythologies, put into written form during the Middle Ages. Celtic mythology is found in a number of distinct subgroups, largely corresponding to the branches of the Celtic languages:

- Ancient Celtic religion (Ancient Gaulish and British deities), understood through archaeological sources rather than through written mythology;

- Mythology in Goidelic languages (forming a dialect continuum stretching from the south of Ireland through the Isle of Man to the north of Scotland. There are three modern Goidelic languages: Irish, Scottish Gaelic and Manx, represented chiefly by Irish mythology and Scottish mythology.

- Mythology in Brythonic languages (form one of the two branches of the Insular Celtic language family, the other being Goidelic, meaning an indigenous Briton as opposed to an Anglo-Saxon or Gael, represented chiefly by Welsh mythology.
The mythology of the pre-Christian Ireland though, could not fully survive the conversion to Christianity, but much of it was preserved (shorn of its religious meanings) in medieval Irish literature. There are a number of extant mythological texts which do not fit into any of the four cycles. Also, there are some recorded folktales which are not strictly mythological but feature personages from one or more of these cycles. According to some of these mythological stories, the Druid Amergin and his Milesian comrades (direct ancestors of the Irish), were the last tribe to invade Ireland around 1700-1500 BC. After many controversies and a few natural calamities like sea-storms, they finally managed to displace the Tuatha Dé Danann, the people of goddess Danu, who had control of the island at the time of their arrival. It is reported that, after being defeated, the Tuatha Dé Danann hid beneath the ground and there they still live as fairies.

**The Mythological Cycles in Ireland**

Scholars have classified much of the mythology of the Irish insular Celts into cycles. There are four cycles, or groups, of connected stories.

**Mythological Cycle**

This cycle is one of the four major cycles of Irish mythology, and is so called because it represents the remains of the pagan mythology of pre-Christian Ireland. Although the gods and supernatural beings have been euhemerised\(^{27}\) into historical kings and heroes, still,

\(^{27}\) The theory of Euhemerus (Greek mythographer in the late fourth century BC) says that the mythologies of various gods arose out of the deification of dead heroes.
Mythological Cycle is important because it gives something of the early history of Ireland (comprising stories of the former gods and origins of the Irish) in the form of myths and treats some of the native myths as history. These accounts are slightly modified by the influence of Christianity but retain much of the flavour of pre-Christian times.

This cycle is the least well preserved of the four cycles. The most important sources are the Metrical Dindshenchas or Lore of Places and the Lebor Gabála Érenn or Book of Invasions. Other manuscripts preserve such mythological tales as The Dream of Aengus, The Wooing Of Étain and Cath Maige Tuireadh, The (second) Battle of Magh Tuireadh. One of the best known of all Irish stories, Oidheadh Clainne Lir, or The Tragedy of the Children of Lir, is also part of this cycle. Lebor Gabála Érenn is a pseudo-history of Ireland, tracing the ancestry of the Irish back to before Noah. It tells of a series of invasions of Ireland by a succession of peoples, the fifth of whom were the Tuatha Dé Danann (Peoples of Goddess Danu). They were believed to have inhabited the island before the arrival of the Gaels, or Milesians. They faced opposition from their enemies, the Fomorians, led by Balor of the Evil Eye. Balor was eventually slain by Lug Lámfada (Lug of the Long Arm) at the second battle of Magh Tuireadh. The Gaels arrived in Ireland and
the Tuatha Dé Danann retired underground and came to be known as
the fairy people of later myth and legend. The *Metrical
Dindshenchas* is the great onomastic work of early Ireland, giving
the naming legends of significant places in a sequence of poems. It
includes a lot of important information on Mythological Cycle
figures and stories, including the Battle of Tailtiu, in which the
Tuatha Dé Danann were defeated by the Milesians.

It is important to note that by the Middle Ages the Tuatha Dé
Danann were not viewed so much as gods as the shape-shifting
magician population of an earlier Golden Age Ireland. Texts such as
*Lebor Gabála Érenn* and *Cath Maige Tuireadh* present them as kings
and heroes of the distant past, complete with death-tales. However
there is considerable evidence, both in the texts and from the wider
Celtic world, that they were once considered deities. Even after they
are displaced as the rulers of Ireland, characters such as Lug, the
Mórrígan, Aengus and Manannan appear in stories set centuries later,
betraying their immortality.

This cycle focuses on the activities of the Celtic gods, describing
how five races of supernatural beings battled to gain control of
Ireland. The chief god was Dagda, whose magic cauldron could
bring the dead back to life. Important figures of Tuatha Dé Danann
are Nuada, Lug, Tuireann, Ogma, Badb Boann, Banba, Brigid,
Creidhne, Danu, Dian Cecht, Donn, Ériu, Étaín, Fódl, Macha, Nechtan, Aes Sídhe and Bean Sídhe.

**Ultonian or Ulster Cycle**

The Ulster Cycle is set around the beginning of the Christian era and most of the action takes place in the provinces of Ulster and Connacht. The Ulster Cycle deals with the heroes of Ulaid, the northern province of Ireland, and the exploits of their greatest hero, the boy-warrior Cuchulainn, and of his uncle, King Conchobor mac Nessa. The stories are placed at the time of the life of Christ, and Conchobor is said to have been born and died on the same days as Jesus of Nazareth. These are the Ulaid, or people of the North-Eastern corner of Ireland and the action of the stories centres round the royal court at Emain Macha (known in English as Navan Fort), close to the modern town of Armagh. The Ulaid had close links with the Irish colony in Scotland, and part of Cuchulain’s training takes place in that colony.

The cycle consists of stories of the births, early lives and training, wooing, battles, feastings, and deaths of the heroes and reflects a warrior society in which warfare consists mainly of single combats and wealth is measured mainly in cattle. These stories are written mainly in prose. The centrepiece of the Ulster Cycle is the *Táin Bó Cúailnge*. Most of the stories of Ulster Cycle are found in the books of *Fermoy*, *Dun Cow*, and *Leinster*. Other important Ulster
Cycle tales include *Bricriu’s Feast, Táin Bó Regamna, The Tragic Death of Aife’s only Son*, and *The Destruction of Da Derga’s Hostel.* *The Exile of the Sons of Usnach*, better known as the tragedy of Deirdre and the source of plays by John Millington Synge, William Butler Yeats is also part of this cycle.

This cycle is, in some respects, close to the mythological cycle. Some of the characters from the latter reappear in this cycle, and the same sort of shape-shifting magic is evident. If the Mythological Cycle represents a Golden Age, the Ulster Cycle is Ireland’s Heroic Age.

**Ossianic or Fenian Cycle**

Like the Ulster Cycle, the Fenian Cycle is concerned with the deeds of Irish heroes. The stories of the Fenian Cycle appear to be set around the third century and mainly in the provinces of Leinster and Munster. They differ from the other cycles in the strength of their links with the Irish-speaking community in Scotland and there are many extant Fenian texts from that country. They also differ from the Ulster Cycle in that the stories are told mainly in verse and that in tone they are nearer to the tradition of romance than the tradition of epic. The stories concern the doings of Fionn mac Cumhaill and his band of soldiers, the *Fianna*. The single most important source for the Fenian Cycle is the *Acallam na Senórach* or *Colloquy of the Old*
Men. The text records conversations between Caílte mac Rónáin and Oisín, the last surviving members of the Fianna, and Saint Patrick.

The ‘Fianna’ of the story exists in two parts: first, Clann Baiscne, led by Fionn mac Cumhaill (Finn Mac Cool), and the second, Clann Morna, led by his enemy, Goll mac Morna. Goll killed Fionn’s father, Cumhal, in battle and the boy Fionn was brought up in secrecy. His story related to Salmon of Knowledge is very famous. Two of the greatest of the Irish tales, Tóraigheacht Dhiarma agus Ghráinne (The Pursuit of Diarmuid and Gráinne) and Oisín in Tír na nÓg form part of the cycle. There is not any religious element in these tales unless it is one of hero-worship.

King’s or Historical Cycle

It was part of the duty of the medieval Irish bards, or court poets, to record the history of the family and the genealogy of the king they served. This they did in poems that blended the mythological and the historical to a greater or lesser degree. As a result, the stories generated the Historical Cycle in Ireland.

The kings that are included range from the almost entirely mythological Labraid Loingsech, who allegedly became High King of Ireland around 431 BC, to the entirely historical Brian Boru. However, the greatest story of the Historical Cycle is the Buile Shuibhne or The Frenzy of Sweeney.
Nature of Fairy Mythology in Ireland

Much of the exotic literary material in Celtic lands involves tales of fairies. In Ireland such figures are diminished gods, the race of the Tuatha Dé Dannan (pronounced too-ha-da dah-n’n) who went into hiding within the hills and bogs of Ireland after being defeated by the human invaders, the Milesians. Similarly in Brittany the old gods became korrigans, while in other areas of the ancient Celtic world, we trace magical beings whose behaviour suggests that they are originally divine. W.Y. Evans-Wentz in the introduction to The Fairy-Faith in Celtic Countries named these tales and traditions as the ‘fairy-faith,’ claiming that it was a functional “folk-religion of the Celts” (Evans-Wentz xxii).

The assertions that the fairy faith is a true religion and connected to earlier Celtic belief, is controversial, but the belief that there are supernatural beings of the Otherworld who interact with humanity, confirm that fairies were originally gods. For instance, Leprechaun (in old Irish stories a magical creature in the shape of a little old man who likes to cause trouble), bear the names of divinities known from mythological texts, (in this case, Lugh, the god of sun and light). While some scholars question the connection between figures from fairy tales and the great gods and goddesses of mythology, most see resonances between what has been recorded from oral folkloric sources and the written evidence found in the manuscripts that record earlier myths. The popular belief in Ireland is that the Fairies are a portion of the fallen angels, who, being less guilty than the
rest, were not driven to hell, but were suffered to dwell on earth. Thomas Keightley in the second volume of his book, *The Fairy Mythology: Illustrative of the Romance and Superstition of Various Countries*, introduces the Irish fairies as:

The Fairies of green Erin present few points of dissimilarity to those of England and Scotland. They are of diminutive stature, but do not appear to have any fixed standard of height; perhaps eighteen inches might with tolerable safety be assigned as their average altitude. A woman from county Kerry lately told us that she saw the fairies when she was a little girl. She said she and some other children were one day returning from school, and they saw the Fairies scudding like wind over a big field on the road-side, and tumbling head over heels into a hollow at the end of it, where they disappeared. Some of them were as high as castles, others were little dony things, not half so big as the children themselves. (Keightley 178)

Irish fairies have the same origin as deities of pagan religion and mythologies. There are many psychological factors on which the construction of myth and religious rituals depends. There seems never to have been an uncivilized tribe, a race, or nation of civilized men who have not had some form of belief in an unseen world, peopled by unseen beings. In religions, mythologies, and the fairy-faith, too, we behold the attempts which have been made by different peoples in different ages to explain in terms of human experience this unseen world, its inhabitants, its laws, and man’s relation to it. The ancients called its inhabitants gods, genii, daemons, and shades; Christianity knows them as angels, saints, demons, and sols of the dead; to tin-civilized tribes they are gods, demons, and
spirits of ancestors; and the Celts think of them as gods, and as fairies of many kinds

**Irish Storytelling Tradition, Legends and Myths**

Irish history in rich with myths and legends and Ireland is especially famous for its fairy lore which contains vestiges of pre-Christian tradition. The fairies are known to the Irish as the people of the ‘Sidhe’ (pronounced shee), which designates people residing in mounds. The Irish fairies can be connected with early Celtic beliefs of how the dead live on as a dazzling community in their burial chambers. Through their identification in the medieval literature with the Tuatha Dé Danaan, People of the goddess Danu, they may also be connected directly to the early pantheon of Celtic deities. In folk belief thousands of ‘raths’, which are ancient earthen structures, are claimed to be inhabited still by the ‘sidhe’ people, and many stories are told of humans being brought into these hidden places at night as guests at wondrous banquets.

The famous legends include the adventures of the famous seer-warrior Fionn Mac Cumhail (pronounced fin-mac-kool) and how he gained his wisdom as a boy by tasting the ‘salmon of knowledge’; how he triumphed over miscellaneous giants and magicians, and how he had the truths of life explained to him in a strange allegorical house. The champion Lugh (pronounced loo), originally a god of the Continental Celts, is also remembered—especially how he slew his tyrant grandfather who could destroy all on which he gazed from his horrific eye. The adventures of the
super warrior Cuchulain (pronounced cu-hoo-lin) are spoken of and tales are also told of more true to life characters, such as the quasi-historical High-King Cormac Mac Airt and the historical though much romanticised Conall Gulban, son of the great king Niall and contemporary of St Patrick. Some myths and lore move around the patron-saints of the various localities. Earlier, they were the Celtic gods, but with the arrival of Christianity they were converted into saints. The saints, historical personages from the early centuries of Irish Christianity, are portrayed in legend as miracle workers who used their sacred power to banish monsters, cure illnesses, and provide food for the people in time of need. Holy wells, dedicated to individual saints, are still frequented on their feast days in many areas, and people pray at these wells for relief from different kinds of physical ailments and mental distress. The most celebrated saints in Ireland were the patron saint of Ireland, St. Patrick, the great founder of monasteries, Colm Cille and, second only to Patrick, St. Brigid who, as protector of farming and livestock, preserves many of the attributes of the ancient earth goddess.

