CHAPTER VII

Deirdre of the Sorrows: A Stage Metaphor of Tragic Vision

The vision of the grotesque in theatre wildly executed in The Tinker's Wedding is followed in the next and the last play also. But there is a fundamental difference to be noticed in the use of the grotesque material and method in these two plays: In The Tinker's Wedding the playwright is at his best because of the stage potential of the exuberant farcical situations involving the free and licentious tinkers and a drunken priest; but in Deirdre of the Sorrows he is a little controlled by the seriousness of the saga characters, his own purpose of turning away from the peasant style and a concern for modern standards of credibility and sensibility.

The myth of Deirdre is a part of the collective consciousness of the Irish people. It has been narrated and sung from generation to generation with slight variations effected by the singer or the narrator. The very fact that the story is well known to the people in all its abundant beauty and details itself poses a problem for any dramatist attempting a serious work on it for a modern audience. Synge was also "afraid that the 'Saga' people might loosen my grip on reality."¹ As there

is not much revelation for dramatic curiosity or anxiety to be meaningfully maintained, the audience must be kept alert and involved by other literary and theatrical possibilities woven into the deep structure of the play. The very mode of the original form must change considerably, taking into account the new medium of theatre in which it is going to be cast. Thus Synge has made his play earthbound and real, "anchored in what is sensible and finite."  

Synge has tried his best to make a stage drama out of the narrative he received from the myth. His transformation of the mythical narrative into a meaningful and moving drama is a sure test of Synge's mastery of stagecraft. He is himself conscious of the care a playwright should take while indulging in such a task. "It is quite useless trying to rush it. I must take my time and let them all grow by degrees." Synge's anxiety also shows how deeply he was aware of the slow growth of the characters and situations. He also believed, "One has to interlace one's characters."  

Deirdre of the Sorrows explicitly displays the dramatic qualities of contrasts, psychological interest, quickness of images suggested in succession and, above all, the philosophical question of the


4 J. M. Synge in a letter to Nolan on 7 December 1908, Plays, Book II, p. xxviii.
individuals caught up in the wheel of time and its consequent role of fate in human experience. The play also epitomises Synge's sense of lighting, colour, movement, images of youth, beauty, age and death and the visual patterns of Nature.

The moments Synge has chosen are intense and highly dramatic. They are "full of incommensurate energy." The characters involved in these situations are clearly delineated with proper individuality, motives and contrasting traits. Writing to Lady Gregory, Synge says about the changes he incorporated in the play: "I have done a great deal to Deirdre since I saw you, --chiefly in the way of strengthening motives." For instance, the two lovers--Conchubor and Naisi--have nothing in common, except their infatuation for Deirdre. The three women characters--Deirdre, the Old Woman and Lavarcham--are distinctly drawn with their own personal likes and dislikes and psychological reasoning. Fergus and Owen have ... separate motivations. They also represent the natural and the artificial or the urban. In effect, the play is a series of visuals projecting the eternal fight of the young with the old or of the rural with the urban. This is a timeless question of beauty and its brilliance in life and this is the only play in which Synge has taken up the idea of beauty and youth as a cause of conflict. All these philosophical and literary qualities have appeared in concrete stage images in the play.


In the early plays the men and women are quite conscious of beauty, the delightful fountain of life but it is not made a cause of their fatal fight and their loss of everything. Nora and Pegeen know the strength of their beauty and successfully capitalize on it. The same is the case with Sara Casey and Mary Doul who have had their heydays when men flock around them in bewilderment. In *Riders to the Sea* the beauty is conceived in a different way. Maurya has bitterly witnessed the brilliant beauty of young men growing pale and spectre-thin and vanishing in the darkness of eternity. None of these characters appears to fight and lose everything in the course of the fight. Naisi and even the old Conchubor fight for the beauty, that is, Deirdre, and the fight presents visuals of tragic ecstasy for the audience. "In all his plays after *Riders to the Sea*, that ecstatic, often sexual Rabelasian note is played."\(^7\)

This fight is conscious as well as unconscious because the men have to get the passionate girl through a conscious effort. Naisi will stake everything including his kingdom, men and their life and Conchubor will go a step further for a union with Deirdre. They take initiatives, plan and plot and execute effectively, but the dramatic interest lies in the awareness of the audience that they have to fight, however unwilling they are, and Deirdre's beauty must be the cause of their fall. They cannot escape this determinism.

