CHAPTER VI

The Tinker's Wedding: Theatre, Physical and Grotesque

The Tinker's Wedding, published in 1908 and produced only posthumously, marks a definite transition in the creative development of Synge as a playwright. In a sense this is the only comedy by the author with no tinge of sorrow. The Shadow of the Glen has a serious point of marital separation as the theme. Riders to the Sea is a sober play all through. The Playboy of the Western World and The Well of the Saints leave the audience deeply troubled and provoked. Deirdre of the Sorrows, the last play, is a major tragedy by Synge. In comparison with these, The Tinker's Wedding does not take the audience far away into lyrical flights of philosophical moods suggesting the fundamental issues and moral dilemma of man. It keeps the audience rooted to their background recalling the rich tradition of revelry, comics, improvisation, spontaneity and harmless joviality in theatre demanding great "alertness of the players and the response of the audience."1

Here Synge is experimenting with some new elements of stagecraft which demand more involvement and physical activity on stage arising from the given situation. These elements are

more suited to farce than to comedy because comedy depends on
the study of characters and their attempts to be witty. "The
appeal of farce is therefore primarily visual and sensuous,
that of comedy, auditory and intellectual."² The physical
vigour, spontaneity and revelry of the farcical events enthral
the audience in an excitedly pleasant atmosphere. The slow,
dignified and measured movements of the ritualistic Riders to
the Sea give way to quicker movements, pungent "sticks,"
bitterness and iconoclasm in The Tinker's Wedding. It is
funny, "crude and subtle, slavering from an unquenchable
appetite for life."³

As is pointed out by Una Ellis-Fermor, Synge is a
playwright of genuine poetic intensity in all his plays, both
tragic and comic.⁴ Even the classification of tragedy
and comedy is unwarranted because all his plays are serious
works of art blending the aesthetic and emotional moods of man.
The mood may vary. It may be jovial, gloomy, hilarious and
comic. Whatever be the state of mind the peculiar
characteristic of the leading figures of the plays is the
intensity, strength, and force with which that particular mood
is expressed. The Tinker's Wedding is self explanatory from
this point of view.

² John Gassner and Edward Quinn, ed., The Reader's
Encyclopaedia of World Drama (1970; rpt. London: Methuen, 1975),
p. 262.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Una Ellis-Fermor, The Irish Dramatic Movement (London:
Methuen, 1977), p. 163.
The play is an artistic expression of a particular mood. The first act is set on a village road after nightfall. The second act takes place on the same scene. It is early morning. The mood of the play is presented against the "movement of May." As Sara Casey herself tells us, "spring-time is a queer time, and it's queer thoughts maybe I do think at whiles" (Plays, II, p. 7). This is in answer to Michael's genuine doubt, "What is it ails you since the moon did change?" (Plays, II, p. 7). This dialogue emphasizes a particular impact of nature on the homeless rustics living in harmony with nature. Their emotions change or get excited on the rise of the moon almost like the waves of the sea. This lunar influence on the sensuous and sensual passions is expressed here in very strong terms.

It is an earthy vision, with a strong folk affinity. It recognizes the instinct to reinstate the rights of the body beside those of the mind, and to allow them priority over reason. It also recognizes that this instinct is ineradicable because it is hinged with the vital regenerative and degenerative processes of birth and death, processes over which the mind and reason have no ultimate control.\(^{5}\)

Hence there is no harm in describing The Tinker's Wedding as a grotesque play.

The grotesque play exhibits all the qualities of creativity and imagination provoked. The characters must be behaving in

a way absolutely abnormal in the eyes of the normal people. The normal public have a sense of order, system, purpose and values. Their mind is conditioned by the drab and common practice imposed upon them by conventions. They do not pause to doubt or ask a question. They accept and do not think, for a moment, of creative feedback. An artist of Synge's calibre also appears to be abnormal, deviating from the normal way of thinking and working. He is quite at home in the company of his characters chosen from the world of imagination. Thus the characters of The Tinker's Wedding must be taken as the creations distilled from his experiences with the lowest rung of society. When the mind is creatively provoked they come out with great vigour and strength displaying the qualities of the body and its sensuous movement for the audience.

The Tinker's Wedding is a grotesque comedy which has all the projection and force of body and imagination. The very title gives a twist of the comic to a spectator or a reader who knows the "marital" life of the tinkers who are not very serious about marriage as the rest of the society understands it. Even Michael fails to understand the reason why his wife, Sarah Casey, is bothered about going to church and getting married because they have already got children:

You to be going beside me a great while, and rearing a lot of them, and then to be setting off with your talk of getting married, and your driving me to it, and I not asking it at all (Plays, II, p.7) is the key point of the play. Its theme is the nourishment on which our imagination lives. Here Sarah Casey's imagination
lives on certain fantastic ideas influenced by the lunar forces. She must have started feeling that she is growing old and losing her charm and beauty. She may want that to be renewed and a new marital life to be started. To live the period of one's life one has already lived through is absolutely unimaginable. Sarah Casey is happily trying for the impossible. If the impossible does not take place she will think of another impossibility to regain that lively and sensual period of youth with the young Jaunting Jim. She tells Michael teasingly:

> It's at the dawn of day I do be thinking I'd have a right to be going off to the rich tinkers do be travelling from Tibradden to the Tara Hill; for it'd be a fine life to be driving with young Jaunting Jim, where there wouldn't be any big hills to break the back of you, with walking up and walking down. *(Plays, II, p. 9)*

