A grim figure with an ironic disposition and a poetic temperament entered the temple of mystery and beauty raised by the Irish Dramatic Movement, disturbing its peace and tranquillity. That was J.M. Synge. His puckish sense of mischief and fantasy firmly rooted in an uncanny grasp of reality brought into the Irish theatre an amazing vitality and energy. Synge shook people by the sheer reality of his mind, by the strange unrealistic reality of his ear and of his method, by the relentless rich reality of his solitude. He completely changed the shape of Irish dramatic writing. His Ireland is neither factual nor fictitious, but a product of the creative dynamics coming to terms with actuality. The life that he has depicted is constricted and primitive on the outermost edge of Europe, which was fast fading out even when he was writing. By his sincerity, integrity and his zestful delight in human character, he has been able to repossess the experience and express it imaginatively out of that obscure romantic outpost of the Western World.

Synge is least concerned with the success or the

failure in the lives of men. His interest lies in the existential rather than the historical aspects of their situation. His concern has been that wild solitude of earth and sky which lies beyond them, not merely as an ambience but as an active presence. As he says in his poem, 'Prelude', in his conversation with the mountains, moors and fens, human words are but a part of the larger vocabulary of Nature or its more comprehensive discourse:

Still south I went and west and south again,
Through Wicklow from the morning till the night,
And far from cities, and the sights of men,
Lived with the sunshine, and the moon's delight.

I knew the stars, the flowers, and the birds,
The grey and wintry sides of many glens,
And did but half remember human words,
In converse with the mountains, moors, and fens.

Synge succeeds as a dramatist by his poetic power. He is master of the poetic emotion which he can skilfully harmonize with character and action. He has the poetic sense of rhythm and harmony, balance and restraint which a dramatist should show himself capable of, if he wants to succeed. The excellence with which Synge communicates through dramatic and poetic imagery the fundamental realities of human life with special significance to a particular community, his sympathetic understanding of human nature and beauty and significance of nature in general mark him out as

\[\text{Ibid.}, \text{p. 232}\]
one of the greatest dramatists.

From his mother, a devout, Protestant Ulster-woman, with strong Evangelical views and pungent expression, Synge inherited his ascetic nature, his strict adherence to 'truth', his joy in 'the living phrase,' and his discrimination of the creative tension between the real and the fanciful. Though himself an agnostic, his evangelical upbringing had left a deep mark on him. This again is one of the antinomies of his life, which however operates in his work as a creative paradox. Being an agnostic he should have distrusted everything beyond the material world and that of senses, but with a pagan disposition he attaches importance to the spiritual and the transcendental. The influence of Maeterlinck with whom he stayed for sometime was an important causative force behind his dramatic work. A combination of robust realism with profound mysticism makes him a romantic realist, a poet seeking what suffices his vision, his experience and what in reality matches his profound sense of life. Drama for him was the discovery of artistic joy that affixes the beam to the lamp, the agony of being man to the radical mystery of existence. As J.W. Marriott points out:

Synge was essentially a poet, an artist, a musician; and he had the genius to create beauty in dramatic form.

What makes him a great poet is the 'untranslatableness' of his style and its emotional inevitability.

Synge once said to Yeats:

A man has to bring up his family and be as virtuous as is compatible with so doing, and if he does more than that he is a puritan; a dramatist has to express his subject and to find as much beauty as is compatible with that, and if he does more he is an aesthete. 4

So he has been consciously objective; but his objectivity is only formal. He creates the images of his mind, as though they were created by some other mind; but they project in essence the desires of his own heart. To escape from the squalor of the poor and the nullity of the rich, he went to the Aran Islands only to find among those forgotten people 'a mirror for his own bitterness,' 5 The emotional part of his mind' is deadened and stagnant, while the intellectual part is a clear mirror-like achievement. 6 The dialect that he uses enables him to be an outsider to his own subjective consciousness and lets his intellect judge the images of his mind objectively, for the simple reason that it is not his own language. So in a way he seeks to escape from personality through his artistic impersonality. The dramatic language

4 cit. W.B.Yeats, Autobiographies, p. 545.
5 W.B.Yeats, Explorations, p. 418
6 W.B.Yeats, op.cit., p. 345.
helps him to achieve self-actualization, though he uses it as a mask as well as objective correlative. The fiery and tender imagination of his people chimes with his own. Their love of life, their preoccupation with the thought of death, their acceptance of harsh, ugly and surprising facts, their adoption of despair and frustration as a way of life, and courage and endurance as a code of conduct were absorbed into his own shaping vision. Even their synthetic language is something like his double-stock, the Anglo-Irish stock.