The tragedy of Deirdre has been interpreted by many critics as unsuccessful. The incompatibility of the heroic stature of Deirdre with the "peasant mould" she is thrown into is ascribed as the reason for the failure of the play. According to Nicholas Grene the adoption of the myth of Deirdre from the ancient Ireland of the sagas proves to be a restriction.8 Maurice Bourgeois says that Synge could not be true to the heroic element in the legend because he handled the ancient story as a peasant folk tale. He is of the opinion that Synge's treatment of the character of Deirdre is not to be blamed because he has transformed the remote legendary character into an untamed, unsophisticated child of Nature. W. B. Yeats and George Russell confined Deirdre into that old world of mystical visions while Synge has brought her into the theatre close to modern audience "in the author's personal interpretation of the action."9

Visual patterns of Nature

Here the text is poetic and Synge has taken pains to blend several elements of the legend and the concept of classical tragedy in order to present a modern tragic vision. The modernization lies in the fact that Deirdre is passionately attached to nature and all its multi-dimensional moods. "The fulfilled

8 Nicholas Grene, Synge: A Critical Study of the Plays, p. 182.

love of Deirdre and Naisi is expressed in terms of nature."10

The tragedy presented on the stage can, therefore, be visualized as the gradual process of nature embracing death. Hence a point of compromise can be seen in the whole structure of the play because nature was everything for Synge from his childhood onward. Nature has been a creative fountain of inspiration throughout his life. It was almost his god as it was to the great romantic poet Wordsworth. "Deirdre gave Synge a setting in which his own nature-worship seemed appropriate."11

All the plays by Synge starting from When the Moon Has Set present the various aspects of nature both external and internal as a witness to the happenings in the life of the characters. Colm weds Sister Eileen with the whole nature as a witness. "In the name of the Summer and the Sun and the Whole World, I wed you as my wife" (Plays, I, p. 177). In Deirdre of the Sorrows also nature assumes an important role trying to articulate in different ways. It is the cause of life and death, permanence and mutability. Deirdre is presented in the first act of the play as jubilantly running about under the green wood trees, collecting flowers and nuts and enjoying herself looking at the clean water and embracing the bushes and feeling the softness of the breeze. Nature is a friend, guide, and philosopher in the play, trying to liberate Deirdre

11 Ibid.
and Naisi from all the bondages imposed upon them by Conchubor. Their marriage itself is solemnized by Ainnle, Naisi's brother, making all nature watch the event. Joining their hands, Ainnle says:

By the sun and moon and the whole earth, I wed Deirdre to Naisi. He steps back and holds up his hands. May the air bless you, and water and the wind, the sea, and all the hours of the sun and moon. (Plays, II, p. 215)

Nature is the visual and mystic cause and main source of creation for man. It manifests itself in the sun, moon and ocean, forests, the hills, the clear pools, lakes and rivers, the vast expanse of the sky and mysterious mountains and lonely glens. The flowers and breeze, rains and storms, lightning and thunders are all the messengers of the mystic depth of nature. They communicate to the poet a lonely vision of immortality with a halo of divinity about it. The abstract philosophical longing for and understanding of the wilderness is generally suitable for lyrical or narrative art. The pantheistic adoration of this nature is "for Synge an inseparable part of the intense enjoyment of love and life."  

Synge has succeeded in turning this abstract adoration into the concrete visuals on the stage. The technique used is the identification of Deirdre's being with the deep feelings and moods of Nature presented to the audience. This is done through the description of the varying aspects and emotional changes.

of nature: day, night, dawn, noon, dusk, the sun, the moon, clouds, light and darkness, when referred to in harmony with the changing moods of the characters, will have a positive impact on the visual experience the audience are privileged to enjoy themselves.

The first sentence of the play gives a kind of catac­
trophic suggestion to the audience. That is made possible through the reference to Deirdre's lingering longer in the woods late in the evening. The third passage brings in a coherence of connected images of the cause of the catastrophe emphasizing the role of the Sons of Usna, Naisi and his brothers who "are above chasing hares for two days or three, and the same a while since when the moon was full" (Plays, II, p. 183). Chasing hares can also suggest Deirdre being followed by Naisi to be wooed. As in the other plays of Synge, here also the audience are given a very natural dramatic event in the choric expressions of the old woman and Lavarcham who, like the Greek chorus, dispassionate and detached in the beginning, report to the audience what has actually happened and what is going to happen. They immediately refer to what will be the end of all. But unlike the Greek chorus the old woman and Lavarcham are involved in the play as it progresses, taking sides with the issues controlling the fate of the leading characters of the play.