Michael as well as the audience is astonished and he himself tells her that she is mad. This is the state of her mind which is very much influenced by the change of season. The idea of a tinker mother's marriage is striking and it is all the more exciting to know of a priest who stipulates the condition that he must be given some money and a tin can made by the tinkers. What Synge wants is joy and good humour, dramatically created out of the situations in the play, without seeking to "exclude the negative aspects of men and his life from art." 6

In the play two classes are brought together. They are incompatible and incongruous in nature and mood. The class

of the tinkers and that of the priest can never be clubbed together for drinking or any other social gathering. The dramatic genius of Synge has brought them together on par with each other as if they belong to the same group. The priest himself is made to drink by Mary Byrne who takes delight in this humorous situation. The priest in the drunken mood of resignation turns inward and sighs gloomily asking,

> what would you do if it was the like of myself you were, saying Mass with your mouth dry, and running east and west for a sick call maybe, and hearing the rural people again and they saying their sins? (Plays, II, p. 19)

None can help laughing aloud at the complaints of the priest. And at the same time the audience feel great sympathy for him. Mary pats him on the knee with comforting words. The priest's prayer is also brought down from its serious, classical, resonant and religious purpose. If the priest says a prayer, she promises: "I'll give you my blessing and the last sup from the jug" (Plays, II, p. 21). An old tinker woman blessing the holy father is typical of Synge's humour and twist of dramatic situations.

The audience can feel a clear sense of social incongruity in the characters and situations in the play. The comic effect of The Tinker's Wedding mostly lies in this incongruity or contradiction. Mary, Sarah, and Michael seem to respect the ideal priesthood. But now the animality in their character comes out and conquers the situation thereby mixing the sacred and the profane. Sarah Casey comes closer to respecting the position
and function of the priest. She has an idea of the refinement a married woman can enjoy in society. At the same time when she gets angry with Michael she teases him saying that she would run off with the young Jaunting Jim. The contradiction in situations also occurs repeatedly. "The acceptance of contradiction is essentially an ambivalent attitude, and Synge's humour is accordingly ambivalent."7 The last sequence of getting the priest into the sack is only a culmination of many farcical incidents.

As regards the spectators, *The Tinker's Wedding* has a special theatrical quality and comic appeal because it has elements of pure comedy, satire and romance. Unlike the traditional forms these elements cannot be separated without disfiguring the structure and form of the play. It has a primitive exuberance of revelry and joviality out of which comic appeal is created. Synge believes that gaiety is a divine impulse peculiar to humanity. The physical vitality, the enjoyment of the characters and their merry struggle to go on living and sharing the pleasures of life are conventionally considered qualities of good comedy. Sarah Casey and her mother-in-law vie with each other for mirth and happiness. Every moment is festive for them and the rhythm of this vitality, mirth, and festivity inspires the plot of *The Tinker's Wedding*.

Marriage game

The festive mood is the dominating mood of the play which appears to be a game. Whether consciously or not, all the characters participate in it. It is a common technique of Synge to use the idea of a game as the inner structure of a comedy. The Tinker's Wedding, for example, is purely a game of marriage. On a fine moon-lit night Sarah feels excited over her marriage to be solemnized by the priest conveniently available at hand. Michael himself has made a ring for the purpose. The tin can which he has been making is reserved as a present for the priest. Like two children engaged in a game they approach the priest who also joins the game. Like a vainglorious "big boy" the priest prescribes certain conditions which are agreed to by Sarah Casey. Michael is quite sluggish and slow in this game. He only says "yes" to every thing initiated by the more powerful and decisive Sarah. Now the ground is set for the game. The three "children," Sarah Casey, and Michael on one side and the priest on the other are happy to have the final part of their game played next morning. For any game to be exciting and challenging enough there should be an antagonist who will thwart the intentions of the rest of the group. Here Mary Byrne is the antagonist of the game who sold the tin can for a drink and has come back singing.

Next morning the first three gather for the game but the senior, supercilious, "boy" (priest) thinks that the contract is violated. He gets violent and the antagonist then
joins the other two and they put him in a sack. The game continues even after the priest has been gagged and put into the sack. Mary sitting on that bundle dictates terms to the priest in the sack. The priest agrees to keep quiet about this shameful incident and on that condition is released. The last bout of the game is the priest's malediction in Latin bringing down fire on his playmates who, fearing imminent catastrophe, run off with bag and baggage.

This view of the play as a game within the frame of the text is a detached view of the spectators. It provides much scope for active theatre work. In any good comedy there cannot but be genuine improvised situations—situations which are not premeditated. Such improvised situations naturally grow or spring up from a preceding one. Thus every new situation seems to issue out of the previous one. In *The Tinker's Wedding*, Sarah's desire for marriage is not a premeditated one. It is just an idea sprouting in her mind, under the influence of the moon and the tempting change of season. From there more and more ideas come and at every point the characters are surprised by their own ingenuity.

The most important situation and the climax of the play is reached by a creative force of improvisation at which point even the characters themselves cannot control its consequence. A striking example of this uncontrollable point of their improvisation is to be found from the beginning of Sarah's quarrel with the priest in the second act. The priest gets
violent when he finds three empty bottles tied up in a sack and presented to him in the place of the tin can he had asked for:

I wouldn't have you coming in on me and soiling my church; for there's nothing at all, I'm thinking, would keep the like of you from hell. Gather up your gold now, and begone from my sight, for if ever I set an eye on you again you'll hear me telling the peelers who it was stole the black ass belonging to Philly O'Cullen, and whose hay it is the grey ass does be eating. (Plays, II, pp. 43-45)

From this moment onward the game tends to be serious, aggressive and violent like that of the children who, when they fail in the game, call their parents for help.