The Deirdre legend underscored for him the solitude of the heroic individual who, having exercised the freedom of choice, must risk his humanity and pay the extreme price for not compromising his selfhood in the quest for meaning and happiness. In fact, he himself, like a true tragic figure went down fighting against public opinion in defending the integrity of his art. He was uncompromising in his attitude to art in that he refused to present figures and facts that would agree with the prevailing political and social views and values. He revolted against custom and conventionality and refused to be enslaved by the categorical imperatives of a philistine and institutionalized morality. In his attempt to transcend conventionalism and be independent of a sterile, moribund tradition, he had to wage a relentless war against a custom-ridden society which hastened his death by aggravating his physical and psychological tensions.
Synge perceives his human figures in a double focus as at once comic and tragic, gentle and violent, real and fanciful, ludicrous and pathetic. This dialectical sensibility sustained him in accepting life as a mingled yarn of pain and joy. He had been fighting death and had even a foreknowledge of his death. But he was cheerful to the end and even in that state he could be jocular, as though watching somebody else dying. The attitude in art became the attitude in life. Yeats describes him as 'a sick man picturing energy, a doomed man picturing gaiety.'

Synge's life itself was a mixture of comedy and tragedy. When Yeats met him in Paris in 1896, he was a poor man, walking the roads fiddling to poor men, with very little to keep himself away from starvation. His life was not different from that of another Irish genius, Oliver Goldsmith. The figure of the future genius, walking the country roads and fiddling to the poor is ridiculously pathetic. If this was how the cosmic eye saw him, then he applied the model of the divine comedy to his own artistic creation. His involvement in the created world of his Aran folk as well as his aesthetic distance from it sprang from an eclectic detachment which held the duality of experience and the unity of existence in perfect balance.

Synge is not without his detractors. On the one
hand, there are those who support and admire him, led by W.B. Yeats who compares him with the classical Greek dramatists:

I have discovered, on reading Synge's first two plays, The Shadow of the Glen and Riders to the Sea, for the Irish National Theatre Society, a man who has the qualities of Aeschylus and Sophocles combined.

William Archer and Max Beerbohm lavish on him heroic praise.

Sir Walter Raleigh places him even above Shaw:

If you want to read a great living English author, read Thomas Hardy.
If you want to read an author twenty times Bernard Shaw's imagination, in dealing with Ireland, read J.M. Synge.

On the other hand, there were many who condemned his plays at the time of their performance for being unIrish and obscene.

When The Playboy of the Western World was performed, the audience called Synge 'decadent.' The Shadow of the Glen was criticized by the audience for its presentation of an unfaithful wife as the representative of the Irish woman.

The man who sat behind Yeats at the performance of The Well of the Saints kept repeating 'blasphemy, blasphemy, more

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12 Ibid., p. 143.
blasphemy. Arthur Griffith, founder of Sinn Fein Movement was a constant slanderer of Synge. Apart from these, there are critics who denounce him for his language. St. John Ervine takes exception to his language as fake peasant speech. Though Eliot agrees that Synge was lucky to have found a poetic but common language suitable to poetic drama, he seemed to have thought with Virginia Woolf that he devalued the language. Virginia Woolf, another of Synge's denigrators, says that James-Joyce, Sachervelle and 'Singe (sic) have all devalued English language.'

But Robert Lynd stresses the need for a reappraisal of Synge and observes:

There can never be any true criticism of Synge until we have got rid of all these obsessions and idolatries. Synge was an extraordinary man of genius, but he was not an extraordinary great man of genius. He is not a peer of Shakespeare; he is not the peer of Shelley; he is the peer, say of Stevenson. He was a byway, not a high road of genius.