The choric utterances give us, the audience, the image of Nature reborn as Deirdre in all its beauty and independence.
The old woman looks out of the door to see whether Deirdre is coming from the glen. Here and in other choric openings of the play Synge has used an ingenious technique of stagecraft by which he has been able to bring closer to the audience a wild green background and the chasing hares in it. Through Lavarcham and the old woman, we, the audience, see these off-stage happenings. They also prepare the audience to receive the two men leaving the furze. "It's Conchubor and Fergus along with him! Conchubor'll be in a blue stew this night and herself abroad" (Plays, II, p. 185). As in Ibsen's Rosmersholm, the character's off-stage movement is described by those on the stage. The old woman describes Conchubor's movements towards the horse crossing the stream, "and there's herself on the hill side with a load of twigs. Will I run out and put her in order before they'll set eyes on her at all?" (Plays, II, p. 185). These ideas of movement are the salient elements of drama which make it worthy of stage presentation helping also the "spectator for conjuring up visions." Along with these movements the central idea of Deirdre being presented as Nature is developed. Lavarcham tells Conchubor that Deirdre "does be all times straying around picking flowers or nuts, or sticks itself, but so long as she's gathering new life I've a right not to heed her, I'm thinking, and she taking her will" (Plays, II, p. 185).

Moods in multiple colours

Colour and its association have also been brought to play a creative role in the development of the plot. They are referred to either in relation to Deirdre or to her proximity with nature. Thus purple, crimson, green, gold, blue, white and red are used to communicate the sensuous and aesthetic relation of Nature and its moods. For instance, Lavarcham tells Conchubor that all say "there isn't her match at fancying figures and throwing purple upon crimson, and she edging them all times with her greens and gold" (Plays, II, p. 187).

Lavarcham continues:

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 may be, and you greedy itself, it wasn't for your like she was born at all. (Plays, II, pp. 187-89)

This reiterates Deirdre's appearance as a child of nature, "a lamb of ten weeks and it racing the hills . . . It's not the dread of death or troubles that would tame her like" (Plays, II, p. 189). When Deirdre appears, she answers the descriptions already given. She comes in poorly dressed with a little bag and a bundle of twigs in her arms. She has collected a bag of nuts, and "twigs for our fires at the dawn of day" (Plays, II, p. 191).

Fires at the dawn

Deirdre's expression of "fires at the dawn" can connote
the imminent and foretold doom that is awaiting Emain. The idea of fire is dramatically brought to the attention of the audience who can recall similar images linking up the present joy and freedom of Deirdre with the future inevitable darkness befalling her and this is interlinked with the nature images. Deirdre can wed only a man of her wildness, "A man with his hair like the raven may be and his skin like the snow and his lips like blood spilt on it" (Plays, II, p. 191). Here again the grotesque picture of her "lover's lips like blood spilt on it" projects the already suggested tragedy of her life.

In Deirdre's assessment "Naisi and his brothers have no match and they chasing in the woods" is a visual picture of striking contrast with the sixty year-old static Conchubor with his "white hounds rearing up for you, and grey horses" (Plays, II, p. 191). The colours and animals that Conchubor suggests are white, grey hounds, horses, etc. which together present an array of stillness, old age, and death. On the stage the richly clad Conchubor with his pale and grey looks poses a picture which conflicts with that of Deirdre, fresh and innocent, from the woods with the flowers, fruits and leaves of Nature. Conchubor is a man of sophisticated life with all the strategies and tactics of politics and tries to win Deirdre's love with these strategies. He has shut himself up in a confinement of worldly richness of mats, hangings, silver, skillets, rings and jewels. But there is a kind of pale whiteness and greyish stillness about his glory and
accumulations. He has gone far away from the wonders of Nature, its changing moods and colours of different strains. He cannot understand Deirdre, a blessed child of glorious nature. She herself makes it clear to him:

You don't know me, and you'd have little joy
taking me, Conchubor . . . I'm too long watching the days getting a great speed passing me by,
I'm too long taking my will and it's that way
I'll be living always. (Plays, II, p. 195)

Deirdre is aware that she will be safe only in the hills and thus she requests Naisi not to leave her. Naisi is the only person who knows her because he is also in essence a part of the Nature with his hair like the raven and his skin like the snow and his lips like blood spilt on it.

In the other plays of Synge, Nature remains a separate entity, either as a protagonist or antagonist. But in Deirdre of the Sorrows the richness lies in "the brilliance of its colouring, in its nature imagery and description, which carries a light like that he describes in The Aran Islands, bringing familiar things to an apotheosis of radiance."\(^{14}\) Going a step further, one can find the inextricable and inseparable nature articulating itself through Deirdre who is tightening her hold on love while being snatched away by death. Here nature becomes the protagonist. Synge concentrates on the beauty of Deirdre, of that Nature of which she is inseparably a part, her passion and her worship of life. W. B. Yeats and George Russell treat

\(^{14}\) Una Ellis-Fermor, *The Irish Dramatic Movement*, p. 179.
Deirdre as a remote and shining ethereal character, while Synge's Deirdre is intensely passionate; the embodiment of desire for love and enjoyment in the face of death. Deirdre's counterparts in classical and modern tragedies--Antigone, Medea, Calantha, Duchess of Malfi, Imogen and Cleopatra--are not as much aware of their end as she is. The audience are also repeatedly told what is foretold about Deirdre's fate. But they are interested in Nature becoming one with Deirdre and gradually meeting with her end in the flames of Emain. Synge's task is a little difficult in linking up the personal emotions of Deirdre with Nature mysticism behind it. Una Ellis-Fermor is all admiration for the playwright's success in the consummation of his dual power, that of the dramatist and of nature mystic. "What had been in The Playboy, two deliberately separated themes running in counterpoint, the nature-imagery appearing superficially unrelated to the theme of the play, are here inseparably one." 