Here Sarah Casey and Michael are provoked by the priest's reference to their theft. And Michael who has been silent all along and not very much involved in the game, all of a sudden comes out and threatens the priest, "I'll beat you with the ass's reins till the world would hear you roaring from this place to the coast of Clare" (Plays, II, p. 45). Now the rhythm of the game becomes quick and more active. The whole game ends up in a hilarious atmosphere with the priest released to become master of the situation driving off the other three with his Latin malediction. Like The Playboy of the Western World, The Tinker's Wedding holds the audience by the very nature of its playing mood. Like children unwilling to get involved in the play, Michael remains a detached observer in the beginning. Mary is quite unaware of the implications of the game but is in it from the very beginning in her own drunken mood.
The Wedding ring and the tin can

The Tinker's Wedding is not expected to teach or prove anything. It only amuses because of the contradictions in human situations that pervade the entire play. The wedding game consequently has no philosophy or moral to be imparted. At the same time it has an idea of two cultures meeting. This is an abstract design of the play which has been given auditory and visual images by the stage sense of the playwright. The two cultures are brought together on the stage through a very effective theatrical means. The objects effecting their linking are the ring and the tin can. The ring unifies Sarah and Michael, and the tin, the priest and the tinkers. The wonder of the play created by Synge is that in the end they are possessed by the wrong persons. The ring is given to the priest and the tin can to an unknown porter-seller.

These two objects seem to be kept at the centre of the dramatic action from the very beginning of the play. Sarah refers to the wedding ring in the sixth sentence of the play "It'll be small joy for yourself if you aren't ready with my wedding ring" (Plays, II, p. 7). In the tenth sentence Michael refers to the tin can. Both these are united for a common purpose at the appearance of the priest. Towards the end of the first act, the tin can assumes more importance because it anticipates an important event next morning. The can is here a suggestive hand property and a powerful visual image. Sarah takes the can from Michael and ties it up in a piece of sacking
and puts it in the ditch. On the stage the bundle of the can neatly tied up in sacking, can be hung suggestively in a dominant place so that the audience can see it clearly. The comic atmosphere is highlighted with our associating the priest with the tin can. When Mary is left alone supposedly asleep on the stage she starts up suddenly and turns over on her hands and knees, going over to the ditch where the can is tied in sacking. "She takes the can from the sacking, and fits in three empty bottles and straw in its place, and ties them up" (Plays, II, p. 27).

Now the audience are comfortably placed, anticipating an encounter between Mary and Sarah. Even in its absence the tin can controls the total action of the play after it has been made and reserved for the priest. What dramatic suspense the handkerchief caused in Othello, the tin can causes in The Tinker's Wedding though in a reversed order. In Othello: the happy relationship of the wife and the husband . . . as fatally estranged forever ending up in their death. Here the loss of the tin can leads to a stronger reunion of the husband and wife. The audience now are tickled to laughter because of their superior awareness of the tension built up by the loss of the can. When the priest comes asking for the tin can next morning we are interested to know how Mary, Sarah and her husband Michael will react to him. Finally the whole idea is comically developed to the laughter of the spectators. T. R. Henn finds the use of the ring very dramatic and symbolic:
We may see some symbolism in the wedding-ring, made by her man (again gloomily) from a piece of tin. It is something irrational and unwanted, yet magically sinister, in the tinkers' lives. And it was a stroke of genius for Sarah to put the tin ring on the priest's own finger to remind him of his oath not to harm them.  

This symbolic significance of the wedding ring is unreservedly comic and full of spirit. The idea of the husband preparing a wedding ring on the insistence of his wife for their own marriage itself is comic and can engage the attention of the audience from the very beginning of the play.

The comedy of The Tinker's Wedding moves in between the priest and the instinctive aggressiveness of the tinkers. The tinkers as a class differ greatly from the general vagrants and nomadic people:

They are great thieves and beggars, violent both in drink and out of it; they pick up a living mainly at fairs, with some work in tin-ware, knife-grinding and the like. Their lives had interested Synge from his earliest writings, and he noted their habit of exchanging "wives" at certain annual gatherings. They have managed to free themselves, to a greater or less extent, from government and convention, while allowing the maximum freedom to instincts of sexual promiscuity, fighting, drinking, yet they retain a primitive awe of the religious customs which they have themselves abandoned, and a mixture of envy and contempt of settled communities.

Whatever be the accusation regarding the authenticity of Synge's knowledge of the tinkers, the comic revels displayed by them in the play reveal to us their essence. They are so easily excitable.

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9 Ibid., p. 44.
that in no time they assault a person. They are "full-blooded, violent, zestful."\footnote{10} They don't mean to kill the priest but in the course of their operation the priest is gagged. In their mood of aggressiveness they may even kill the victim. For instance, Michael who has finished bundling up the priest, coming over with Sarah, suggests: "We're fixed now; and I have a mind to run him in a bog-hole the way he'll not be tattling to the peelers of our games to-day" (Plays, II, p.47). These pieces of dialogue show that Michael has been observing the whole business with the priest as a game and the women also have not attached great importance to it. They are cruel when their essential and medieval traits are provoked. They may feel like indulging in any activity which might appear to be brutal, vulgar and grotesque to a civilized society.