This seems to imply that Synge's dramatic output is small and the range of his plays narrow and limited, Synge's active

13 Ibid., p. 302.
16 Ibid.
writing extended over a period of only six years and in a way he was a committed writer, committed to the paganism of a primitive community. But in Synge's plays, the locative impulse was a limit, rather than a limitation and within the clearly defined canvas he achieved a luminous concentration and depth. He exploited to the full all the potentialities which that life had offered both by way of content and language, leaving nothing for others to do in that specified miniscular world thoroughly mapped out. In Riders to the Sea he has given the very essence of their tragic life, while in The Playboy of the Western World, the comic and the savage elements of that life are thoroughly projected. The last play, Deirdre of the Sorrows, despite its uncrystallized form, has an almost embarrassing richness of sensibility and a disturbing vitality and power of attraction. His plays do show a master's hand in the presentation of an effective dramatic situation in a poetic language, intense and highly evocative. As a dramatist he ranks above his contemporaries in his sensitive but 'profound common interests of life.'

From the local particulars he drew the force of the concrete universals.

Synge's regionalism has no touch of the provincial or

18Andrew E. Malone, sp. cit., p. 156.
the chauvinistic, and he eschews all political and social controversy. He uses peasant themes and motifs to specify and concretize his sense of the fundamental realities of life in a language that is richly poetic, yet simple, always firmly controlled by the shaping vision. The aspirations and disappointments of the Aran folk are not peculiar to them alone but they are universal conditions. Synge's projection of this life and experience involves a combination of a fiery-pointed objectivity and a sensitive poetic realism. The plays do not present any difficulties in understanding, and even their legendary, mythic, archetypal or personal content is self-enacting and needs no special pleading. There is little preciousness in theme and they have the kind of transparent lucency that characterizes the life and conduct of his unsophisticated people whose passions and agonies and joys are primeval and elemental.

Had Synge lived longer, he might have achieved greater things and, perhaps, chosen subjects with a wider scope and range and complexity. But it is only a conjecture. As P.P. Howe says,\(^1^9\) he should be judged not by the width but by the intensity which, according to Oscar Wilde, is the aim of all the arts. To give the reality of a life which is always complex, often dull and quotidian, but in a speech which

\(^{1^9}\)P.P. Howe, *J.M. Synge - A Critical Study*, p. 213
should be living and yet capable of pleasure is one of the major problems of the modern dramatist. The latter is also concerned with the problem of giving this reality a form and structure that should be both comprehensive and natural. Synge offered his own solution by achieving a balance as well as a tension between the poetry of reality and the reality of poetry, between naturalism and mysticism, between, what one might say the tragic and the comic modes of viewing man's finitude and possibility.

It is very difficult to classify Synge in terms of any particular 'ism', for he combines and exceeds all by a sensibility which may be described as eclectic detachment, or negative capability. Though all his plays are in the naturalistic convention, Synge goes beyond it in his search for an artistic equivalent for the mystery and the reality of existence. If Naturalism is a description of style and Realism of content, his plays are at once naturalistic and realistic. But the alternatives of Naturalism are Expressionism and poetic drama and those of Realism, fantasy and melodrama. In so far as an element of fantasy intrudes upon realism in his plays, they are anti-realistic. But in the sense that Synge seeks to extract the poetic content of the life and language of a vividly realized community, his plays tend to be anti-naturalistic. At the same time,
Expressionism of the Strindbergian variety represents the states of mind several cuts below the behavioural surface, dispensing with the logical sequence of time, place and action, concerning itself with consequence and consciousness. Synge's *Riders to the Sea* accomplishes in a rich measure this kind of metarealistic integration. Synge, by remaining faithful to the summons of his own genius and sensibility, strikes a creative mean between dramatic reduction and augmentation. The *Playboy of the Western World*, in the comic mode and *Deirdre of the Sorrows* in the tragic, bear ample evidence of such an imaginative synthesis.