Deirdre's role-play and different responses

This philosophy and shared myth of the Irish past is presented in concrete actions, unit by unit, using the potentials of stagecraft in a straightforward and simple form. Here also Synge is making use of role-play in so effective a manner that it merges with the whole structure. Deirdre is doing the role-play of a queen dressed and very beautiful while she appears to be a poor lass refusing everything offered to her

15 Una Ellis-Fermor, The Irish Dramatic Movement, p. 182.
by the king Conchubor. What we find in the same act before the sons of Usna is quite unexpected: revelations are used to highlight the dramatic curiosity. Before Naisi and his brothers Deirdre appears as a queen well attired ‘sitting in the high chair in the centre’ (Plays, II, p. 207). This role-play presents the dual state of mind of the heroine and expects a similar response from the audience.

Four levels of responses are possible in this unit of action. A serious spectator will have to co-relate all these for the fullest appreciation of the play. These four responses are related to four positions held by Deirdre. She is Fedlimid's daughter that Conchubor has walled up from all the men of Ulster. She is also expected to be the queen of Emain at the feet of the king Conchubor. She is now in reality Deirdre, the sweetheart of Naisi and the girl of many sorrows. Keeping these three roles about her she is acting the role of the queen with perfect detachment and the audience get a relative and distancing effect of time and space. Overshadowing the "queen" at whose side is seated Naisi on a stool, is the dark figure of death, the presence of which makes their declaration of love and expression of beauty grotesque and tragic. Their attempt is to remain young, beautiful, and loving to each other, thereby defeating all impediments of time, age, and the king of the sophisticated world. The audience can see in concrete images on the stage, life and death, bargaining for the lives of Deirdre and Naisi. In the first act Deirdre is forced to leave the woods
of Slieve Fuadh. From the point of view of the spectator, here starts her tragic procession.

Since Deirdre is more at home in the woods, her separation from that background may appear to cause a total change in her life. But in Alban, she is presented to the audience with the true background and identity. Now more than seven years since Deirdre and Naisi have started living together in this lonely place of their own exile. Deirdre is now mature and radiant with a fuller awareness of life and love under the foreboding evils of her fate. "The seven years of Deirdre's vision and the seven years of Synge's writing are an unintended, bitter coincidence."\(^{16}\) The first section of the second act seems to be a repetition of many things—love, fear, age, time, youth and death.

The action, from the point of view of the audience, may appear to be static and still in the second Act. But seemingly static moments are enlivened with the appearance of Owen, Conchubor's spy. Owen is a character with special features and traits. Besides being a spy of the king, he has his own personal motives for coming to Deirdre and Naisi. Here Synge has developed meaningful motives in characters and dramatic situations which would otherwise be very passionless and pale. The November and December 1907 draft of the manuscript of the play uses the fancy work as a motive for sending Conchubor out

\(^{16}\) Raymond Williams, *Drama from Ibsen to Brecht*, p. 152.
of the room. Synge explores the possibility of developing motives and activating situations and actions accordingly. Owen's entrance thus provides a similar motivational unit. He has strong love for Deirdre and his father was killed by Naisi:

I'll give you a riddle, Deirdre. Why isn't my father as ugly and as old as Conchubor? You've no answer? . . . It's because Naisi killed him. /With a curious expression./ Think of that.

(Plays, II, p. 225)

This motivation makes Owen's presence in Alban quite convincing. Later he becomes mad, thereby presenting a powerful and grotesque stage picture.

Suggestive visuals on the stage

Synge's idea of stagecraft is better displayed by a touch on the secrets of Naisi. In the second act, Fergus is talking to Naisi revealing the compromise brought from Conchubor who suggests that Naisi must not linger in Alban "until the day that you'll grow weary, and hurt Deirdre showing her the hardness in your eyes" (Plays, II, p. 227). It is exactly at this time, according to the stage directions, that "Deirdre comes out of tent with a horn of wine. She catches the beginning of Naisi's speech and stops with stony wonder" (Plays, II, p. 227). She happens to listen to Naisi's unlocking his heart saying that "I've had a dread upon me a day'd come I'd weary of her voice _very slowly_. . . and Deirdre'd see I'd wearied" (Plays, II, p. 227). If these feelings are expressed by Naisi against Deirdre genuinely, the audience with an awareness
superior to his, can anticipate a broken relationship with her in the next turn of events. The audience are aware of Deirdre's presence just behind. She is now thoroughly broken and must be planning the next course of action. All of a sudden Deirdre drops the horn of wine and crouches down where she is.