The different traits of the tinkers are separately embodied in the play. Among them Mary Byrne is the typical creation of that free society. She drinks like a fish and sings like the minstrel. She has no fear of the society controlled by religion, politics and law. She does not mind even blessing the priest. She persuades the priest to drink with her:

Let you not be shy of us, your reverence. Aren't we all sinners, God help us! Drink a sup now, I'm telling you; and we won't let on a word about it till the Judgement Day. (Plays, II, p. 17)

The funny question,"Aren't we all sinners?" is asked quite casually. She is afraid of Sarah and when she steals the tin

\footnote{10} T. R. Henn, ed., The Plays and Poems of J. M. Synge, p. 44.
can she wants to avoid the presence of Sarah next day. If drinking, merry making and boasting are delineated in full in the character of Mary, sexual boastfulness, sensuous enthusiasm and a vague love for the established customs of society, are depicted in Sarah. Michael is moody and melancholic; waiting for Sarah to take the initiative. But at the end of the play his mettle manifests itself and he is actively involved in sacking the priest.

The involvement of the spectators is managed by the atmosphere, characters, and their dialogue. This, as a farce, is powerful enough to provoke laughter. The humour in the life pattern of the tinkers in contrast to the priest's has many shades. It causes spontaneous laughter touching on austerity and revelry. Synge had a very strict, controlled and austere personal life and as such did not unduly comment on other people. Lady Gregory also belonged to this class. W. B. Yeats applauded this unusual quality of their mind:

In one thing he and Lady Gregory are the strongest souls I have ever known. He and she alike have never for an instant spoken to me the thoughts of their inferiors and their own thoughts. I have never known them to lose the self-possession of their intellects. 11

This austerity is true of Synge's personal life which reflects his honesty. But in his creative world he let loose his faculty thereby analysing the ironies, ambivalences and contrasts

seen in social and personal relations. Even this vision was controlled by a creative order. There is a pattern of the elements of humour organically brought together in the whole structure of the play. Let us examine some dialogues:

(1) Michael  
I'm thinking on the day I got you above at Rathvanna, and the way you began crying out and we coming down off the hill, crying out and saying, 'I'll go back to my ma' and I'm thinking on the way I came behind you that time, and hit you a great clout in the lug, and how quiet and easy it was you came along with me from that hour to this present day. (Plays, II, p. 9)

(2) Sarah  
Pleadingly, taking money from her pocket
Wouldn't you have a little mercy on us your reverence? Holding out money.
Wouldn't you marry us for a half a sovereign, and it a nice shiny one with a view on it of the living king's mamma? (Plays, II, p. 15)

(3) Mary  
Persuasively
Let you not be shy of us, your reverence. Aren't we all sinners, God help us! Drink a sup now, I'm telling you; and we won't let on a word about it till the Judgement Day. (Plays, II, p. 17)

(4) Priest  
Crying out
Come along now. Is it the whole day you'd keep me hear saying my prayers, and I getting my death with not a bit in my stomach, and my breakfast in ruins. (Plays, II, p. 39)

(5) Priest  
Did ever any man see the like of that? To think you'd be putting deceit on me, and telling lies to me, and I going to marry you for a little sum wouldn't marry a child. (Plays, II, p. 41)

(6) Mary  
In a soothing voice
There now, holy father, let you stay easy, I'm telling you, and learn a little sense and patience, the way you'll not be so airy again going to rob poor sinners of their scraps of gold. He gets quieter. (Plays, II, p. 47)
Lifting up his hand I haven't sworn I wouldn't call the fire of heaven from the hand of the Almighty God. He begins saying a Latin malediction in a loud ecclesiastical voice. (Plays, II, p. 49)

Together Run, run. Run for your lives. (Plays, II, p. 49)

The whole text can be quoted like this for a definite pattern of humour employed by Synge. The playwright's purpose here is to make the spectators see the incidents and characters of The Tinker's Wedding from different angles. For instance, the first passage quoted above makes the spectator see the character and relationship of Michael and Sarah simultaneously at different levels. Sarah's superior voice, power of command and strength displayed have been immediately snubbed by a reference to the beginning of their relationship. The preceding and following passages by Sarah all of a sudden reiterate her upperhand and these visual sights become delightful to the audience when they corroborate within their mental frame the pictures of the past and present life and Sarah's threats of going away with Jaunting Jim.

The second projects Sarah's attempt to persuade the priest to marry them for the reward of half a sovereign. Here the audience can see the shining coin with the picture of the living king's mamma. They must be able to associate two levels of significance attached to the coin. The little shining coin with the print of the living king's mamma is definitely valuable and very covetable to the poor tinker beggars. But the priest
is thinking of the value of the coin which is only half a sovereign. Whether it shines or not is immaterial. Sarah's advances to the priest displaying the nice coin compel the listener and the spectator to have two values associated with the same object. There is another twist within the sentence itself. Till "Mamma" is pronounced or rendered in subdued voice the impression one gets is that of a shining coin with the imprint of the living king on it. These ideas and questions help to provoke a smile and then laughter in the audience who must be aware of the two levels of life: one, the routine view of life; and two, the creative vision of the same in the given circumstances. It is the dramatic contrast between these two that highlights the humour in Synge's plays.