Fortunately, Ireland has never suffered much from the interference of modern ways when it comes to traditional folklore. Stories have been, and still are told around the fire, usually with the story teller having a glass of Guinness (popular Irish dry stout or beer) to quench his/her thirst while telling the story).
Synge’s Pendent for Irish Mythology and Folklore

To the Irish Celts, the craft of poetry was a form of magic, related to incantation and enchantment. Especially powerful was the satire, a stinging verbal rebuke so strong and effective that it could change the physical world. A satire could “raise boils” on the skin of a “stingy king” or “twist the arm of a thief” (Monaghan ix). In Synge’s plays, however, we find the musical, poetic tone in whatever is spoken by the humble peasant characters. Their habit of blessing and cursing people every time they talk, reveal their belief in their spoken-power to get their motives materialised. Folklores can be traced on and off in Synge’s dramas. In The Tinker’s Wedding, we see Mary singing a ballad woven around a famous Irish folklore which talks about the cruelty of a priest and the innocence of common islander, Larry. The Night before Larry was Stretched is an Irish execution ballad written in the Newgate Cant or Slang Style. Mary, on hearing the priest’s demand in exchange to wed Sarah and Michael, starts singing this ballad as a comment on the greed of the priest:

MARY. [suddenly shouting behind, tipsily]. Larry was a fine lad, I’m saying; Larry was a fine lad, Sarah Casey— . . .
MARY [comes in singing]:
And when he asked him what way he’d die,
And he hanging unrepented,
Begob,’ says Larry, ‘that’s all in my eye,
By the clergy first invented.’ (Synge, Collected Plays 61)
PRIEST. Let you get a crown along with the ten shillings and the gallon can, Sarah Casey, and I will wed you so. She goes out singing ‘The night before Larry was stretched’. (Synge, Collected Plays 68)

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28 Newgate Prison was a place of detention in Dublin until its closure in 1863.
The relevant lines in the original ballad about the folklore also go like this:

. . . Says Larry, ‘That’s all in my eye,  
And all by the clargy invented,  
To make a fat bit for themselves.

Then the clergy came in with his book  
He spoke him so smooth and so civil;  
Larry tipp’d him a Kilmainham29 look,  
And pitch’d his big wig to the divil;  
Sighing he threw back his head  
To get a sweet drop of the bottle,  
And pitiful sighing he said,  
‘O! the hemp will be soon round my throttle,  
And choke my poor windpipe to death!’ (Sparling 342)

Families all across Ireland, gather around an older family member to listen wide eyed to an epic adventure full of danger and excitement. These tales take many forms and vary from family to family as each house has various personal tales to tell. These are fantastic tales of magical fairy castles made of glass on top of beautiful lush green hills or fearsome hags or ‘pookas’ which are shape changing creatures usually seen in the form of a horse running wildly with red eyes and breathing fire, leading travellers to their death. The story of ‘bansidhe’ (pronounced ban-shee), the fairy woman, wailing and appearing to a family member on a dark, cold, lonely night, can be heard everywhere. This is just beyond hope that it was just the wind or

29 A ‘Kilmainham look’ may be something like a kick in the groin or perhaps not. Kilmainham was the county jail in former times, and later was the scene of the execution of the leaders of the 1916 Rising. Larry may have been confined in Kilmainham or in the Green Street prison, the ‘new’ Newgate which replaced the old Newgate in the 1770s. Kilmainham is remembered in another prison ballad called ‘The Kilmainham Minit,” i.e., ‘minuet,’ the dance of the hanged man.
the mournful sound of a cat calling out to the dark night and not the keening of the banshee, foretelling the news that a family member would soon be leaving this mortal world. If children behave badly, then parents or grandparents scold them saying that they would be taken away by fairies to the ‘Otherworld’ and a *changeling* (ugly fairy child) would come to take their place.

All of Synge’s major characters are modelled on people from the peasantry, the real representatives of the Irish Celts who kept Irish mythical notions alive. In the present chapter, an attempt has been made to examine Synge’s major plays in the context of Irish myth and folklore. W. B. Yeats, who advised Synge to go to the Aran Islands to write plays about Irish peasantry, himself collected numerous mythological fairy tales of the Irish peasantry in his book *Fairy and Folk Tales of the Irish Peasantry*. He writes:

> In Ireland they are still extant, giving gifts to the kindly, and plaguing the surly. “Have you ever seen a fairy or such like?” I asked the old man in County Sligo. “Ain’t I annoyed with them,” was the answer. “Do the fishermen along here know anything of the mermaids?” I asked a woman of a village in County Dublin. Indeed, they don’t like to see them at all,” she answered, “for they always bring bad weather.” (Yeats x)

The folklore found in the plays of Synge is an accurate representation of what people actually said. He liked the tradition of storytelling and written plays based on folklore to fulfil the demands of the Abbey Theatre. In Ireland, there are two notable forms of storytelling:
• **Art of Seanchai** (pronounced shawn-ack-ee): It includes stories about local events, family sagas and short accounts of fairies and other supernatural beings. These stories were traditionally told by either men or women who were known as Seanchaithe.

• **Art of Scealai** (pronounced sk-eh-l-ee): It was concerned with tales of a hero, and would be quite lengthy. These stories were usually told during winter evenings as work finished early during these dark months. These stories were generally told by men known as Scealai, who were held in high respect by the community for their skill (Lambert 18-19, Harvey 627-646).

Seán Ó Súilleabháin, in his article ‘Synge’s Use of Irish Folklore,’ delineates the various genres of folklore Synge documented in Wicklow, the Aran Islands, Connemara, and the Counties of Mayo and Kerry, including fairy tales, folk belief, heroic sagas, and folk poetry (Harmon 18-34).

Richard Bauman notes that in his work on the Aran Islands, Synge became aware of the difference between the two most commonly distinguished types of storyteller, “the seanchai, whose repertoires consisted of shorter, more realistic tales, local history, and tales of the supernatural, and the scealai, proficient in the longer hero-tales” (277). Synge’s particular experience enabled his invocation of authentic peasant life. He not only wandered the Irish countryside among the peasantry, especially in Wicklow, but also formalised his study through a commitment to Irish
language and folklore, underlined by his time on the Aran Islands and in other Irish-speaking areas. Oona Frawley notices that Synge’s first two plays namely, *The Shadow of the Glen* and *Riders to the Sea*:

... exhibit the influence of these various experiences: a familiarity with nature and local rural place in Ireland; an interest in experimenting with dialect; and knowledge of Irish folklore alongside an appreciation of its connections with wider European folk traditions. (*Collected Plays* 16)

Synge has made ample use of Celtic-Irish folklore in his plays. Phrases associated with Irish folklore construct a vital portion of his characters’ dialogues. Tales about the likelihood of being kidnapped by fairies on certain days were connected to rituals of protection, such as wearing clothes backwards and carrying iron implements. In the play *The Shadow of the Glen*, Nora leaves the tramp alone with her dead husband, and goes outside to call someone for help; but before she could go, the tramp asks her for a needle:

TRAMP [moving uneasily]. Maybe if you’d a piece of a grey thread and a sharp needle there’s great safety in a needle, lady of the house I’d be putting a little stitch here and there in my old coat, the time I’ll be praying for his soul, and it going up naked to the saints of God.  
NORA [takes a needle and thread from the front of her dress and gives it to him]. There’s the needle, stranger, and I’m thinking you won’t be lonesome . . .
TRAMP. It’s the truth I’m saying, God spare his soul.  
*He puts the needle under the collar of his coat and settles himself to sleep in the chimney corner. Nora sits down at the table: Nora and Michael’s backs are turned to the bed.* (*Synge, Collected Plays* 26)

This very act of using charms against fairies reminds us of a popular folklore of Tara, in Ireland which goes like this:
In olden times there lived a shoemaker and his wife up there near Moat Knowth, and their first child was taken by the queen of the fairies who lived inside the moat, and a little leprechaun left in its place. The same exchange was made when the second child was born. At the birth of the third child the fairy queen came again and ordered one of her three servants to take the child; but the child could not be moved because of a great beam of iron, too heavy to lift, which lay across the baby’s breast. The second servant and then the third failed like the first, and the queen herself could not move the child. The mother being short of pins had used a needle to fasten the child’s clothes, and that was what appeared to the fairies as a beam of iron, for there was virtue in steel in those days. (Evans-Wentz 35)

In the play, the Tramp fears that in such a bad weather spending time in a lonely cottage along with a dead body lying beside him, might get him into trouble. He also mentions his previous encounter with deadly creatures in a rough, foggy weather.

TRAMP [speaking mournfully]. Is it myself, lady of the house, that does be walking round in the long nights, and crossing the hills when the fog is on them, the time a little stick would seem as big as your arm, and a rabbit as big as a bay horse, and a stack of turf as big as a towering church in the city of Dublin? If myself was easy afeard, I’m telling you, it’s long ago I’d have been locked into the Richmond Asylum, or maybe have run up into the back hills with nothing on me but an old shirt, and been eaten by the crows the like of Patch Darcy the Lord have mercy on him in the year that’s gone. (Synge, Collected Plays 20)

Though the bean-sidhe (banshee), leprechaun, púca (pooka), and the like are the most commonly known and usually seen creatures of the spirit world, yet great quantities of other appearances are believed to have been also sporadically met with. W. Y. Evans-Wentz in The Fairy-Faith in Celtic Countries presents his experience of the Irish fairies:
I very well remember sitting one night some four or five years ago in a hotel in Indianapolis, U. S. A., and talking to four Irishmen, one or two of them very wealthy, and all prosperous citizens of the United States. The talk happened to turn upon spirits—the only time during my entire American experiences in which such a thing happened—and each man of the four had a story of his own to tell, in which he was a convinced believer, of ghostly manifestations seen by him in Ireland. Two of these manifestations were of beings that would fall into no known category; a monstrous rabbit as big as an ass, which plunged into the sea (rabbits can swim), and a white heifer which ascended to heaven, were two of them. I myself, when a boy of ten or eleven, was perfectly convinced that on a fine early dewy morning in summer when people were still in bed, I saw a strange horse run round a seven-acre field of ours and change into a woman, who ran even swifter than the horse, and after a couple of courses round the field disappeared into our haggard. I am sure, whatever I may believe to-day, no earthly persuasion would, at the time, have convinced me that I did not see this. Yet I never saw it again and never heard of anyone else seeing the same. (41)

Evans-Wentz also says:

My object in mentioning these things is to show that if we concede the real objective existence of, let us say, the apparently well-authenticated banshee (Bean-sidhe, ‘woman-fairy’), where are we to stop? for any number of beings, more or less well authenticated, come crowding on her heels, so many indeed that they would point to a far more extensive world of different shapes than is usually suspected, not to speak of inanimate objects like the coach and the ship. Of course there is nothing inherently impossible in all these shapes existing any more than in one of them existing, but they all seem to me to rest upon the same kind of testimony, stronger in the case of some, less strong in the case of others, and it is as well to point out this clearly. My own experience is that beliefs in the Sidhe folk, and in other denizens of the invisible world is, in many places, rapidly dying. In reading folk-lore collections like those of Mr. Wentz and others, one is naturally inclined to exaggerate the extent and depth of these traditions. They certainly still exist, and can be found if you go to search for them; but they often exist almost as it were by sufferance, only in spots, and are ceasing to be any longer a power. (27)
As far as Synge’s plays are concerned, one can notice similar associations in this regard through the dialogues and activities of rural Irish peasants. For an instance, in *The Shadow of the Glen*, Nora talks about a ‘drop’ of alcohol enough to intoxicate any person. It points towards an indirect style of these islanders to talk about fairies just as here, the drop actually represents large quantity of liquid whether liquor or water:

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NORA [to Michael, in a low voice]. Let you not mind him at all, Michael Dara; he has a drop taken, and it’s soon he’ll be falling asleep. (Synge, Collected Plays 24)
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There is a folklore, *The Three Fairy Drops* which tells us the meaning of a ‘drop’ in terms of fairy mythology:

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Even yet certain things are due the fairies; for example, two years ago, in the Court Room here in Tuam, a woman was on trial for watering milk, and to the surprise of us all who were conducting the proceedings, and, it can be added, to the great amusement of the onlookers, she swore that she had only added “the three fairy drops”. (Evans-Wentz 44-45)
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Evans-Wentz also says that Halloween or *Samhain* is a time famous for dark nights and fairy fights and in Synge’s dramas there are many references to this time-period and one may notice that peasants appear to be reluctant in going out during the nights which fall in this time frame.