On the stage these three figures of Naisi and Fergus with Deirdre behind unseen by them can create a triangular picture of hide and seek game. It is the stroke of Synge's genius to have created such a stage composition. When Fergus is gone the audience find Naisi turning towards the tent and seeing Deirdre crouching down with her black cloak round her face. The picture of a character with a cloak round the face with another character looking at it generates a suggestive, powerful and silent tableau-like image. The visual impact of the scene is very suggestive for an audience which can fill up the gaps left by the silence of the characters. Their silence is more eloquent and the static posture more dynamic than their words. Thus by using such devices Synge creates a better meaningful poetic depth than is otherwise possible in an organic but broken relationship.

An equally brilliant element of creative stagecraft is to be seen in Owen's madness. There is no method in this madness as in the case of Hamlet. He throws up a bag of gold brightening the atmosphere with the colour and sound of the coins and his intermittent laughter. He is a personification of unfulfilled desires. He has not been able to take revenge
upon Naisi for killing his father; nor is he able to get the love of Deirdre. He cries aloud, "Deadmen, deadmen, men who'll die for Deirdre's beauty, I'll be before you in the grave!" (Plays, II, p. 235). The playwright has condensed many ideas of life and death, heaven and hell, beauty and ugliness and courage and helplessness into this single but central sequence of events. Owen is functionally a spy who has been paid for it. His action is heinous and hideous, loathsome and dark. But this aspect is coupled with his own love for Deirdre for whose beauty he will be ready to sacrifice everything. The very same heart which cherished love and happiness now harbours poisonous hatred and an unquenchable sense of revenge against Naisi and contempt towards Conchubor.

At the end of the second act Deirdre refers to death as "a poor untidy thing, though it's a queen that dies" (Plays, II, p. 239). Here Owen's death also is suggested. Deirdre and Naisi, the children of the woods, might also confront death as they are moving away from the woods. Almost in a lyrical outburst, Deirdre expresses herself "Woods of Cuan, Woods of Cuan... It's seven years we've had a life was joy only and this day we're going west, this day we're facing death may be" (Plays, II, p. 239).

Emain is burning

Act three of the play is an example of the union of the philosophical and the concrete. Here the visuals suggested in the first two acts gain a clearer physical shape and the emotions
expressed by the characters have demonstrably solid form. This act has an important dramatic quality—the abundance of events chosen with a sense of poetic justice in mind. Here literature and theatre are brought together, so that one is organically supporting and complementing the other. The central image which started in the first Act (twigs for our fires) is developed in Lavarcham's statement to Conchubor, "I'm going surely, and in a short space I'll be sitting up with many listening to the fires crackling, and the beams breaking, and I looking on the great blaze will be the end of Emain" (Plays, II, p. 247). The audience are prepared, step by step, to see this fantastic picture of the great Emain in flames. That is the concluding image towards which we are led by suggestions of smaller ones.

The tragic intensity in visible form is presented in the fatal and strange "Tent below Emain, with shabby skins and benches. There is an opening at each side and at back, the latter closed" (Plays, II, p. 241). The strangeness of the place itself is the first visual which connects it with the ensuing ones. Here Lavarcham pricks the egoistic bubble of Conchubor's planned happiness. Everyone will end up in the grave in the attempt to win a beauty like Deirdre. Owen destroyed himself, running mad because of Deirdre.

Grave—the central image

Thus Synge is again using the idea of game. Here it is a macabre and bleak game, morose and morbid. As in Webster's
The Duchess of Malfi, horrible scenes are suggested with the appearance of men with weapons. In the Jacobean play, Bosola's men carry out the execution, presenting dead bodies and other blood-curdling business on the stage. Synge with a more refined sense of tragedy distils its effect for the audience without presenting them on the stage. But it creates the same experience and is given by a grave—dry, deep, and wild, and kept hidden by a curtain. This is exactly the vision of a new theatre awareness using the entire depth of the stage in a grotesque image of tragic reality.  

In The Road Round Ireland, Padraic Colum explains his discussion with Synge on the impact of the open grave on the stage. Synge said that "he had been close to death, and that the grave was a reality to him, and it was the reality in the tragedy he was writing." This indicates that the play "was concerned with his own situation, his love for Molly and his fears of death."  