The third passage cited above presents the key to the whole text. Mary, in her drunken mood, looks at the whole of humanity including the priest as sinners. That may be true. But it is not up to the tinker woman Mary to say the truth regarding the priest. It should be vice versa. Here is a reversal of the order of values effected by Synge. The intensity of Synge's humour is enhanced by this device. It becomes stronger, making the priest obey and drink a sup with the poor sinners on condition that they would not divulge the priest's sin till the Judgement Day. In this delightful context of two cultures meeting, Mary goes on blessing the priest who has been sitting fully involved in her stories. Thus the whole text is an example of two levels of meaning communicated to the audience—
the routine meaning of day-to-day language and the reversed meaning of cross-currents in the given creative situations.

Synge's stagecraft of this dimension is accessible only to those theatre lovers who can creatively apply themselves to the process of linking together so many elements of wit, humour and laughter of comedy. These are quite often found overlapping and juxtaposed. The priest is not greedy or gluttonous. But he is all this in a milder way. It is the tinker group which meddles with his normal, neglected and lonely way of life. Sarah Casey presses her demand and right to be married. Only at that point does the priest think of a reward for his religious duty. He is provoked to be aggressive and to some extent even inhuman. Once he feels that he is caught by the tinkers he wants to escape and save face. Quite unaware of the fatal consequence he drinks the porter with old Mary Byrne and unlocks his heart to the drunken woman. In those moments the audience can find the priest being completely declassed, brought down to the level of the sub-culture much beneath his. The picture of his sitting, drinking and musing, thinking sad silent thoughts provides genuine humour devoid of malice and wickedness. Mary herself speaks out her pleasure on seeing the big priest with no pride in him, complaining of his hard work and lonely life.

Next morning the priest appears in front of the church in his surplice calling the tinker couple for their marriage and reminding them of his suffering and poor condition with his breakfast awaiting him for a long time. Conventionally a
The priest is expected to be magnanimous and merciful, generous and jovial, good humoured and humane. The priest in The Tinker's Wedding is a contradiction to all these. Here the priest forgets his own basic postulates and appears to be controlled by the rules of the world and not those of the Lord. It is the flexibility of his character and his intermittent references to fear of God and the good ways of life that provide laughter. We also feel that he is not very much aware of the ways of the world. This is our general impression of all the priests depicted by Synge. In The Well of the Saints, Molly Byrne carried the saint's bell, cloak and the holy water. When asked about the saint's trusting these sacred things with the girls she answers that, according to the saint, the young girls are the cleanest holy people. Mary Doul cannot but laugh at this nonsensical stance of the saint and she express it, "Well, the saint's a simple fellow, and it's no lie" (Plays, I, p. 83). A similar reference is made by Maurya in Riders to the Sea. When she is told by her daughter Nora that the priest said that God is merciful and he would not leave her without a son, Maurya retorts, "It's little the like of him knows of the sea" (Plays, I, p. 21). Father Reilly in The Playboy of the Western World also is a "fool figure" in a special sense. He is mentioned by Shawn Keogh as busying himself with the affairs of Rome and those of Shawn himself but seems to be quite ignorant of human relationships and religious duties.

Synge's presentation of the priest as a poor victim tied
up in a sack by the tinkers is the main argument put forward against the playwright. Moreover, critics like Alan Price are of the opinion that:

he is not a true priest. He has officially renounced his Pagan instincts but he has not acquired the Christian virtues. He still has the old Pagan craving for the enjoyments of the flesh, but when he tries to satisfy this his pleasure is spoiled by the sense that he is sinning.12

A closer look reveals an answer to this question. The last part of the statement, "when he tries to satisfy this his pleasure is spoiled by the sense that he is sinning," itself is the pivotal point on which Synge concentrates. The priest has a weak awareness of his religious function and a strong recurring awareness of his physical pleasures and his incapacity to fulfill both. The consequent disappointment in whatever he does is presented without malice and in full intensity and aggressiveness.

Synge's comedy projects the aggressive nature which is essentially a strong feature of all good comedies. The priest is mercilessly treated by the tinkers, with a primitive instinct of violence. And this violent and aggressive quality is what makes The Tinker's Wedding a successful comedy. Otherwise it would have ended up a mild, pathetic play of mean and coarse materials. The audience are tempted to coarse laughter without an obvious satirical purpose. A satire can flourish only on a point of righteous indignation. Synge seems to be conscious

12 Alan Price, Synge and Anglo-Irish Drama, p. 130.
of the psychological condition of the spectators watching a comedy. He has been able to excite a bewildering variety of moods inspired by various forms of humour. Whatever be the proportion of humorous elements mixed, there must be at least in a mild way the element of aggression or apprehension. This is seen in the case of *The Tinker's Wedding* and thus Synge has established an understanding and a relation with his spectators.

Synge's technique of stagecraft in *The Tinker's Wedding* is to create a sort of dramatic tension and then relax it. The audience watching the representative of the church being silenced and tied up in a sack will be wonder-struck and tense, not knowing the motives of the aggressor and the fate of the victim. By this technique the playwright has shocked and awakened them to the incidents on the stage. Sarah, Mary, and Michael appear to be serious and purposeful. We believe they might carry out the murder of the priest. Immediately our tension is relaxed to a great extent when Mary pats his head saying "Be quiet, your reverence" (*Plays*, II, p. 47). After this stage direction she is made to say with some sense of sympathy, "It's only letting on you are, holy father, for your nose is blowing back and forward as easy as an east wind on an April day" (*Plays*, II, p. 47). At this moment we may laugh aloud knowing that nothing has happened to the priest in spite of the concerted assault by two women and a man. Our laughter and enjoyment of the whole situation have been fully complemented by the happy union of our desire for the priest's safety and his final
triumph. There is also a basic faith in the goodness and order of life pattern which makes us disapprove of the tinker's action.