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It is a common belief now that on Halloween the fairies, or the fairy hosts, have fights. Lichens on rocks after there has been a frost get yellowish-red, and then when they thaw and the moisture spreads out from them the rocks are a bright red; and this bright red is said to be the blood of the fairies after one of their battles. (Evans-Wentz 92-93)
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This may be the reason that in *Riders to the Sea*, after the death of her last surviving son, Maurya talks about avoiding her visits outside to collect holy water during the dark nights of *Samhain*:

MAURYA [raising her head and speaking as if she did not see the people around her]. They’re all gone now, and there isn’t anything more the sea can do to me. . . . I’ll have no call now to be up crying and praying when the wind breaks from the south, and you can hear the surf is in the east, and the surf is in the west, making a great stir with the two noises, and they hitting one on the other. I’ll have no call now to be going down and getting Holy Water in the dark nights after Samhain, and I won’t care what way the sea is when the other women will be keening. (Synge, *Collected Plays* 48)

In Ireland, a popular belief goes about fairies that they cause storms and bad weather at the time of *Fairy Procession*. It finds an interesting place in Synge’s *Riders to the Sea* where the chief protagonist Maurya discovers the weather stormy and unsuitable for Bartley to go to the sea.

MAURYA: [Sitting down on a stool at the fire]. He won’t go this day with the wind rising from the south and west. He won’t go this day, for the young priest will stop him surely.  

(Synge, *Collected Plays* 38-39)

The evidence collected by Evans-Wentz from Kilmessan, near Tara, in Ireland from the mouth of John Boylin (a sixty year old man from County Meath), make this belief clear that the stormy weather is a prominent sign of the commencement of ‘The Fairy Procession’.

We were told as children, that, as soon as night fell, the fairies from Rath Ringlestown would form in a procession, across Tara road, pass round certain bushes which have not been disturbed for ages, and join the *gangkena* (?) or host of industrious folk, the red fairies. We were afraid, and our nurses always brought us home before the advent of the fairy procession. One of the passes used by this procession
happened to be between two mud-wall houses; and it is said that a man went out of one of these houses at the wrong time, for when found he was dead: the fairies had taken him because he interfered with their procession. (Evans-Wentz 34)

In his book *The Aran Islands*, Synge records several examples of the fairy faith among country people. Similar to Maurya’s throat choking experience (as stated above), an islander’s wife also encountered the same problem while blessing her child good luck and on the same night, his baby died.

Afterwards he told me how one of his children had been taken by the fairies. One day a neighbour was passing, and she said, when she saw it on the road, ‘That’s a fine child.’ Its mother tried to say ‘God bless it,’ but something choked the words in her throat. A while later they found a wound on its neck, and for three nights the house was filled with noises. ‘I never wear a shirt at night’ he said, ‘but I got up out of my bed, all naked as I was, when I heard the noises in the house, and lighted a light, but there was nothing in it.’ ‘Then a dummy came and made signs of hammering nails in a coffin. The next day the seed potatoes were full of blood, and the child told his mother that he was going to America. That night it died, and ‘Believe me,’ said the old man, ‘the fairies were in it. (Synge, *The Aran Islands* 4)

While talking to Steven Ruan, a piper of Galway, Wentz came to know about similar beliefs and visions of the Irish peasants when he says that the fairies ‘who are nobody else than the spirits of men and women who once lived on earth’; and the banshee is a dead friend, relative, or ancestor who appears to give a warning. ‘The fairies’, he says, ‘never care about old folks’. They only take babies, and young men and young women. If a young wife dies; she is said to have been taken by them, and ever afterwards to live in Fairyland. The same things are said about a young man or a child who dies. Fairyland is a place of delights, where music, and singing, and
dancing, and feasting are continually enjoyed; and its inhabitants are all about us, as numerous as the blades of grass’ (Evans-Wentz 40).

In *Riders to the Sea*, Maurya has a vision in which she sees the apparition of Michael (her dead son) riding on the back of a ‘grey pony’ behind Bratley, which may symbolise that ‘pooka,’ herself, carrying Bartley to the ‘Otherworld’. According to legend, pooka is a shape shifter fairy and most commonly takes the form of a sleek black horse with a flowing mane and luminescent golden eyes. Pooka, sometimes, is depicted in the Irish folklore as a white horse and is known as the harbinger of doom, indicating bad luck on the way. It attacks mostly near ‘Samhain,’ the Celtic feast of first November, because this is the time when forces of the ‘Otherworld’ could easily enter our world. The pooka would cause destruction on a farm—tearing down fences and disrupting the animals. On a bad day, pooka would stand outside the farmhouse and call the people outside by name. If anyone came out, pooka would carry them away. They also love to mess with the ships pulling away from Ireland, and were blamed for many shipwrecks along the rocky coast (Monaghan 384).

MAURYA. I went down to the spring well, and I stood there saying a prayer to myself. Then Bartley came along, and he riding on the red mare with the grey pony behind him ([*she puts up her hands, as if to hide something from her eyes*] . . .

MAURYA [*a little defiantly*]. I’m after seeing him this day, and he riding and galloping. Bartley came first on the red mare, and I tried to say ‘God speed you,’ but something choked the words in my throat. He went by quickly; and ‘the blessing of God on you,’ says he, and I could say nothing. I looked up then, and I crying, at the grey pony,
and there was Michael upon it – with fine clothes on him, and new shoes on his feet.

CATHLEEN [begins to keen]. It’s destroyed we are from this day. It’s destroyed, surely. (Synge, *Collected Plays* 45-46)

There is an Irish goddess or spirit named Áine (pronounced en-sya). She is both the moon and sun goddess with varying characteristics. She, sometimes assumes the shape of an unbeatable horse, Lair Derg or ‘red mare’ and is associated with prosperity and glory. Maurya says that she saw Bartley coming along “riding on the red mare” (Synge, *Collected Plays* 45-46). Bartley can attain glory and prosperity only in the ‘Otherworld’ like Michael can get new shoes and fresh attire. For Maurya, this might be a sign of fairy-influence over her son and the main reason to worry for Bartley’s life.

Red is generally an Otherworld colour, and horses had associations with death; the title thus seems to point to Aine as a goddess of death who takes us on a ride to the afterlife.

(Received 279)

Another Celtic mythological figure, goddess Epona (pronounced eh-poh-nuh), can also be associated with Maurya’s premonition of her son’s fast approaching death because of seeing the ‘pony’ and the ‘mare’ near the spring well. “Epona is specifically identified by her horse symbolism” (Green, Miranda 204) and like other mother goddesses, is often linked “with the images of death” (Monaghan 158). In her images, the goddess is usually depicted either riding side-saddle on a mare or between two ponies or horses. It may be significant that the one pony is male and other female, a detail which enhances the fertility symbolism in Epona’s imagery. In
Synge’s *Riders to the Sea* we see one male “grey pony” and the other being female “red mare”. Goddess Epona is also associated with death and regeneration beyond the grave and this is shown partly by the context of some of her images and partly by symbolic details. One of the several images of Epona depicts the goddess on her mare, leading a mortal to the Otherworld. At one level, this symbol may be interpreted as the key to the stable door, reflecting a straightforward horse association. But in wider perspective, the key may also symbolize the entrance to the afterlife, the ‘Otherworld’ (Monaghan 158).

In the Celtic folklore there is a similar character, Each Uisge (pronounced ach-ishkeh). It is a water-horse found in the Highlands of Scotland, and is supposedly the most dangerous water-dwelling creature in the British Isles. Each Uisge is often mistaken as the Kelpie but the Each Uisge lives in the sea, and fresh water lakes while Kelpie inhabits streams and rivers. The Each Uisge is a shape-shifter, disguising itself as a fine horse or a pony. If a man mounts it, he is only safe as long as the Each Uisge is being ridden in the interior of land. However, the merest glimpse or smell of water means the end of the rider. After the victim is drowned, the Each Uisge tears the victim apart and devours the entire body except for the liver, which floats to the surface. Kelpie was also said to warn of impending storms by wailing and howling, which would carry on through the tempest. This association with thunder-the sound its tail makes as it
submerges under water-and storms, may be related to ancient worship of river and weather deities by the ancient Celts (Monaghan 464).

Maurya’s vision gives us a strong evidence of the popular Celtic belief in the spirit of the dead. Michael was definitely *taken* by the fairies as he was away for the ‘nine’ long days in the sea. Bartley also says that he may be ‘coming again in two days, or in three days, or maybe in four days if the wind is bad’ (Synge, *Collected Plays* 40). The total number of days again reaches to ‘nine’. ‘Naoi’ (pronounced n-ee) or ‘Nine’ is the most magical number in the Irish mythology. It occurs frequently throughout the lore such as the ‘nine’ hazel trees at ‘Segais Well’, the ‘nine’ hostages of Niall, the ‘nine’ waves the Milesians retreated before giving battle to the Tuatha Dé Danaan, etc. The Celts were believed to use a nine day week based on lunar phases. Owen, a spy for Conchubor in *Deirdre of the Sorrows*, makes a reference to Deirdre about ‘nine waves’:

> OWEN. . . . The full moon, I’m thinking, and it squeezing the crack in my skull. Was there ever a man crossed nine waves after a fool’s wife and he not away in his head?  
> (Synge, *Collected Plays* 236)

To the Celts, the ninth wave was the mystic interaction of sea and wind and that is the boundary between this world and the ‘Otherworld’ (“Celtic Myths” wanderingangus.com).

Animal symbolism is an important aspect of the art and myths of the Celtic people. In all the plays by Synge, one can easily find out references to animals and birds. Again, in the *Riders to the Sea* we see Maurya and Cathleen talking about a pig. The Pig (Boar, Bacrie, Torc) is known for its
cunning and ferocious nature. Throughout the British Isles, a famous Irish legendary boar was Orc Triath, which the Goddess Brigit owned. In the Arthurian tales of the Mabinogion the boar Twrch Trwyth (pronounced turch-truith) was a terrible foe to Arthur. The White Boar of Marvan sent inspiration to its master to write music and poetry.

In Ridersto the Sea, we see Cathleen informing her brother, Bartley, about a ‘pig with the black feet’ (Synge, Collected Plays 39) eating the rope meant for the funeral of her dead brother, Michael.

CATHLEEN [coming down]. Give it to him, Nora; it’s on a nail by the white boards. I hung it up this morning, for the pig with the black feet was eating it. (Synge, Collected Plays 39)

To the ancient Irish-Celts, the pig was also honoured as a mother provider figure. Similarly, in the play, the pig, is heard eating the rope which was meant for lowering down Michael’s coffin into the grave. This symbolically means that Maurya, the mother provider, attempts to prevent Bartley from going to the sea to avoid his death (symbolised by the pig eating the coffin rope). But the ill-fated Bartley takes the same rope with him to ride the ‘red mare’.

MAURYA. You’d do right to leave that rope, Bartley, hanging by the boards [Bartley takes the rope] . . .
BARTLEY [beginning to work with the rope]. I’ve no halter the way I can ride down on the mare, and I must go now quickly. (Synge, Collected Plays 39)
MAURYA [turning round to the fire and putting her shawl over her head]. Isn’t it a hard and cruel man won’t hear a word from an old woman, and she holding him from the sea? (Synge, Collected Plays 41)
In Ulster Cycle of the Irish mythology, we find a story of Manannán mac Lir, son of Lir (a sea deity in Irish mythology related to Tuatha Dé Danaan) who owned a heard of pigs which never dwindled. They were forever replenishing their numbers. Mannanán’s powerful role in the cycle of life and death is also expressed in his possession of magic swine whose flesh provides food for feasting by the gods, and then regenerates each day, like that of Odin’s boar Sæhrímnir in Scandinavian myth (Spaan 185). As such, in Celtic symbolism pigs remained icons of abundance, but in the *Riders to the Sea*, the pig brought ill-luck with it because of its ominous black feet and this reminds us of Maurya using ominous words for Bartley and in perplexity taking the ‘turf’ (symbolising ‘life fire’) out of the hearth.

MAURYA [crying out as he is in the door]. He’s gone now, God spare us, and we’ll not see him again. He’s gone now, and when the black night is falling I’ll have no son left me in the world.

CATHLEEN. Why wouldn’t you give him your blessing and he looking round in the door? Isn’t it sorrow enough is on everyone in this house without your sending him out with an unlucky word behind him, and a hard word in his ear?

(CSynge, *Collected Plays* 41)

CATHLEEN [cutting off some of the bread and rolling it in a cloth; to Maurya]. Let you go down now to the spring well and give him this and he passing. You’ll see him then and the dark word will be broken, and you can say “God speed you,” the way he’ll be easy in his mind.

(Synge, *Collected Plays* 42)

 Saying ‘God speed you’ means that ‘you remain safe from the fairies’ (‘Good People’) who ‘steal children and strike people with paralysis and other ailments (which is called being fairy-struck’). When:
. . . the peasant sees a cloud of dust sweeping along the road, he raises his hat and says, “God speed you, gentlemen!” for it is the popular belief that it is in these cloudy vehicles that the Good People journey from one place to another. (Keightley, “Ireland” sacred-texts.com)

Actually ‘Good People’ are fairy-gentry.