The first response to the sudden revealing of the grave is an important excitement mixed with a sense of horror. And this response of the audience is visibly reflected in Deirdre, who in a faint voice requests Naisi, "Take me away... Take


18 Ibid.

me to hide in the rocks, for the night is coming quickly" (Plays, II, p. 249). She seems to hear strange words in the trees, which takes the audience away from the local, the present and the mundane. Here is a feeling of meta-theatrical experience in which elements outside the theatre world are invited.

As the play nears its end it becomes more of a ritual than a tragedy of murders. The murder of Naisi and his brothers and Deirdre's suicide must be assessed as a pure ritual for the sake of something highly spiritual. Deirdre is the cause of all these. Synge's climax is a point of triumph where love and immortality break through the grave and death as in the fourth movement of Brahms first symphony. "Deirdre's keen over Naisi before she kills herself is a song of life, not of death, but it springs from that close knowledge of death which alone can measure life."20

This is not only the climax of the play but it also marks a very high point of creativity. Here the playwright has creatively tied together many elements of drama as literature and as stagecraft. The total philosophy of the writer to be communicated has found expression in unequivocal terms, that is, his idea of reality of life and death, the value of beauty, youth and fidelity in human relationship. A thing of beauty, as Keats would say, is a joy for ever and the audience are alerted on the quality of sacrifice for that eternal beauty.

As many have pointed out, Synge's autobiographical utterances also appear to be woven as an integral part of the whole structure of the play. 21

While Deirdre is keening over the dead bodies of Naisi and his brothers, she creates meaning through her poetic utterances. She can be found bending over the grave and lamenting, referring to the shining and happy days with Naisi who made her feel always young. This posture on the stage is an eloquent image suggesting more ideas than could be expressed through words. She expresses how sincere and kind Naisi was towards her and took care of her by making a little tent for her with his rods and cloaks. But in his absence she thinks, "from this day my own fingers will be making a tent for me, spreading out my hairs and they knotted with the rain" (Plays, II, p. 261). With these words of unimaginable love and sympathy Deirdre must be doing a very significant stage business and movement upward and then side ways spreading out her hair: with her fingers almost like the open umbrella, broken because of her hair...knotted with the rain. This stage picture carries with it dark, lyrical, compassionate, aural and visual patterns.

Similar suggestions are also given for the audience who can by this time see a patch of colours both abstract and concrete in relation to Deirdre's dark and knotted hair spread out on the dead bodies of bright young men with her eyes open.

and the red flames of Emain behind. This complex sensuous pattern of sight and keening sound is realized for a moment by Conchubor with an excitement. Consequently he requests Deirdre to "come forward and leave Naisi the way I've left charred timber and a smell of burning in Emain Macha, and a heap of rubbish in the store house of many crowns" (Plays, II, p. 265). The graveyard is thus a point of life and death, or rather, the point of departure for the representatives of life and death. Deirdre is dead and cold with Naisi laid in the grave. The grave is more alive and beautiful with the three young and handsome soldiers hurled into it. Deirdre seeks their company, so that she can be young and beautiful for ever with them.

Thus the playwright has given a dramatic twist to the meaning and motive of the grave. The grave now represents, quite unusually, the source of life, strength and beauty and the country led by Conchubor has become, in a sense, a graveyard. Conchubor from this point of view becomes the keeper of the graveyard. The audience can read meaning akin to this at his movement, furious but defeated facial expressions, a mad and insensible rashness about everything that he runs after. The spectators see in Conchubor definite changes comparable to those of the ferryman of the nether world (Cú Chulainn). The king himself confesses this mental state of his to Lavarcham, "I am more powerful than he is though I am defeated and old" (Plays, II, p. 265). This reiteration of power sounds silly, ironic and paradoxical for the audience who see a red glow behind the
grave, which has risen out of the fire Fergus set to Emain.

With this complex pattern of colours, red flames and diverse experiences the audience encompass a wide vision of life touching on human recognition. After the flames have subdued and emotions subsided Conchubor gradually raises his head and turns to Lavarcham who has been all along a sane advisor and cool-headed woman with a motherly affection towards Deirdre. He must be then turning to Fergus who, in spite of himself, has been employed to shed the blood of the poor and the innocent. Fergus also presents a vivid picture saying, "four white bodies are laid down together, four clear lights are quenched in Ireland" (Plays, II, p. 269). His throwing the sword into the grave is also a meaningful stage business in the production of the play. When Fergus, his protector, goes out telling him, "our war is ended" (Plays, II, p. 269), Conchubor, like the great tragic heroes in world theatre—Oedipus, Lear and others—feels a kind of vacuum and moves a little forward as though groping in the dark.