From the point of view of the spectators, the whole play can either be elevated to a ritual reversed or brought down to the ridiculous. The first is the point of elevation: the audience have been waiting for the tinker's wedding to be solemnized by the priest. That ought to be a good ritual. On the contrary, the wedding party put the priest in the sack and pat him on the back with comforting words. The ridiculous aspect is to be marked in terms of the respect the audience and the actors are expected to have towards the priest. It is all now thwarted. Whatever the mental attitude of the performers and the audience, and the moral issues, the theatrical effectiveness of that passage can be compared with the best comic scenes of European theatre.

On the stage the bundling business is not easy. The very physical problem of a sack long and large enough to cover up the big priest is to be solved. The sack is to be used as a good hand property. Another important problem is that of the strong, tall, big, and lively priest himself who appears to be a very huge figure in his cloak in the presence of the tinker beggars. How can he be put into the sack without any struggle and combat? If there is any struggle, the beggars against the priest--three against one--can naturally win. Then the conquered priest must be packed in the sack with no part of his body left outside. Then the mouth of the sack must be tied. If this
process is not artistically done the whole stage business will be coarse, clumsy, vulgar and merely a physical struggle. Synge requires well trained actors for the purpose. The priest, for example, must have a flexible body and a resonant voice. He must let himself wriggle into the sack to be tied up. The other three must give an impression of exerting themselves greatly and winning a hard struggle against the man of the church. The audience must be conscious of the space used by the actors before and after the bundling business.

If the tin can was a central focal point till now at present the bundle itself is filling the stage. The comic interest of Synge is ever active and growing strong even after the priest has been bundled. Mary talks to the bundle, "Would you swear an oath, holy father, to leave us in our freedom, and not talk at all?" (Plays, II, p. 49). The next stage direction is "Priest nods in sacking" (Plays, II, p. 49). The spectator's mind at this point works at many levels: the different moral issues of the tinkers' crime, the artistic way of doing it on the stage, the grotesque and the pure elements of theatre emerging in the Irish Theatre Movement.

It is a stroke of Synge's genius to have made Sarah put the ring on the finger of the priest. The tin was made by Michael for Michael himself to be united with Sarah in an arranged marriage. The priest was to unite them, which did not take place. The violence to which the priest was subjected can have a sublimated sexual passion and putting the ring
immediately following that violence can connote the Freudian subconscious motives of physical assault. Thus the last unit of the play provides possibilities for active movement and meaningful stage business.

Synge's purpose in the play is to amuse and entertain. He has written a rare preface to The Tinker's Wedding. He wrote one to The Playboy of the Western World also. To no other play of his has Synge written a preface. Both these prefaces describe his vision of art and theatre. The writer's statement of his own vision of writing is the best document on the subject. Besides these, his ideas on art, theatre and literature expressed in his reviews, interviews and articles must also be taken into account. In Synge's case all his writings on art and drama bear testimony to this. He had a consistent view of drama. The Irish Dramatic Movement and Synge's vision of drama were mutually helpful. It was he alone who happily integrated the Celtic and poetic vision of Ireland in unequivocal terms:

Synge is the only great poetic dramatist of the movement; the only one, that is, for whom poetry and drama were inseparable, in whose work dramatic intensity invariably finds poetic expression and the poetic mood its only full expression in dramatic form.13

The creation of The Tinker's Wedding is in perfect harmony with Synge's theory of drama. He does not want to make his plays serious in the sense used by the didactic exponents of theatre; nor does he want to deal with problems of social or national 13 Una Ellis-Fermor, Irish Dramatic Movement, p. 163.
importance for their own sake. He has playwrights like Ibsen and Zola and some Germans in his mind when he speaks of joyless words of modern plays. For Synge:

the drama is made serious—in the French sense of the word—not by the degree in which it is taken up with problems that are serious in themselves, but by the degree in which it gives the nourishment, not very easy to define, on which our imaginations live. We should not go to the theatre as we go to a Chemist's, or a dram-shop, but as we go to a dinner where the food we need is taken with pleasure and excitement.

This view of Synge is approved by critics like Toni O'Brien Johnson and others. The comic in Synge, especially in The Tinker's Wedding, is lavish and unreserved. Synge himself believed that there was a golden age in all great theatres of the past which witnessed a genial and natural humour which nourished the imagination of those people. He also warns us, "it is dangerous to limit or destroy it." "This is traditional comedy with a farcical ending. It is excellent and consistent theatre." Those who close their eyes and ears to such spontaneous humour will have to be careful about the morbidity of


15 J. M. Synge, "Preface" to The Tinker's Wedding, Plays, Book II, p. 3.

16 Ibid.

their mind. Baudelaire, who called laughter the greatest sign of the satanic element in man was, according to Synge, morbid. That is why Synge advocated a way of life of genuine and simple humour in theatre which amuses and delights us.