People killed and murdered in war stay on earth till their time is up, and they are among the good people. The souls on this earth are as thick as the grass (running his walking stick through a thick clump), and you can’t see them; and evil spirits are just as thick, too, and people don’t know it. Because there are so many spirits knocking about they must appear to some people. The old folk saw the good people here on the Hill a hundred times, and they’d always be talking about them. The good people can see everything, and you dare not meddle with them. They live in raths, and their houses are in them. The opinion always was that they are a race of spirits, for they can go into different forms, and can appear big as well as little. (Evans-Wentz 34)

Robin Skelton and Declan Kiberd, scholars of Irish language and culture, make Riders to the Sea seem a compendium of folk beliefs. Colours, clothing, horses, the sea, certain actions and utterances, the hearth, all have superstitious (read mythological meanings). For example, Kiberd mentions “that in Irish folklore ‘the fire is symbolic of human life’ and must not be allowed to die down”. . . . In raking the fire aimlessly, Maurya gives us a vital clue to her spiritual condition and a premonition of the disaster which will soon overtake her household (166).”

There is a folklore attached to the ‘grey pony’ from Fenian Cycle of Irish mythology: Abarta (possibly meaning “doer of deeds”) was one of the Tuatha Dé Danaan, associated with Fionn mac Cumhail. Abarta offered himself as a servant to Fionn mac Cumhail, shortly after Fionn had
succeeded his father as leader of the Fianna (a band of mighty Milesian warriors). In a gesture of goodwill, Abarta then gave them a wild ‘grey horse’, which fourteen Fianna had to mount onto its back before it would even move. After Abarta had mounted behind the Fianna on the horse, it galloped off taking the warriors to the otherworld where the Tuatha Dé Danaan had been driven underground by the Milesians (pronounced mi-le-shans). The Fianna, led by Fionn mac Cumhail’s assistant Foltor, had to acquire a magical ship to hunt down Abarta’s steed. Foltor, being the Fianna’s best tracker, managed to navigate into the otherworld, where Abarta was made to release the imprisoned Fianna warriors, and as a punishment he had to hold the horse’s tail and was dragged back to Ireland. (Cotterell 96)

In this folklore, the grey horse takes the warriors to the ‘Otherworld.’ Similarly, in Riders to the Sea, Maurya knows that the grey pony is running behind Bartley and this might have aggravated her suspicion.

CATHLEEN [leaves her wheel and looks out]. God forgive you; he’s riding the mare now over the green head, and the grey pony behind him.

MAURYA [starts, so that her shawl falls back from her head and shows her white tossed hair. With a frightened voice]. The grey pony behind him . . . .

(Synge, Collected Plays 45)

Nora tells Cathleen that the young priest said:

There were two men . . . and they rowing round with poteen before the cocks crowed and the oar of one of them caught the body, and they passing the black cliffs of the North.

(Synge, Plays 40)
In classical mythology, there is a place of darkness through which the spirits pass into Hades. Black cliffs occur as ominous places in many Irish folk-tales and myths.

This, of course, connects up with the appearance of Michael’s apparition later in the play, riding a grey pony. The colour grey is associated with death in Ireland. The Grey Washer by the Ford is, in Irish folk-tale, a female spectre who seems at first to be washing clothes in a river, but when approached by the man about to die she holds up the clothes and they have become the man’s own phantom marked with mortal wounds he is about to receive. Here the use of clothing and spectre echoes Synge’s treatment of the appearance of Michael.

(Maurya, as a representative of Irish peasant-folk, exudes her strong convictions in the evil and ominous surroundings several times in the play. For instance she says that ‘there was a star up against the moon’ (Synge, *Collected Plays* 40). These small signs of misfortune made her have hallucinations and bad intuitions about her son’s approaching death. This is why she is compelled to speak ‘dark words’ about her son’s journey.

MAURYA [raising her head and speaking as if she did not see the people around her]. They’re all gone now, and there isn’t anything more the sea can do to me. . . . I’ll have no call now to be up crying and praying when the wind breaks from the south, and you can hear the surf is in the east, and the surf is in the west, making a great stir with the two noises, and they hitting one on the other. I’ll have no call now to be going down and getting Holy Water in the dark nights after Samhain, and I won’t care what way the sea is when the other women will be keening. (Synge, *Collected Plays* 48)

We notice that Maurya sees Michael’s apparition on the pony, wearing ‘fine clothes’ and ‘new shoes’. Fairies are believed to provide the young people (abducted by them), with new clothes. Michael, being a poor young lad, is
not supposed to buy new attire for himself, so his apparition with new clothing on himself, suggests that he was ‘taken’ by the fairies to become a fairy himself. As for Bartley, we see him wearing “newer coat” (Synge, *Collected Plays* 40) and Michael’s shirt as his own shirt was “heavy with the salt in it” (Synge, *Collected Plays* 43) and riding a “red mare” which are again ominous signs suggesting that he too, along with Michael, will go away with the fairies. In the Irish mythology, two colours are most often connected with the fairy-folk, red and green (Monaghan170); and the colour of the horse which Bartley was riding also happens to be red.

In *The Playboy of the Western World*, we notice Old Mahon talking about Christy Mahon’s fear of the fairies and ghosts when he sees the “red” coloured petticoat visible over the “hill” (Synge, *Plays* 248):

MAHON [*with a shout of derision*]. Running wild, is it ? If he seen a red petticoat coming swinging over the hill, he’d be off to hide in the sticks, and you’d see him shooting out his sheep’s eyes between the little twigs and the leaves, and his two ears rising like a hare looking out through a gap. (Synge, *Plays* 248)

As legend has it, female fairies often give birth to deformed children. Since the fairies prefer visually pleasing babies, they would go into the mortal world and swap with a healthy human baby, leaving behind a changeling. While the changeling looks like a human baby, it carries none of the same emotional characteristics. The changeling is happy only when “misfortune or grief happens in the house” (Evans-Wentz 105). Anyone could be ‘taken away’ by the fairies, but certain categories of humans are most vulnerable. As believed by the Irish peasants that fairy babies were both rare and, when
born, exceedingly ugly, their own charming infants remain in great risk. Sometimes they are simply snatched away; at other times, a substitute is placed in the cradle, either an enchanted rock or stick or worse, an ugly fairy/changeling. For this reason, new mothers make it certain that a pair of their husband’s trousers is always in their bed, for the pants are supposed to scare the fairies away (Monaghan 173). Brides on their wedding day might be snatched away before the marriage is consummated (in the *The Playboy of the Western World*, we see Pegeen making a list of her wedding articles and is afraid of staying alone at night time in the shebeen (Synge, *Collected Plays* 141)). Handsome youngmen, sometimes wander away on the arm of a red-haired girl, never to be seen again. Even, musicians and poets are sometimes stolen away for their talents (Monaghan 173).

In the *The Playboy of the Western World*, Christy reaches Pegeen’s house all tired and frightened. He is unable to find his right way between heaven (safety at Pegeen’s house) and hell (Christy’s own home with tyrannical father). Then he goes near the fire and starts eating a turnip. This whole scene reminds us of an Irish legend ‘Stingy Jack’ famous as ‘Jack O’Lantern’. The Irish immigrants brought the tradition of the Jack O’Lantern to America to celebrate Halloween. But, the original Jack O’Lantern was not a pumpkin. The Jack O’Lantern legend goes back hundreds of years in Irish history. As the story goes, Stingy Jack was a miserable, old drunk who liked to play tricks on everyone including his family, friends, and even the Devil himself. One day, he tricked the Devil
into climbing up an apple tree. Once the Devil had climbed up the apple
tree, Stingy Jack hurriedly placed crosses around the trunk of the tree. The
Devil was then unable to get down the tree. Stingy Jack made the Devil
promise him not to take his soul when he died. Only after the Devil had
made the promise, did Stingy Jack remove the crosses and let the Devil
down.

Many years later, when Jack finally died, he went to the pearly gates
of Heaven and was told by St. Peter that he was too mean and too cruel, and
had led a miserable and worthless life on earth. He was not allowed to enter
heaven. He then went down to Hell and the Devil. The Devil kept his
promise and would not allow him to enter Hell. Now Jack was scared and
had nowhere to go but to wander about forever in the darkness between
heaven and hell. He asked the Devil how he could leave as there was no
light. The Devil tossed him an ember from the flames of Hell to help him
light his way. Jack placed the ember in a hollowed out turnip, one of his
favorite foods which he always carried around with him whenever he could
steal one. For that day onwards, Stingy Jack roamed the earth without a
resting place, lighting his way with the help of his “Jack O’Lantern”
(“Jack” pumpkinnook.com).

CHRISTY (with relief). It’s a safe house, so.
He goes over to the fire, sighing and moaning. Then he
sits down, putting his glass beside him, and begins
gnawing a turnip, too miserable to feel the others staring
at him with curiosity. (Synge, Plays 198)
Almost in all the plays by Synge, we notice that his characters frequently discuss about the position of constellations, sun, and phases of moon and how all these guide their present and future actions.

In *Deirdre of the Sorrows*, we see Arden, Naisi’s brother, talking about Orion:

NAISI [*very soberly*]. Is the rain easing?
ARDAN The clouds are breaking . . .
I can see Orion in the gap of the glen.

(Synge, *Collected Plays* 227)

Orion, sometimes subtitled ‘The Hunter,’ by the Celts, is a prominent constellation located on the celestial equator and visible throughout the world (Dolan, “Orion” astro.wisc.edu). It is one of the most conspicuous and most recognisable constellations in the night sky. Its name refers to Orion, a giant huntsman in Greek mythology whom Zeus placed among the stars as the constellation of Orion. The role of Orion in Celtic Mythology is played out by Mabon (pronounced mah-bawn), the autumn equinox. The autumn equinox divides the day and night equally (Griffiths, “Under a Celtic Sky” lablit.com).

Mabon is considered a time of the Mysteries. It is a time to honor Aging Deities and the Spirit World. Considered a time of balance, it is when we stop and relax and enjoy the fruits of our personal harvests, whether they be from toiling in our gardens, working at our jobs, raising our families, or just coping with the hussle-bussle of everyday life. (Akasha, “Mabon” wicca.com)
For many pagans and wiccans[^30], the cycles of the moon play a very important role in determining their actions especially when they think to start a new work, undertake a fresh journey, or plan for marriage. In *Riders to the Sea* we see Maurya’s suspicion about the upcoming trouble getting stronger with the position of moon and the star ‘against it’:

MAURYA. If it isn’t found itself, that wind is raising the sea, and there was a star up against the moon, and it rising in the night. (Synge, *Collected Plays* 40)

According to Celtic traditions, the waxing moon, the full moon, the waning moon and the new moon (Wigington, paganwiccan.about.com), all have their own special magical properties, and so all new ventures should be planned accordingly. People, in fact, swear on the four quarters of the moon believing it to have divine power. In Celtic mythology, Lair báln is considered the Moon Goddess, meaning the ‘white mare’.

In *Deirdre of the Sorrows*, Lavarcham asks Naisi not to go to Emain by saying:

LAVARCHAM [*impressively*]. It’s a hard thing, surely; but let you take my word and swear Naisi, by the earth, and the sun over it, and the four quarters of the moon, he’ll not go back to Emain for good faith or bad faith the time Conchubor’s keeping the high throne of Ireland. . . . It’s that would save you, surely. (Synge, *Collected Plays* 234)

The waxing moon is the period during which the moon grows from dark to ‘full’. It takes approximately fourteen days for this to happen. The Irish

[^30]: Wicca (pronounced wi- k’) is a modern pagan religion which draws upon a diverse set of ancient pagan religious motifs for its theological structure and ritual practice. The religion usually incorporates the practice of witchcraft.
people use this time of the moon to perform ‘positive’ activities; in other words, magic that draws things to you. Some examples would include, money spells and attempt to get a new job or home, bringing love into one’s life, and buying of material items.

In The Tinker’s Wedding, Mary says that Sarah has started talking about wedding plans since the moon has come into a new phase:

MARY [nudging Michael]. Did you see that, Michael Byrne? Didn’t you hear me telling you she’s flighty a while back since the change of the moon? With her fussing for marriage, and she making whisper-talk with one man or another man along by the road. (Synge, Collected Plays 56)

Also, in Deirdre of the Sorrows, Deirdre starts thinking ‘at the full moon’ about the heavenly relationship she and Naisi could share in the ‘new face on the moon’ and get rid of the tormenting thoughts about Emain and Conchubar.

DEIRDRE. It isn’t many I’d call, Naisi. . . . I was in the woods at the full moon and I heard a voice singing. Then I gathered up my skirts, and I ran on a little path I have to the verge of a rock, and I saw you pass by underneath, in your crimson cloak, singing a song, and you standing out beyond your brothers are called the Flower of Ireland.

NAISI. It’s for that you called us in the dusk?