Synge's sense of stagecraft reveals itself in the conceiving of a reasonable and dramatic change in the total person of Conchubor as the audience keep on watching. The change pertains mainly to the nature and character of Conchubor and not to the physical person. Here is a classical touch in building up a tragic character who, with the bare minimum of words, translates his experiences into powerful visuals. His picture is made clearer with the words of the old woman and
Lavarcham who are once again, as in the beginning, the chorus of the play. Conchubor, unlike the Shakespearian tragic heroes, does not become eloquent. He has just a single sentence to utter, "Take me with you, I'm hard set to see the way before me" (Plays, II, p. 269). This request, read with the old woman's sympathetic guidance, "This way, Conchubor" (Plays, II, p. 269), has the last and the leading visual suggestion that Conchubor is old and as blind as Oedipus. The visual sequence is that of Conchubor being led away by the old woman in total darkness.

The last image suggested by Lavarcham is that of a night with all the stoves dead, leaving a thick pall of darkness to cover the entire Emain Macha. Structurally, since the play is very compact the last unit when compared with the first, reveals a polar difference in tone, texture, and essence of life. When the play opened, it was all life, light, youth and clarity in action and the audience have watched a dramatic movement from a centre of brilliant light into a point of perfect darkness.

Deirdre of the Sorrows, has the qualities of Greek tragedies in the sense that it has a foreboding spirit and the whole surroundings have a mysterious involvement in it. Deirdre hears songs of the trees and the atmosphere is replete with hidden sounds and suggestions. Unlike the Greek characters she and others in this tragedy are aware of their fate. Like the Jacobeans, here the characters have something of their knowledge of the inevitable, though hidden, movements of the spirit in
the supreme moments of tragic experience. This idea of Una Ellis-Fermor is developed further with the support of Synge's autobiographical elements in the play. "He, who knew so much of the fundamental loneliness of human life, who lived so constantly with death at his elbow, shared their knowledge of the searching interplay of death and life."22

This interplay of death and life is made visible to the audience throughout the play and at the final unit life succeeds leaving death in shameful darkness. The victory over death is explicitly delineated in the heroic words and conduct of Deirdre who almost echoes Maurya's confidence in the face of death. This may be the confidence and victory of the playwright himself. Synge has a profound knowledge, "the knowledge of the freedom that comes from the parting of the last of the bonds of life."23 The Greek element, as well as the Elizabethan tragic experience, is echoed in the last unit of the play where a sublime sacrificial event is reenacted.

**Deirdre of the Sorrows as a ritual**

The ritual quality is one of the most striking elements of the play, especially its culmination in the last sequence. When considered for a modern production, a director can give an interpretation of Deirdre preparing herself for a sublime

22 Una Ellis-Fermor, *The Irish Dramatic Movement*, p. 185.

23 Ibid.
act or ritualistic sacrifice. She appears on the stage with "twigs for our fires." This is a ritual carried out willingly by the scapegoats who have a dual role of struggling against their fate and submitting themselves to the fatal and prophetic doom foreshadowing their life. A sensitive and receptive audience with some theatre experience will happily remember the classical pattern of fertility ritual which Gilbert Murray ascribed to the spiritual intention of Greek tragedy. The Greek plays were traditionally presented with processions and sacrifices in a sacred place associated with Dionysus. Here in Deirdre of the Sorrows the grave is prepared and maintained in a sacred atmosphere and nothing is hidden from the audience. The death of the great Deirdre, Naisi, and his two brothers can be considered as a sacrificial action because theirs is not abject death of helplessness. On the contrary they respect a value opposed to that of Conchubor. "The last speeches of Deirdre have the nobility and inevitability of great ritual; they are a beautiful lament, applicable to all generations." 24

The ritual base is akin to both the literary and theatre traditions of Ireland. The audience can get themselves spiritually involved in Deirdre of the Sorrows, because of the feeling that Deirdre's myth is theirs. But here is a problem: even though it is a shared myth and a part of their common cultural heritage,

they had to consciously wait and watch the moving tragedy taking shape out of the high mythical skeleton. Of the two important points to be emphasized, Synge left out the social aspect of king Conchubor's approach to the girl and chose the sexual part of the myth and he threw light on that with all the intensity possible and made it a subject of eternal appeal in terms of love, marriage, youth, age, and death. Sex is the central point of reference to all these aspects and it is a unifying subject of most of the tragedies of world theatre (Antony and Cleopatra, Othello, Oedipus, Agamemnon, The Duches of Malfi etc.). Synge has made it the central and pivotal point of creation. The mythical and historical narrative part has been converted into dramatically powerful issues of common interest for the audience.