In his Preface to The Tinker's Wedding, Synge has referred to the rich tradition of Irish humour:

In the greater part of Ireland, however, the whole people, from the tinkers to the clergy, have still a life, and view of life, that are rich and genial and humorous. I do not think that these country people, who have so much humour themselves, will mind being laughed at without malice, as the people in every country have been laughed at in their own comedies.\(^\text{18}\)

There is another version of this apology for making fun of the Irish clergy. The T. S. draft dated 20 November 1907 explains:

I do not think these country clergy, who have so much humour—and so much heroism that every one who has seen them facing typhus or dangerous seas for the comfort of people on the coasts of the west must acknowledge—will mind being laughed at for half an hour without malice, as the clergy in every Roman Catholic country were laughed at through the ages that had real religion.\(^\text{19}\)

This defensive explanation clearly defines Synge's state of mind as a playwright. It is also a projection of his plan of writing. He wants to establish a sympathetic relationship with his audience. He does not intend antagonizing them. They must be prepared to relive the essential and jovial experiences of

\(^{18}\) J. M. Synge, "Preface" to The Tinker's Wedding, Plays, Book II, p. 3.

\(^{19}\) Ibid.
the past. This is another way of preparing the audience when he finds that he might be misunderstood. He does not have a purpose of seriously correcting modern man or satirising logically his follies and foibles. His real intention is to amuse and to provoke laughter. Petit de Julleville had a tremendous influence on Synge. He was also quite appreciative of Rabelais's line of thinking regarding comedy which is meant to delight, amuse and cause laughter.

Synge has made use of these "medieval" ideas in The Tinker's Wedding which depend for their comic appeal mostly on the gortesque.

The audience must be able to perceive their own superiority compared to the infirmity of the tinkers and the priest in the play. As is explained in Thomas Hobbes' Leviathan (1651), "The passion of laughter is nothing else but sudden glory arising from a sudden conception of some eminency in ourselves by comparison with the infirmity of others, or with our own formerly." Alexander Bain, one of the pioneers of experimental psychology shows similar views: "Not in physical effects alone, but in everything where a man can achieve a stroke of superiority in surpassing or discomforting a rival is the disposition of laughter apparent." Synge's approach to the comic in theatre is very close to these, especially with regard to the situations and characters in The Tinker's Wedding, and more emphatically

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21 Ibid.
in the tinkers' encounter with the priest. There, one more level of our thinking and awareness works. As we watch the priest becoming a bundle, we instinctively laugh because of our own primal instincts to defeat and conquer. There is a pleasure for the audience to see the vanity, pride, and virtuosity of the priest gradually dwindling and melting away.

The spectators watching a comedy of this quality are, for a moment at least, reliving the primitive feelings of game hunting and enjoyment. It is also to have a glimpse of the pre-historic humour of this kind:

On the way home we saw and shot a springbok, as there was no meat left in camp. The bullet hit the springbok in the stomach and partly eviscerated him causing him to jump and kick before he finally died. The Bush men thought that this was terribly funny and they laughed, slapping their thighs and kicking their heels to imitate the springbok, showing no pity at all, but then they regard animals with great detachment.

A primitive mood of this type can be seen in the excited moments of the tinkers' encounter with the priest. The fun here has a pungent sharpness. The atmosphere of the tinkers' mean fight with the priest may appear to be grotesque and unsophisticated. But that is the very essence of farce. With these defects farce amuses itself, discovering the inconsistencies which underlie life and character, and exhibiting evil not as it is in its essential nature, but as a thing to be laughed at rather than hated. According to Aristotle, "The main ingredient in comic


mirth is the malicious pleasure afforded by the discomfiture of another."24 When the priest in the sack is not in great danger he offers pleasure of a ludicrous nature which is a type of self-ignorance that is incapable of inflicting serious injury. The spectators of the play must also be convinced of the safety of the victim.

Synge's humour does not present a wholesome view of man or of the world. At the same time he does not present his characters as types. He has a little sympathy left for Mary and the priest. Unlike a satirist, Synge the humorist stands involved in the happenings to the extent of recognizing his own kinship with humanity which provokes him to mirth. He sees ideals shattered around him; he witnesses the irony of destiny; he becomes conscious of discords and imperfections and is saddened and amused in turn, to borrow an expression from Butcher. We feel that Synge approves of Coleridge's dictum regarding humour annihilating the finites: "The little is made great, and the great little in order to destroy both, because all is equal in contrast with the infinite."25

The playwright's sense of stage-lighting is greatly commendable. The play begins after nightfall. There can be a full moon in the sky. The golden flames of sticks burning near the ditch will add to the total depth of the stage. The


figures on the stage, thus lit up imperfectly, give a three-dimensional, flowing and liquid lighting quality. Against this background is the whole happening of the first Act. From the spectator's point of view there are points of distance and nearness with respect to some characters on certain occasions. These theatre movements as a whole must create an effective visual pattern of characters lit very dimly and brightly by turns according to their spatial relations. Mary's singing, when heard at a distance against this moonlit night wafts us to a poetic height. Our mind will be lingering partly at that poetic distance and partly at the comic incidents on the stage in front of us.

Mary is the only character who takes us occasionally into a dream world with her story and fantastic recollection. Almost like a grandmother with a store of ever so many fairy tales, Mary Byrne unlocks her rich and resourceful mind to Sarah:

So let you sit down there by the big bough, and I'll be telling you the finest story you would hear any place from Dundalk to Ballinacree, with great queens in it, making themselves matches from the start to the end, and they with shiny silks on them the length of the day, and white shifts for the night. (Plays, II, p. 23)

These stories greatly contribute to the total structure of the play. In her drunken moments these stories will come up relating the present with the past. For instance, Sara Casey's beauty and physical strength always recur in her recollections of "a grand story of the great queens of Ireland with white
necks on them the like of Sarah Casey, and fine arms would hit you a slap the way Sarah Casey would hit you" (Plays, II, p. 25). During these moments of her story-telling, the audience themselves become a part of the whole theatre events as involved listeners. The part of the dialogue, "the way Sarah Casey would hit you," can even be said to the spectators themselves, taking the entire audience into her confidence.