DEIRDRE [in a low voice]. Since that, Naisi, I have been one time the like of a ewe looking for a lamb that had been taken away from her, and one time seeing new gold on the stars, and a new face on the moon, and all times dreading Emain. (Synge, Collected Plays 229)

The full moon is the point at which we can see an entire side of the moon. The Irish people consider that the full moon is a good time to perform rituals focused on personal growth and spiritual development. Examples
may include spells related to increasing your intuitive awareness, healing, rituals which connect one closely with deity. But the most common interpretation of full moon is not so good, because lunar eclipse occurs only on the night of a full moon, which is mostly feared by primitive and orthodox people. During the ancient and medieval periods the astrologers noticed that there was a higher percentage of the population that would make a ‘transition’ from life to death on the full and new moons. For people who worship a moon goddess, full moon is a night for rituals. Full Moons are traditionally associated with temporal insomnia, insanity (hence the terms lunacy and lunatic) and various ‘magical phenomena’ such as lycanthropy\textsuperscript{31}.

In Deirdre of the Sorrows, Owen also gives us a hint of some problem getting accelerated in his head because it was full moon.

OWEN [\textit{who has been searching, finds a loaf and sits down eating greedily, and cutting it with a large knife}]. The full moon, I’m thinking, and it squeezing the crack in my skull. (Synge, Collected Plays 236)

Lavarcham, Deirdre’s nurse, also anticipates some bad omen with the changing phase of moon:

LAVARCHAM [\textit{despairingly}]. I’m late so with my warnings, for Fergus’d talk the moon over to take a new path in the sky. [\textit{With reproach.}] You’ll not stop him this day. . . . I’m destroyed seeing yourself in your hour of joy when the end is coming surely . . . (Synge, Collected Plays 236)

\textsuperscript{31} The professed ability or power of a human being to transform into a wolf, or to gain wolf-like characteristics.
The new moon is sometimes tricky to work with because we cannot see it properly during this phase. Sometimes it appears as a very faint silver crescent. For approximately three days during each lunar cycle, after the moon has waned, it goes dark before waxing again. This time is considered to rest and rejuvenate before beginning something new. Some examples may include cleansing and purifying of the body and mind, rituals that designate sacred space, and works related to inner harmony and peace.

In *The Playboy of the Western World*, Christy proposes to Pegeen to marry him and anticipates future with her passing by Neifin, the valley of Glasnevin\(^{32}\), in new moon which will have a purifying effect on their souls:

*CHRISTY* (indignantly). Starting from you, is it? (*He follows her.*) I will not, then, and when the airs is warming, in four months or five, it’s then yourself and me should be pacing Neifin in the dews of night, the times sweet smells do be rising, and you’d see a little, shiny new moon, maybe, sinking on the hills. (*Synge, Plays 270*)

The waning moon is the period during which the moon goes from full to dark once again. Like the waxing moon phase, it lasts approximately two weeks. In many traditions of wicca and paganism, this time of the month is used to curse someone or do some malicious magic. For example, magic to eliminate negative people from one’s life, workings to smoothly end a relationship or job and get a new one, any magic related to reducing bad things, such as debt, illness, etc.

\(^{32}\) Glasnevin seems to have been founded by Saint Mobhi (sometimes known as St Berchan) in the sixth (or perhaps fifth) century as a monastery.
In *The Playboy of the Western world*, Widow Quin tries to convince Christy’s that Pegeen, along with people of Mayo, would not accept Christy’s second attempt to kill his father and if Christy still stays with her, then Pegeen, herself might become the cause of his destruction due to the ‘double murder’ he has attempted. She also tries to make it clear to him that Christy can get ‘finer’ girls when there is a ‘waning moon’ in the sky.

CHRISTY. I’ll not leave Pegeen Mike.

WIDOW QUIN [*impatiently*]. Isn’t there the match of her in every parish public, from Binghamstown unto the plain of Meath? Come on, I tell you, and I’ll find you finer sweethearts at each waning moon.

(Synge, *Collected Plays* 205)

The Hazel Moon (August 5-September 1) is known to the Celts as *Coll*, which translates to ‘the life force inside you’. This is the time of year when hazelnuts start appearing on the trees. Hazelnuts are also associated with wisdom and protection and in Celtic lore, they are associated with ‘sacred wells’ and magical springs containing the ‘salmon of knowledge’. This is a good month to do workings related to wisdom and knowledge.

In *Deirdre of the Sorrows*, one can notice Naisi discussing with Fergus his knowledge about ‘old age’ because he encountered the ‘Salmon of Wisdom’:

NAISI [*very thoughtfully*]. I’ll not tell you a lie. There have been days a while past when I’ve been throwing a line for salmon or watching for the run of hares, that I’ve a dread upon me a day’d come I’d weary of her voice, [*very slowly*] and Deirdre’d see I’d wearied . . .

(Synge, *Collected Plays* 240)

NAISI. You’ve heard my words to Fergus? [She does not answer. A pause. He puts his arm round her.] Leave
troubling, and we’ll go this night to Glen da Ruadh, where the salmon will be running with the tide.
(Synge, *Collected Plays* 241)

The ‘Salmon of Knowledge’ is a creature figuring in the Fenian Cycle of Irish mythology. The Salmon figures prominently in *The Boyhood Deeds of Fionn*, which recounts the early adventures of Fionn mac Cumhail.

According to the story, an ordinary salmon ate nine hazelnuts that fell into the Well of Wisdom (*Tobar Segais*) from nine hazel trees that surrounded the well. By this act, the salmon gained all the world’s knowledge, consequently, the first person to eat of its flesh would, in turn, gain this knowledge. The folklore goes like this:

Deimne (Fionn mac Cumhail) was the son of Cumhail. His father was slain while Deimne (pronounced dei-fni) was still in his mother’s womb. Fearing for the boy’s life his mother sent him away to be trained by a druid on the Isle of Skye. The druid was a great philosopher and a curious seeker striving to understand the elements of nature and truth. He often taught lessons or narrated tales in the shade of oak trees. Knowing that no one would harm a druid, his mother felt he was safe from the tragic fate that had befallen his father. Deimne under the tutelage of the druid became quite learned and began to understand the curing properties of various herbs. He was a fine poet and also a harper. But he was not satisfied with the simple life of a druid so he decided to seek adventure.

Deimne had heard that there was a sacred well in Ireland, which was the primary source of inspiration. If there was anything he would need, to
gear him up for any adventure, it was unfettered access to the knowledge
that the well could bestow on someone. So he set himself on the task of
finding it. He followed the river Boyne, which was named after Boann, of
the Tuatha Dé Danaan (the legendary race of people that were said to have
arrived in Ireland from four great cities that had perished due to some
natural disaster or another). They were a regal people and holders of a great
amount of knowledge.

Deimne followed the river Boyne and it became narrower and
narrower until it resembled a stream. Finally he came to a well from which
the stream took birth. Nine old and purpled hazel trees encircled the well
and it is said that there is a certain time when one of the trees will drop a
hazelnut that, if caught by a salmon before it reaches the water, and the said
salmon is caught by a druid before the fish gets back into the water, eating
that salmon will bestow great wisdom and inspiration. Demine was not
familiar with that tale.

The poet Finn Eces spent seven years fishing for this salmon. But
when Fionn (Demine) reached the well, he just saw a salmon being cooked
nearby over some stones and no one else near the fish. He touched the fish
with his thumb to see if it was cooked and burnt his finger. He sucked on it
to ease the pain without having the slightest idea that all of salmon’s
wisdom had been concentrated into that one drop of fish fat. Then Finn
Eces arrived and saw that the boy’s eyes shone with unseen wisdom. Finn
Eces asked Fionn if he had eaten any of the salmon. Answering no, the boy
explained what had happened. Finn Eces realised that Fionn had received
the wisdom of the salmon, so gave him the rest of the fish to eat. Fionn ate
the salmon and in so doing gained all the knowledge of the world.
Throughout the rest of his life, Fionn could draw upon this knowledge
merely by biting his thumb. The deep knowledge and wisdom gained from
Fintan, the Salmon of Knowledge, allowed Fionn to become the leader of
the Fianna, the famed heroes of Irish myth. (“Salmon of Knowledge”
celtic.org)

In Irish mythology, Conna’s Well (also called the ‘Well of
Coelrind,’ ‘Well of Nechtan,’ and ‘Well of Segais’) is one of a number of
wells of the ‘Otherworld’ that are variously depicted as ‘The Well of
Wisdom,’ ‘The Well of Knowledge’ and the source of some of the rivers of
Ireland, for example, the river Boyne as depicted in the above mentioned
story. Much like the ‘Well of Nechtan,’ the well is the home to the salmon
of wisdom, and surrounded with hazel trees, which also signify knowledge
and wisdom (“Irish Myths and Legends” toptenz.net).

There is a folklore associated with a blessed well known as ‘Mary’s
well’ in Ballintubber (i.e., town of the well), in the county Mayo, Ireland:

So the story goes, one day a well broke out of the earth at the foot of
a hill, near an altar. A poor friar happened to pass by the road where the
well had just emerged and he started saying a prayer upon the site of the
blessed altar. Suddenly, he saw a fine well in its place and heard a voice
saying: “Put off your brogues, you are upon blessed ground, you are on the
brink of Mary’s Well, and there is the curing of thousands of blind in it; there shall be a person cured by the water of that well, for every person who heard mass in front of the altar that was in the place where the well is now, if they be dipped three times in it, in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.” When the friar had said his prayers, he looked up and saw a large white dove speaking to him from above. Then, the fame of Mary’s Well went through the country, and it was not long till there were pilgrims from every county coming to the blessed well and nobody went back without being cured; and after that, people from other countries started coming to it (Hyde 14-15).

The characters in Synge’s plays are well aware of these blessed wells and mention them frequently in their speeches. In the *Tinker’s Wedding*, Mary also talks about a blessed well:

> MARY [a feigned tone of pacification with the bundle still in her hand]. It’s not a drouth but a heartburn I have this day, Sarah Casey, so I’m going down to cool my gullet at the blessed well . . . (Synge, *Collected Plays* 71)

In *The Well of the Saints*, we get to know about the curing power of a well ‘of four beautiful saints’ from Timmy:

> TIMMY [impressively]. There’s a green ferny well, I’m told, behind of that place, and if you put a drop of the water out of it on the eyes of a blind man, you’ll make him see as well as any person is walking the world. (Synge, *Collected Plays* 90)

Yet another Irish folklore moves around a well, which cures blindness:

Once, there were two merchants going along the road and one said that there was blessing of God on the road, while the other disagreed. So they
bet and the price of the winner was decided on the eyes of the loser. The merchant, who believed in God, lost both of his eyes because none out of the two people (whom they asked about the blessing of God) agreed with him and said like the other merchant that there was no blessing of God on the road. In this way, the merchant turned blind and asked the winner to leave him in a nearby church. There he overheard some cats talking about the curing power of a well. Conall, the king of cats said “if anyone were blind, and he to put a drop of that water on his eyes he would get his sight.” The blind merchant strived to reach the well and asked, “Is there any well here?” “There is,” said the shepherd. “Leave me at the brink of the well.” He left him there. The merchant just put down his hand and splashed a drop of water on his two eyes; and he finally got his eyesight again. (Hyde 175-76)

Like most artists, Synge was concerned with expressing what cannot be communicated directly. The problem, he suggested in a 1906 note, is “finding a universal expression for the particular emotions and ideas of the personality of the artist himself” (qtd. in Saddlemeyer, introduction to the Collected Works xxviii) His treatment of individual situations and experiences, in the major writings, shows that he moved from the particular to the universal. For example, if one of his characters speaks about something paranormal, that very thing has been experienced or at least known to all the people living in the same region. These people share similar beliefs and notions about the magical power of some well, or the
black hags keening for the dead. In *Riders to the Sea*, Cathleen tells Nora that the black hags must be keening around Michael’s dead body:

CATHLEEN [*counts the stitches*]. It’s that number is in it [*crying out*]. Ah, Nora, isn’t it a bitter thing to think of him floating that way to the far north, and no one to keen him but the black hags that do be flying on the sea. (Synge, *Collected Plays* 44)

This individual perception of Cathleen about the black hags is not just personal, but has universal significance in Celtic contexts. In Irish mythology, a hag is a wizened old woman, or a kind of fairy or goddess having the appearance of such a woman, found in folklore and children’s tales as a death messenger. She is like Badb (pronounced ba-v) meaning ‘crow’. Badb was a war Goddess who took the form of a crow, and was thus sometimes known as Badb Catha (‘battle crow’). Badb would also appear prior to a battle to foreshadow the extent of the carnage to come or to predict the death of a notable person. She would sometimes do this through wailing cries. Hags are often seen as malevolent, but may also be one of the chosen forms of shape-shifting deities, such as the Morrígan or Badb, who are seen as neither wholly beneficent nor malevolent (Lysaght 54).