Mary's narration and recollections of stories give the audience another angle from which the whole play can be looked at. Most of her references are poetic, lyrical and melancholic expressions of desires unfulfilled and loneliness, age and death as unwelcome guests. These stories and her songs provide a parallel line of visual elements which help the audience to place the actual incidents on the stage in proper stage perspective. Like other characters Mary also is prompted by an unconscious rhythm. When she appears singing and holding the jug in her hand the speech pattern perfectly coincides with the zig-zag movement and the visual patterns suggested in the song. What P. L. Henry has discovered in a close analysis of the speech rhythms of The Playboy of the Western World can be very well applied to the general speech patterns in all the Syngean peasant plays, especially The Tinker's Wedding. "To a certain extent, then, the primary cadence may be said to relate to the mood (and manner) of the drama rather than to immediate exigencies of context and character." 26 The Tinker's Wedding also presents

a regular system of speech rhythm which is poetic and musical.

The playwright's relation with the audience is creatively established by an effective means of communicating a particular mood and psychic spirit through the poetic speech rhythm. Naturally when the play is in progress what the audience get is not the psychological development of the characters but the contrasting moods in which they are rooted. For instance, the dramatic heterogeneity is attained through some very powerful stage devices which make the work a piece of literature and visually potential as a piece of stagecraft. Michael appears to be in a lethargic mood in the beginning. He only responds to Mary's urges but Sarah is in her full spirits—gay, happy, jovial and excitable. She seems to be carried away by the game of marriage. She is aware of her beauty appreciated openly by the peelers and even by the young boys. The audience get a different suggestion of mood in Mary's singing tipsily and blissfully claiming the grace even to bless the priest. The priest in turn has a very practical vision and an ironically mundane mood imposed upon him by his routine life of "meaningless" activities in the church and in the village. These different moods clash with one another. The spectators' interest lies in these apparently conflicting moods getting polarized at a crucial juncture. At this critical movement the nomadic spirit gains the upperhand, defeating the static and mundane spirit of the priest.
The Tinker's Wedding at a closer analysis has only a limited appeal as a piece of literature, because it does not have a universally striking spiritual problem promoting its premise. All the other plays of Synge in varying degrees possess this quality. The characters do not develop much. Mary alone can claim to have some inner recesses of experience in depth. Others are all bound to the present which is not very attractive. The spiritual dilemma found in other plays is not very striking or fatal in *The Tinker's Wedding*. This is the only comedy by Synge with all the elements of farce and a slight touch of satire in it. Naturally the acting potential of the play is superior to that of *The Well of the Saints* and equal to that of *The Playboy of the Western World*.

*The Tinker's Wedding* has a physical nearness to the audience. This is another stage device Synge used in his comedies. The physical nearness is made possible by the presentation of the tinkers on the street in front of the church. It has the quality of a street play also wherein much outward activity is displayed. The frank and open expressions of the tinker women, the indolent mood of Michael and the unexpected violence, the wedding game and their frantic running off make it purely physical, active and strong enough to physicalize for a gathering of theatre enthusiasts. The grotesque dealing with the priest is enjoyable at this level. There is an element of Don Quixote and an abundance of Falstaffian
fun in the play which makes it most "rollicking" and striking. This rollicking nature is present in the Irish character, which demanded a powerful rollicking tale for its communication. The play was not presented during Synge's life-time for fear of violent reactions. But when it was presented later in Ireland in 1969 it was received well by the new generation of young people:

A multitude of rootless people obeying no law but that of their imaginations, their ideals and their rejection of bourgeois conventions of property and morality, some of them even emulating, in their music and their poetry, the romantic and high-sounding dreams of Sarah Casey and Mary Byrne, The Tinker's Wedding does not seem quite so easy a play to dismiss. Indeed, in The Tinker's Wedding, the third of his shanachie plays, Synge chose by means of rollicking farce to present a conflict that has become in the ensuing years evermore central to our Western society. 27

This belated acceptance implies a conspicuous change in the cultural, social and aesthetic attitude of the people who have been exposed to tremendous political, philosophical and sociological mutations the world over. All these changes have found their visual expressions in modern theatre both in Ireland and abroad:

There are new technical aids, new lighting possibilities, new relationships between director and actor, between actor and audience. There are new styles of playwriting; above all there is a new style of living. We no longer regard the word

"shift" as outrageous. The management of the Abbey would not withhold the production of a play because a priest was tied up and gagged by a party of tinkers.\(^{28}\) Synge the visionary certainly anticipated them some eight decades ago in visualizing the Irish character of seeking joy in misery, presenting the homeless tinkers in an ecstatic game of marriage, and in bringing the sublime world of the clergy down to the ridiculous and grotesque. This thematic design demands a physical theatre where the body and the sensuous and sensual experiences associated with it prove themselves to be superior to mind and intellect. When it is translated into dramatic experience on the stage, the audience are privileged to witness the actor's exploration of the potentials of his body in beautiful movement and joyous rhythm. This will surely make amends for any of the literary limitations of *The Tinker's Wedding.*