Aside from Maurya’s vision, the strongest evidence for supernatural forces in *Riders to the Sea* is its sense of design and its phenomenal unity. The white boards meant for Michael’s coffin become the boards for Bartley’s; the bread for his trip becomes a meal for his coffin builders; and his changing into Michael’s cleaner coat—a natural enough action—
becomes a highly significant aspect of Maurya’s vision. Her strong conviction in the ‘Otherworld’ is very much evident in the play. On many occasions one may notice Maurya and her daughters looking out of the window. The world ‘outside’ the window is dominated by the people of the ‘Otherworld’ and when their procession starts (understood by bad weather and thunderstorm), no window or door can stop them from coming in and passing by. A folklore named The Death Coach is about a coach which used to pass by a house every night where a woman lived. After her daughter was born, she used to hear the sound of the death coach. It passed about midnight, and she could hear the rushing, the tramping of the horses, and most beautiful singing, just like fairy music, but she could not understand the words. Once or twice she was brave enough to open the door and look out as the coach passed, but she could never see a thing, though there was the noise and singing. One time a man had to wait on the roadside to let the fairy horses go by, and he could hear their passing very clearly but could not see any one of them. (Evans-Wentz 72)

There are mounds known as ‘fairy preserves’. People believe that any heap of stones in a field should not be disturbed, especially if they are part of an ancient civilisation. The fairies are said to live inside the pile, and to move the stones would be most unfortunate.

If a house happens to be built on a fairy preserve, or in a fairy track, the occupants will have no luck. Everything will go wrong. Their animals will die, their children fall sick, and no end of trouble will come on them. When the house happens to have been built in a fairy track, the doors on the front and
back, or the windows if they are in the line of the track, cannot be kept closed at night, for the fairies must march through.

(Evans-Wentz 39)

Sometimes, fairies also appear as flies and in County Mayo it is believed that once the fairies had a great battle near it and that the slaughter was tremendous.

At the time, the fairies appeared as swarms of flies coming from every direction to that spot. Some came from Knock Ma, and some from South Ireland, the opinion being that fairies can assume any form they like. The battle lasted a day and a night, and when it was over one could have filled baskets with the dead flies which floated down the river. (Evans-Wentz 40)

We see in Synge’s *The Shadow of the Glen*, Nora’s husband Dan making a reference to a fly as “Devil’s own fly”:

DAN. It is not, stranger; but she won’t be coming near me at all, and it’s not long now I’ll be letting on, for I’ve a cramp in my back, and my hip’s asleep on me, and there’s been the devil’s own fly itching my nose.

(Synge, *Collected Plays* 23)

‘Syngean’ Characters: Not ‘Just’ Simple Rustics

In the present study, the characters of Synge’s plays are compared with the deities and people of high esteem, which clearly shows that along with portraying his characters as simple rustic peasants, Synge has made their thoughts, superstitions, beliefs appear overwhelming. Their actions and decisions appear to have a striking affinity with some hero or deity.

Synge’s characters share several prominent characteristics of the Irish mythological figures. These characteristics, exclusively attributed to the Celtic-Irish deities and folkloric figures, contribute to the collective
psychology of Irish peasantry. If we go through his plays, we are likely to find traces of supernatural deities in peasant men and women. For example, the women with red petticoats over their heads appear very similar to the famous Irish folkloric figure, beansídhe. She is a fairy woman who wails over the dead and calls for them. She is usually depicted as an older woman with long red hair, a pale complexion, and a long grey cloak draping over her body. Some say that she has no real substance and appears more as a mist-like cloud, or is seen with one nostril, breast, and tooth. It is said that the wailing of the beansídhe foretells an approaching human death. Her name is a variation of ‘washing woman’ and it is said that one may see her more often near a river or a lake. She is posed as washing the bloody clothes of the person whose death she is foretelling. As far as characters in the plays are concerned, in *Riders to the Sea* one can notice Maurya with a red shawl over her head foretelling her son’s death; and in the last section of the play, sprinkling Holy Water on the clothes of Michael and on Bartley’s body as if she, herself is trying to wash away the signs of misfortune. In the last part of the play we also see women ‘keening’ and wearing red petticoats over their heads which again remind us of fairies who ‘take away’ young people with them.

. . . they are at times seen to issue mounted on diminutive steeds, in order to take at night the diversion of the chase. Their usual attire is green with red caps. (Keightley, “Ireland” sacred-texts.com)

In *Riders to the Sea*, Maurya:
. . . pauses again with her hand stretched out towards the door. It opens softly and old women begin to come in, crossing themselves on the threshold and kneeling down in front of the stage with red petticoats over their heads.

(Synge, Collected Plays 47)

Nicholas Grene, at one point in his essay on Riders to the Sea says that:

Synge wins from his audience the willing suspension of disbelief by the strength and actuality of his dramatic image. . . We not only believe that Maurya saw Michael on the grey pony, we believe Michael was there. (Grene 54)

Robin Skelton, general editor of Synge’s Collected Works, states directly that the play’s “emphasis upon the dominance of the sea makes the sea itself into a power, a god” (Skelton 43). On the other hand, Malcolm Pittock has harshly criticised Synge, saying:

He cheats us, for the sake of effect, into actively assenting to some of the [beliefs of the islanders] least acceptable elements. . . .When as a boy I first saw the play, the powerful justification given by the action for Maurya’s subjective misgivings puzzled me: the implication seemed to be that to put to sea in rough weather was not merely to risk death but to make it certain. . . . Perhaps the most significant falsity in the play is Maurya’s vision. Here Synge does not allow us to question the validity of her or her family’s belief in its prophetic nature or its relationship to Bartley’s death . . . .

(Pittock 448)

“Pittock overlooks what Grene sees, the incredulity with which Maurya’s family and friends regard her, but he is right in pointing out how much in the play is realistic, reasonable, and natural and how this element can undermine the viewer’s belief that something supernatural is happening” in Riders to the Sea (Hull 245).
The present study argues that Synge does not cheat us, however; he simply wants to give us a glimpse of the Celtic mythological and supernatural beliefs. *Riders to the Sea* “is an ambivalent drama, promoting the view that supernatural forces are at work while supporting the view that the play’s action is purely naturalistic” (Hull 245).

In ancient Ireland, a special gift of clairvoyance was believed to be possessed by the poets and the druids, known as ‘imbas forosnai’. *Imbas* means ‘inspiration’ or ‘knowledge’ and *forosnai* means ‘illuminated’ or ‘that which illuminates’. Descriptions of the practices associated with *Imbas forosnai* are found in Cormac’s Glossary and in the mythology associated with Fionn mac Cumhail. Generally Imbas forosnai was thought to involve the practitioner engaging in sensory deprivation techniques in order to enter into a trance and receive answers or prophecy (“Imbas Forosnai” wikipedia.org).

The term clairvoyance (from 17th century French with *clair* meaning “clear” and *voyance* meaning “vision”) is used to refer to the ability to gain information about an object, person, location or physical event through means other than the known human senses, a form of extra-sensory perception. A person said to have the ability of clairvoyance is referred to as a clairvoyant (“one who sees clearly”). (“Clairvoyance” wikipedia.org)

Claims for the existence of paranormal and psychic abilities such as clairvoyance are highly controversial. Parapsychology explores this possibility, but the existence of the paranormal is generally not accepted by the scientific community. Synge’s characters are based on real peasants, therefore, their beliefs in fairies, ghosts, apparitions, and *numen/spirit of the
objects, their visions and related actions have also become part and parcel of his plays. Another play of Synge *Deirdre of the Sorrows*, clearly justifies the underlying mythical theme of the belief in the future prediction by a priest that Deirdre will be the doom of the sons of Usna, and we see it happening. At one point of play, Deirdre herself admits this:

DEIRDRE. Do many know what is foretold, that Deirdre will be the ruin of the Sons of Usna, and have a little grave by herself, and a story will be told forever? (Synge, *Collected Plays* 228)

Though the islanders have formally adopted Christianity, their outlook is often pagan. The regular devastation caused by the sea and other agents of nature, create in them a polytheistic belief that the world is in the clutches of gods (malicious they may be) instead of the benevolent Christian Almighty Father. One may notice that Maurya questions the words of the young priest:

MAURYA [in a low voice but clearly]. It’s little the like of him knows of the sea... Bartley will be lost now... . . .

(Synge, *Collected Plays* 46)

This pagan response gives rise to several superstitions such as “a star up against the moon” (Synge, *Collected Plays* 40) is a premonition for death and disaster, and a drowning man is not rescued because it is considered ill luck to save someone whom the sea has tried to claim. The supernatural vision like that of “Bride Dara” (Synge, *Collected Plays* 45) and Maurya’s premonition of ‘Michael’s ghost’ riding the grey horse reveal the rustic imaginations of the Aran people. Moreover, the custom of lamenting over
the dead by ‘keening’ is again an Aran practice that Synge himself had observed.

Synge elevates the moral standard of his protagonists by the end of each play. What was suggested by the visions of Maurya, we see it getting materialised on the stage. Maurya’s last living son also dies and she, who was so troubled by previous misfortunes, does not burst into tears this time. She suddenly appears with stoical tolerance and keeping Michael’s clothes near the feet of Bartley’s body and sprinkles holy water over him. From her identity as a common islander, she is transformed into a stoical tolerant mother. There are many elements in the play which remind us of the classical tragedies of antiquity: the compelling structure, the foreshadowing of the tragedy and its inevitability, the element of guilt which is not personal guilt, the stoic acceptance of fate, the great simplicity and dignity of the main character. Her name echoes the Greek word *moira*, meaning ‘fate’. She is a poor victim of dark fatality as represented by the sea as both preserver and destroyer. The most important aspect of her characterisation is the change in her attitude towards life and death after her last son and the last surviving male member of her family, Bartley, is drowned in the sea. Maurya senses a paradoxical victory over the tyrant-god, for the sea can cause no more harm to the old woman who becomes a sort of mythical embodiment of suffering humanity and the transcendence of suffering. Maurya and her daughters appear to be like three female personifications of destiny, often called ‘The Fates’ in English. Their Greek equivalent were
the ‘Moerae’ and in Roman mythology, the ‘Parcae’ (Grimassi 154). They controlled the metaphorical thread of life of every mortal and immortal from birth to death. Even the gods feared the Parcae. Cathleen is like one of the three Parcae, Nona (Greek equivalent Klotho), who spun the thread of life from her distaff onto her spindle and just like her, we notice Cathleen spinning at the wheel “rapidly” (Synge, Collected Plays 37) in the very beginning of the play. Maurya’s second daughter Nora, appears to be like Decima (Greek Lachesis), who measured the thread of life with her rod. In the play, Nora counts the stitches in Michael’s stocking and finally confirms the possibility of Michael’s death (Synge, Collected Plays 43). Maurya behaves in the same manner as the goddess Morta (Greek Atropos), who cuts the thread of life and chose the manner of a person’s death. Maurya, seems to have similar power when she herself foretells (or, in a way, decides) the future of her son, Bartley:

MAURYA. It’s hard set we’ll be surely the day you’re drowned with the rest . . . [crying out as he is in the door]. He’s gone now, God spare us, and we’ll not see him again. He’s gone now, and when the black night is falling I’ll have no son left me in the world.

(Synge, Collected Plays 36-37)

According to Keith N. Hull:

Maurya’s behavior possibly helps cause Bartley’s death. Whatever she says or does not say seems to affect the course of events, since the first omitted blessing might have doomed him and the second might have saved him. The “something” that silences Maurya might be from within her or an active agent without. If she is certain of Bartley’s death, maybe she unconsciously stops the blessing to keep the dark word in effect, or maybe she is a victim of some malevolence that takes advantage of her dark word, be it an uttered or a
withheld blessing. Then again, maybe all this is superstitious speculation, and the blessing or lack of it or the cry as Bartley goes out can have no logical effect on events anyway, so the dark word has no significance.

There is no way to tell. Dark words have power in a supernatural world. If we accept “Riders to the Sea” as occurring in such a world, then the characters might be active agents in their own fates by supernatural means, in which case we witness Maurya’s ironically causing what she fears most. If the world is not supernatural, an unspoken blessing will not cause one horse to crowd another, pushing a rider off a cliff.

(Hull 248-49)

In Maurya’s very famous vision of the riders, she mentions Bride Dara having the premonition of her child’s death.

MAURYA [speaking very slowly]. I’ve seen the fearfulest thing any person has seen since the day Bride Dara seen the dead man with the child in his arms.

(Synge, Collected Plays 45)

‘Bride’ is an archaic form of the name Brigid (pronounced br-eed), one of the great pagan goddesses of Ireland. Brigid was later Christianized and turned into one of the Catholic saints, who founded a double monastary and convent at Cill-Dara in in County Kildare. Bride Dara, must like Maurya have had a vision of loved ones who where dead. ‘Bride Dara’ is therefore a sort of shorthand way of saying ‘Brigid of Dara’.

Brigid was a goddess who kept watch over a well (or many wells) from which a prospective king had to drink in order to earn his place on the throne. (Parks 628)

Maurya goes to the Spring well to break the dark word she said for Bartley and bless him, but she could not say anything. She keened rapidly. Many of the myths surrounding the goddess Brigid also include the story of the death of Brigid’s son, Ruadan. It states that when Brigid’s son Ruadan is killed in
battle, her wailing was such that it started the tradition of keening, used ever since at Irish ‘wakes’. The goddess epitomizes maternal love while grieving for her dead son and by her connection with the great mother goddess Danu. This may be the origin of Maurya’s allusion.

Maurya also shares many features of the Irish goddess Brigid, ‘the Mary of the Gales’. Like Greek goddess Artemis, and Roman goddess Minerva, Brigid was a goddess of childbirth, a protector of children, and a fierce advocate of women’s rights. Brigid was one of the greatest deities of the Celtic people and was known as Brigit or Brigid to the Irish, Brigantia in Northern England, Bride in Scotland, and Brigandu in Brittany. As a goddess of healing, herbalism, the arts, and midwifery, she is in touch with both powers of water and those of fire.

MAURYA [drops Michael’s clothes across Bartley’s feet and sprinkles the Holy Water over him].
(Synge, Collected Plays 48)

Brigid is the goddess of the hearth and Maurya is also seen frequently near fire and hearth.

Maurya takes up the tongs and begins raking the fire aimlessly without looking round. (Synge, Collected Plays 41)

Talismans associated with Brigid also include similar household stuff that Maurya’s house contains—mirror, spinning wheel and holy grail. For Brigid, mirror serves as a medium to see the ‘Otherworld,’ spinning wheel

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33 An Irish wake (called faire in Ireland) is a ceremony associated with death. A wake takes place in the house of the deceased, with the body present before all. People sit round the corpse, and guard the dead body whole night. The gathering drinks ale, consumes tobacco and sometimes bread, and cakes.
suggests ‘the circle of life and death’ and holy grail means ‘womb’. All these objects may suggest affinity with Maurya, especially the holy grail. On seeing her last surviving son, Bartley’s dead body Maurya turns the empty cup (before, which contained holy water) upside down as if it is symbolic of the holy grail (and her womb) which is now empty.

MAURYA [puts the empty cup mouth downwards on the table, and lays her hands together on Bartley’s feet].

(Synge, Collected Plays 51)

Synge elevates his characters to a sublime level and in doing so a halo surrounds his characters making the divine powers not just associated with the gods but also, symbolically, with these islanders. We see Maurya evolving from a weak-hearted mother to a woman, having stoical understanding of the realities of life. She says, “No man at all can be living forever, and we must be satisfied” (Synge, Collected Plays 50). On the religious front, she achieves the position of the tolerant mother figure – Mother Mary. Maurya is not second to the Greek heroine, Hecuba34 who also bears the pangs of losing all her children, grandson and husband. In Greek mythology, Hecuba was the second wife of Priam, king of the city of Troy. She bore Priam many children, including Hector, Paris, Polydorus, and Cassandra.

In The Trojan Women, Euripides’s follows the fates of the women of Troy after their city has been sacked, their husbands killed, and as their remaining families are about to be taken away as slaves. The Greek herald

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34 Hecuba appears in Homer’s Iliad and the plays Hecuba and The Trojan Women by Euripides.
Talthybius arrives to tell the dethroned queen Hecuba (as her husband Priam is dead in the war) that she will be taken away with the Greek general Odysseus, and her daughter Cassandra is destined to become the conquering general Agamemnon’s concubine. He also informs her that Hector’s baby son, Astyanax, has been condemned to die. The Greek leaders are afraid that the boy will grow up to avenge his father Hector (Hecuba’s son), and rather than take this chance, they plan to throw him off from the battlements of Troy to his death. The widowed princess Andromache (wife of Hector) tells Hecuba that her youngest daughter, Polyxena, has been killed as a sacrifice at the tomb of the Greek warrior Achilles. After sometime Talthybius arrives again with gives the corpse of Astyanax to Hecuba, who prepares the body of her grandson for burial before she is finally taken off with Odysseus. On her way to Greece with Odysseus, they journey through Thrace, which is ruled by King Polymestor. Before the war, Hecuba had asked Polymestor to protect her son Polydorus. However, upon reaching Thrace, she finds that the king has killed the last surviving boy too. In Euripides’s another tragedy Hecuba, the ghost of Polydorus is a character, and his death is the cause of the main conflict of the play. Polydorus’ ghost presents the prologue of the play, explaining that he was sent to Thrace under the protection of King Polymestor in case Troy fell. Priam sent gold with Polydorus so that if Troy should fall, even then his son could continue to support himself. Once Troy fell, however, Polymestor killed Polydorus by throwing him into the sea and stole the gold. Polydorus laments the fact
that his body is adrift in the sea without the proper death rites (“Hecuba” mythencyclopedia.com).

Another character by Synge—Deirdre, of Deirdre of the Sorrows, is totally based on the heroine of the Ulster Cycle of Irish mythology—Deirdre, the heroine of the tale of The Sons of Usnach (pronounced us-na). Her story is one of the ‘Three Sorrowful Stories of Erin’. She was the daughter of Fedlimid, harper to King Conchubar (pronounced cona-ch-oor) of Ulster, and Cathbad the druid prophesied that her beauty would bring banishment and death to heroes. Conchubar destined her for his wife and had her brought up in solitude. But she accidentally saw and fell in love with Naoise (or Naisi; pronounced nee-sha), the son of Usnach, who with his brothers carried her off to Scotland. They were lured back by Conchubar and treacherously slain, and Deirdre took her own life. Deirdre’s tragic tale served as inspiration for poetry, plays, and stories by later Irish writers, including William Butler Yeats and J. M. Synge (Parks 216).

Deirdre, may also be compared with Helen of Troy. In Greek mythology, Helen was considered the most beautiful woman in the world. A daughter of the god Zeus and Leda, she is best known for the part she played in causing the Trojan War (a story told by Homer in the Iliad and the Odyssey). Some scholars suggest that Helen was also a very ancient goddess associated with trees and birds. We see Lavarcham saying to Conchubar, the king of Ulster, similar things about Deirdre in the play Deirdre of the Sorrows:
LAVARCHAM. I’m after serving you two score of years, and I’ll tell you this night, Conchubor, she’s little call to mind an old woman when she has the birds to school her, and the pools in the rivers where she goes bathing in the sun. I’ll tell you if you seen her that time, with her white skin, and her red lips, and the blue water and the ferns about her, you’d know, maybe, and you greedy itself, it wasn’t for your like she was born at all. (Synge, *Plays* 302)

Paris, the son of king Priam and queen Hecuba of Troy, was a handsome young prince. He eloped with Helen and this caused the Trojan War (in Deirdre’s tory, Naisi eloped with her and this resulted in his destruction). Paris seemed destined for disaster from birth. Shortly before Paris was born, his mother, Hecuba, dreamt that she gave birth to a flaming torch that destroyed Troy. Priam consulted a seer, who warned the king that the dream foretold disaster for the city. He advised Priam to have the baby killed. But the servants did not follow their order and left Paris on a mountain to die, and he was found and raised by a shepherd. Years later, Paris returned to Troy, and as predicted, he caused the city’s destruction. He began the Trojan War by taking away Helen, wife of King Menelaus of Sparta (“Trojan War” mythencyclopedia.com).

35 According to myths, the Trojan War was rooted in vanity and passion. A youth named Paris, one of the sons of king Priam of Troy, was asked to choose the fairest of three goddesses: Aphrodite, Athena, and Hera. Each goddess offered Paris a special gift if he declared her the fairest. Paris selected Aphrodite, who had promised him the most beautiful woman in the world. Aphrodite led Paris to Sparta, the home of a Greek prince named Menelaus. Helen, the wife of Menelaus, was considered the world’s most beautiful woman. Paris fell in love with Helen and carried her off to Troy. Menelaus asked his brother King Agamemnon to lead the princes and warriors of Greece against Troy to recover Helen and to punish the Trojans. The Greeks built a large hollow horse out of wood and hid in it to get
Deirdre was also aware of a prophecy that she will be the doom of the sons of Usna. Cathbad, the druid, told Fedlimid about the future of his daughter.

“... I see by Druid signs that it is on account of a daughter belonging to you, that more blood will be shed than ever was shed in Ireland since time and race began. And great heroes and bright candles of the Gad will lose their lives because of her.”... “For all that,” said Cathbad, “I am certain of its truth, for I can see it all clearly in my own mind.” (Gregory 105)

Deirdre asks Naisi (son of Usna, Deirdre’s lover) to take her away from Ulster. He agrees, and Ainnle (brother of Naisi) weds them in an impromptu ceremony. Conchubor (the king who had charged Lavarcham to raise Deirdre to be his queen) and Naisi go to join the fray and Naisi is killed. Fergus and his men arrive, enraged by the king’s treachery, and set Emain Macha ablaze like Troy. Lavarcham tries to convince Deirdre to flee Ulster, and Conchubor tries to take her to a different castle, but she stays and mourns her dead lover and his brothers. In the end, Deirdre takes Naisi’s dagger, stabs herself, and falls into his open grave, leaving Conchubor with nothing.

The protagonist of *The Well of the Saints*, Martin Doul can be symbolically compared with the hero of Fenian Cycle, Oisin in few aspects. In Celtic mythology, Oisin (pronounced uh-sheen) was a great warrior poet and the son of Finn, leader of a warrior band known as the Fianna (pronounced fee-uh-nuh). Legend says that as a man, Oisin met Niamh (pronounced nee-uhv), daughter of the sea god Manannan Mac Lir through the gates of Troy. Once inside, the Greeks set fire to the city and defeated the Trojans.
pronounced muh-nah-nahn makleer). She invited him to visit her father’s kingdom of ‘Tir Na Nog,’ the ‘Land of Ever Young’. He spent all his youth there but did not grow old. After what seemed to him like just a few years (while in reality he must be very old by then), Oisin grew homesick and asked if he might visit Ireland. Niamh agreed and sent him back on horseback, warning him not to touch the ground or he would never be able to return to ‘Tir Na Nog’. However, Oisin slipped out of his saddle while helping some men lift a stone. When he fell to the ground, he instantly became blind, white-haired old man. Martin, like Oisin, also ‘slips’ from the paradise of illusions and ‘falls’ to face the reality. Martin and Mary Doul are two blind beggars who have been falsely led to believe by the townsfolk that they are handsome, when in fact they are old and ugly. A saint cures them of their blindness with water from a holy well, and they are disgusted by each other at first sight. Martin goes to work for Timmy the smith and tries to seduce his betrothed, Molly, but she rejects him, and Timmy sends him away to suffer without work and money. Both Mary and he lose their sight again, and when the saint returns to wed Timmy and Molly, Martin refuses his offer to cure their blindness again. To him, in spite of having eyes, life makes one ‘slip’ everyday because of its harsh realities. The world in blindness is far more pleasant for him, like Oisin’s ‘Tir Na Nog,’ the Land of Ever Young, where he can live in dreamy illusions of youth.

TIMMY [seen blinking in doorway]. Is it turning now you are against your sight?
MARTIN DOUL [very miserably], It’s a hard thing for a man to have his sight, and he living near to the like of you [he cuts a stick and throws it away], or wed with a wife [cuts a stick]; and I do be thinking it should be a hard thing for the Almighty God to be looking on the world, bad days, and on men the like of yourself walking around on it, and they slipping each way in the muck.

MARTIN DOUL. There’s not a bit of fear of me losing my sight, and if it’s a dark day itself it’s too well I see every wicked wrinkle you have round by your eye.

(Synge, Plays 89)

Christy Mahon, in The Playboy of the Western World, shares few heroic attributes of the famous Irish folkloric figure, Cuchulain. But these attributes should be considered quasi-heroic or mock-heroic because of Christy’s false claims about his bravery. Cuchulain is one of the principal heroes of the Ulster Cycle of Irish mythology, the nephew of Conchubar, king of Ulster. His birth was miraculous, and he showed his strength and prowess at an early age. While still a child he killed the terrible watchdog of the smith Culain and compensated the owner by undertaking to guard his house in the dog’s place, whence the name of Cuchulain, signifying ‘Culain’s hound’. Of his numerous feats of valour, which won him the love of many women, the chief was his defence of Ulster, single-handed, against Medb (pronounced maeve), queen of Connaught, who attacked it in order to carry off the Brown Bull of Cuailgne (pronounced coo-ley). Cuchulain was killed, aged twenty-seven, by Lugaid, son of a king of Ulster, and the daughters of Calatin the wizard, in vengeance for their fathers whom Cuchulain had slain.
In *The Playboy of the Western World*, Synge had remodelled a scene in the life of Cuchulain. In the epic, the hero underwent a ‘battle rage’ after fighting, which so terrified his comrades that they would not permit him to re-enter the city of Emain Macha. Eventually, they solved the problem in a different way; thirty virgins were sent naked across the plain of Macha, walking towards the hero. Being a bashful lad, he blushed, bowed low, and, so the manuscripts say, with that his battle rage left him. But this scene turns against Synge’s Playboy-Christy. Rage turned to riot when Christy voiced his love for the publican’s daughter Pegeen:

CHRISTY. It’s Pegeen I’m seeking only and what’d I care if you brought me a drift of chosen females, standing in their shifts itself maybe, from this place to the eastern world? (Synge, *Plays* 286)

Synge had clad the maidens of Mayo in shifts, presumably to mollify strict moralists among his Abbey audience. But despite all this, the very thought of sending scantily clad females to Christy, became even more inflammatory to the male puritans than one who is wholly naked. The similarity between *The Playboy of the Western World* and a story from Lady Gregory’s *Cuchulain of Muirtherrne* is unmistakable: the people were so frightened of Cuchulain’s battle madness that they “sent out three fifties of the women . . . red-naked to meet him. When the boy saw them coning there was shame on him . . . and the wildness went out of him” (Gregory 21). Yet another parallel presents itself in Christy’s borrowing a suit to participate in the local games; Cuchulain wins the Championship of Ulster in a borrowed suit of armour. The three prizes that Christy wins, a
blackthorn, a fiddle, and a bagpipe, evoke the three titles bestowed on Cuchulain at the championship of Ulster—the head of warriors (symbolized by the blackthorn), the head of poets (symbolised by a fiddle played by the poets), and the head of musicians (the bagpipe).

Christy is sometimes called mock-Oedipus and mock-Christ too. Oedipus (ed-uh-puhs) was a tragic hero of Greek mythology. He was born to King Laius (pronounced lay-uhs) and Queen Jocasta (pronounced joh-kas-tuh) of Thebes (pronounced theebz). The oracle at Delphi (pronounced del-fye), who could communicate directly with the gods, told Laius and Jocasta that their child would grow up to murder Laius and marry Jocasta. The horrified king fastened the infant’s feet together with a large pin and left him on a mountainside to die. However, shepherds found the baby—who became known as Oedipus, or “swollen foot”—and took him to the city of Corinth. There King Polybus (pronounced pol-uh-buhs) and Queen Merope (pronounced mer-uhpee) adopted him and raised him as their own son. When Oedipus grew up, someone told him that he was not the son of Polybus. Oedipus went to Delphi to ask the oracle about his parentage. The answer he received was that he was fated to murder his father and marry his mother. Like Laius and Jocasta, Oedipus was determined to avoid the fate predicted for him. Believing that the oracle had said he was fated to kill Polybus and marry Merope, he vowed never to return to Corinth. Instead, he headed toward Thebes. Along the way, Oedipus came to a narrow road between cliffs. There he met an older man in a chariot coming from the
other way. The two quarrelled over who should give way, and Oedipus killed the stranger and went on to Thebes. He found the city in great distress. He learned that a monster called the Sphinx was terrorizing the dwellers of Thebes by devouring them when they failed to answer its riddle, and that king Laius had been murdered on his way to seek help from the Delphic oracle. Oedipus solved the riddle of the Sphinx and won the throne of the dead king and the hand in marriage of the king’s widow, Jocasta. Oedipus and Jocasta lived happily for a time and had four children. Then a dreadful plague came upon Thebes. A prophet declared that the plague would not end until the Thebans drove out Laius’s murderer, who was within the city. A messenger then arrived from Corinth, announcing the death of king Polybus and asking Oedipus to return and rule the Corinthians. Oedipus told Jocasta what the oracle had predicted for him and expressed relief that the danger of his murdering Polybus was past. Jocasta told him not to fear oracles, for the oracle had said that her first husband would be killed by his own son, and instead he had been murdered by a stranger on the road to Delphi. Suddenly Oedipus remembered that fatal encounter on the road and knew that he had met and killed his real father, Laius. At the same time, Jocasta realised that the scars on Oedipus’s feet marked him as the baby whose feet Laius had pinned together so long ago. Faced with the fact that she had married her own son and the murderer of Laius, she hanged herself. Oedipus seized a pin from her dress and blinded himself with it.
In *The Playboy of the Western World*, Christy tells Widow Quin that his father wanted him to marry a widow who nursed him when he was a child.

CHRISTY [*getting almost excited*]. I did not. ‘I won’t wed her,’ says I, ‘when all know she did suckle me for six weeks when I came into the world, and she a hag this day with a tongue on her has the crows and seabirds scattered, the way they wouldn’t cast a shadow on her garden with the dread of her curse.’ (Synge, *Collected Plays* 169)

In a way, Christy also ‘kills’ his father like Oedipus had killed Laius; and like Oedipus’s wedding with Jocasta, Christy, too, was supposed to marry his ‘mother’ who suckled him in infancy. The main action in *The Playboy of the Western World*, may be seen as the mockery of the ancient Greek play *Oedipus the King* by Sophocles. Oedipus, however, unknowingly killed his father and married his mother while Christy knows all about his family in *The Playboy of the Western World*.

In due course of the play, Christy Mahon’s conception of self also enlarges, thus, making his speech more lyrical and richer in associations. This contributes to the development of a pattern of biblical imagery. Christy turns into a Christ-figure.

Ultimately Christy becomes a Christ-figure. In his “love-talk” with Pegeen he refers prophetically to Good Friday, when, he says, his poetry will be something very special indeed. His own Good Friday is imminent and, like Shakespeare’s Richard II, he is betrayed by all the people. At least subconsciously he seems to appreciate his own role as a Christ-figure. This is almost too obvious in an early draft of *The Playboy* where he says, “Oh let you wed me Widow Quin for the love and kindness of the holy Christy” (IV, 333) . . . . Still, he is a kind of savior, at least for as long as Pegeen believes in the myth. She could have married a rich Jew, she
says, “and I not knowing at all there was the like of you drawing nearer like the stars of God” (IV, 151). The Mayoites finally lose their faith in Christy, but in basing their belief on the essentially unimportant act described by him when he first comes to the village they are as guilty as Judas Iscariot or Pontius Pilate. “Societies get the leaders they deserve,” Robin Skelton suggests, “and Christy Mahon is more fitted for Mayo than Christ Messiah, but even Christy is betrayed.

(Edwards 8-18)

Towards the end of his plays, all his characters behave like people of high esteem. We see Maurya’s premonition materialised; Deirdre’s life struck by misfortune; Pageen’s only hope in ‘the playboy’ withered; the Douls again blinded; Sarah remained unsuccessful in her attempt to get married; Nora is taken out of her husband’s house to struggle; but these characters come up as heroes for they practice uncompromising will. They do what they want to and accept the consequences their fate has in store for them. Sometimes, J. M. Synge, is thought to have overdone with the accent of peasants, but one can say that to celebrate the poetic tone as the voice of gods, he again honoured his Irish characters and elevated them to the stature of gods.

To justify the fact that Synge did make use of the Irish mythology in his plays, and thus contributed a lot in the Celtic Revival but, in his own unique way, the present study is an attempt to interpret the myths and folklores as happen to be present in his plays. But unlike others, his plays are not just wholly based on the mythic structure. To portray reality, Synge uses mythological motifs of the peasants as they are. The theme of The Well of the Saints is highly fantastic, and Deirdre of the Sorrows is based on an Irish legendary character. Riders to the Sea is famous for Maurya’s vision
and *The Playboy of the Western World* appears to be a parody of great ancient myths. Except for his last, unfinished play, however, Synge did not choose to employ a myth-structure which was readily available and had already served dramatists like Yeats. He was not willing to sacrifice, even in *Deirdre of the Sorrows*, unique, individual, psychological drama for something “Cuchulainoid” or “spring-dayish”. Unlike Yeats and AE, Synge does not romanticise the theme and carries it to the atmosphere of dream-land. She is a heroine of real life, full of passions and real blood and last of all she too struggles helplessly against fate like any other character in Synge’s plays. Myth is never permitted to obscure the drama of the individual in Synge’s plays. It is incorporated, as it were, into an individual’s conscious or intuitive being. He believed that the Irish Theatre should not be based wholly upon mythology and fantasy. He wrote to Stephen MacKenna:

> I do not believe in the possibility of ‘a purely fantastic, unmodern, ideal, breezy, spring-dayish, Cuchulainoid National Theatre’. . . no drama can grow out of anything other than the fundamental realities of life which are never fantastic, are neither modern nor unmodern and, as I see them, rarely spring-dayish, or breezy or Cuchulainoid. (Greene and Stephens 157)

The present thesis attempts to assert that the common Irish islander’s belief in mythology and folklore is firm and its significance in Synge’s plays cannot be negated. He definitely believed in the effects of such events on a ‘prepared personality’. By the phrase ‘prepared personality’ one can understand that Synge himself, just like any Irish islander, heard so much
about these paranormal things (which we may call either superstitions or myths) that his personality, in a way, prepares itself to feel those things. His study of the occult and fairy faith of the islanders prepared his mind to get premonitions of these supernatural beings. He, in his autobiographical notes had written about his experience one evening when he was sitting near a valley in County Wicklow:

. . . wreaths of white mist began to rise from the narrow bogs beside the river. Before it was quite dark I looked round the edge of the field and saw two immense luminous eyes looking at me from the base of the valley. I dropped my net and caught hold of a gate in front of me. Behind the eyes there rose a black sinister forehead. I was fascinated. For a moment the eyes seemed to consume my personality, then the whole valley became filled with a pageant of movement and colour, and the opposite hillside covered itself with ancient doorways and spires and high turrets. I did not know where or when I was existing. At last someone spoke in the lane behind me—it was a man going home—and I came back to myself. The night had become quite dark and the eyes were no longer visible, yet I recognised in a moment what had caused the apparition—two clearings in a wood lined with white mist divided again by a few trees which formed the eye-balls. For many days afterwards I could not look on these fields even in daylight without terror. It would not be easy to find a better instance of the origin of local superstitions, which have their origin not in some trivial accident of colour but in the fearful and genuine hypnotic influence such things possess upon a prepared personality. (qtd. in Skelton 8)

For example Nicholas Grene, in his book *Synge: A Critical Study of the Plays*, opines that the dissenting view of Malcom Pittock about the success of *Riders to the Sea* hovers at the impractical use of Maurya’s vision in the play because she believes that it will be fulfilled. Grene says that Pittock talks about the non-serious attitude of the modern audience towards such superstition which causes this play to be a failure. Grene opines,
The play does not fail in the way Pittock suggests, but his article is helpful in making us consider why it should succeed. How does Synge make us believe in a central incident which in cold blood we might call folk-superstition? Why does the vision not interfere with our sense of the reality of the drama? Why ultimately does a play concerned with a life which is alien and peripheral to our experience engage us with an immediate and profound sense of tragedy? (Grene 202)

This view adds to a typical Syngean style of using a myth in a manner that its supernatural elements subtly appear to be natural. Skelton says that the personality of Synge, by 1898 was, “almost fully prepared to respond to experience in this imaginative fashion. He had felt the agony of belief and the agony of doubt” (8).

Early in his life Synge averted his thoughts from church and chose to study the occult but he kept reading Bible for its aesthetic appeal. Synge’s interest in the occult practices, dreams, premonitions and visions helped him to understand the fairy lore of the country people. Synge never interfered with the views of his characters which were delineated on the basis of real primitive community because their experiences provided the best test to reality. The people were nearer to the primary truth because they were closer to nature. Synge’s doubts in these beliefs were not devoid of, to some extent, his own deeply-felt beliefs in such intuitive experiences of the islanders. Synge may have a perspective similar to that of Evans-Wentz who has made a careful personal investigation of the surviving Celtic fairy-Faith by living for many months with and among the people who preserve it:
These experiences of mine lead me to believe that the natural aspects of Celtic countries, much more than those of most non-Celtic countries, impress man and awaken in him some unfamiliar part of himself—call it the Subconscious Self, the Subliminal Self, the Ego, or what you will—which gives him an unusual power to know and to feel invisible, or psychical, influences. What is there, for example, in London, or Paris, or Berlin, or New York to awaken the intuitive power of man, that sub-consciousness deep-hidden in him, equal to the solitude of those magical environments of Nature which the Celts enjoy and love? . . .

The great majority of men in cities are apt to pride themselves on their own exemption from ‘superstition’, and to smile pityingly at the poor countrymen and countrywomen who believe in fairies. But when they do so they forget that, with all their own admirable progress in material invention, with all the far-reaching data of their acquired science, with all the vast extent of their commercial and economic conquests, they themselves have ceased to be natural.

(Evans-Wentz xxii)

While dabbling in folklore, theosophy and magic Synge attended lectures by the Celtic mythological scholar Professor M. D’Arbois de Jubainville. In his first visit to the Aran Islands he was more impressed by the pre-Christian pagan myths and folklore, the reminiscences of which were still evident in the speech and stories of the Aran people which one may find in Synge’s accounts in his book length journal *The Aran Islands*. When Yeats later classified Synge as a “primary” man, he was saying that his friend’s muse had inspired an “objective” type of drama (Stengel 163-68).

Irish peasants are a vehicle in conveying old Celtic myths because they are the modern practitioners of what had existed before. As their beliefs are still the same, their counterparts in Synge’s plays do justify the usage of old mythical beliefs and folklore of Ireland. Thus one may conclude that Synge has made ample use of Celtic-Irish mythology in his
plays with the help of his peasant characters and in doing so he has made a successful attempt to revive Celtic mythology. As Donna Gerstenberger writes, "There is nothing, that is extraneous; there is nothing that is without meaning in a total pattern . . ." (Gerstenberger 45)
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