**Synge's Deirdre more theatrical**

The changes that Synge effected are done with great theatrical acumen. He has brought all the elements of a successful and classical play into operation. The impact of the play is very powerful and concrete because of the concentration the audience are privileged to enjoy in terms of a small number of characters, singleness of plot and vision and the speed at which the plot is found to develop. Synge's play has more precision and strength than the plays of W. B. Yeats and George Russell on the same subject. Synge has also been successful in interpolating two motives into the deep structure of the play. First is the superhuman motivation which is already there in
the given myth. The second is human motivation which is displayed at every minor and major action. The audience is well aware of the first and the playwright alerts them with the second.

However, Synge seems to have modelled his play on some aspects of Lady Gregory's Deirdre. Lady Gregory introduces "a new sense of the tangible presence of the open grave and the clay in which the bodies are laid." At the final phase of Deirdre's lament over the loss of Naisi and her brothers, Synge has given her the stage business of throwing clay into the grave with the gestic and verbal expressions:

Draw a little back from the white bodies I am putting under a mound of clay and grasses that are withered--a mound will have a nook for my own self when the end is come. (Plays, II, p. 265)

The use of knife by Deirdre as the means of her own death was originally used by Lady Gregory, which Synge followed in his play for dramatic and theatrical effectiveness. Lady Gregory makes her heroine secure the knife from a carpenter in exchange for Naisi's valued ring. But Synge's sense of stage-production makes it more direct and simplified, supplying his Deirdre with Naisi's knife. Before going to the aid of Ainnle and Ardan, Naisi throws down his belt and cloak with the knife which Deirdre takes up and uses later.

The tragic vision

Synge presents the tragic vision of a theatre and literature supported by an aesthetic and moral view in which the beauty never fades and the loss and suffering is inescapable. Deirdre and Naisi have attained immortality while they have tasted the bitterness of loss and suffering. Deirdre is really at the centre of action which takes place in the given circumstances of a few characters who are not as self-willed and independent as she is. But these other characters also contribute to the total vision of tragedy in their own way with their fate. The mood of spiritual despair implicit in the characters around Deirdre is a reflection of the spiritual despair of the audience. Their doubts and frustrations are raised by the old woman and Lavarcham. Even though the play does not care much for the unities of time and place, the unity of action makes good for the loss, if any.

Deirdre of the Sorrows in a particular way reminds the modern audience of Antigone by Sophocles. In both plays the heroines sacrifice themselves in order to uphold the calls of their conscience. In the modern tragedy the pivotal point of attention is love while in the Greek theatre it is the social and political concerns. Both these heroines do not get the satisfaction of reconciliation as Hegel envisaged. They get satisfaction at the expense of their own life. According to Nietzsche the essential tragic types are of two kinds—Apollonian and Dionysian. The first relates to restraint while the second to more freedom and
enjoyment. Synge's Deirdre comes under the second with an influence of the first.

Synge's comedies have a Dionysian ecstasy with all the restraints removed, while his tragedies have a classical control of emotional exuberance. This does not imply that his tragedies are completely restrained to the extent of being lifeless statues. On the contrary, there is another type of ecstasy, enjoyment, pleasure and brilliant liberation of energy controlled by stoicism and asceticism. Synge himself seems to have referred to these three qualities to Yeats in Paris: "There are three things, any two of which have come together in the past, but never all three--asceticism, ecstasy, stoicism. I desire that we may bring together all three." 26

In Riders to the Sea there is ascetism and stoicism but not ecstasy. In Cathleen ni Houlihan by Yeats we have ecstasy and in a small degree, asceticism. In Deirdre of the Sorrows, Synge has successfully experimented a unison of these three transformed into powerful visual metaphors. He must have probably wanted to create the cathartic effects of this combination.

Deirdre stoically undergoes fatal sufferings on the way to her death and in refraining from becoming the queen of Emain and in accepting a life of Nature, she becomes a symbol of asceticism. Conchubor is opposed to these values of life which are represented on the stage by the costly and shining jewels

and hangings brought by him for Deirdre. But she remains ascetic, simple and innocent in her mind untouched by any of the urban approaches. The ecstasy displayed by her manifests itself at two levels: At the level of sexual pleasure enjoyed with Naisi who makes her feel young always, she forgets all the curse and disturbances caused by Conchubor. She is all joy and happiness which knows no bounds; the second level of ecstasy enjoyed by Deirdre is a sublimated state of mind transcending time and place, thereby making all the other experiences, men and matters of the world, look simply meaningless. This is a higher plane of creative enjoyment in which sorrow is not sorrow and pain is not pain. They are only luminous steps to higher avenues of understanding, reconciliation, and permanent bliss and Deirdre has reached that state of mind:

I have put away sorrow like a shoe that is worn out and muddy, for it is I have had a life that will be envied by great companies. . . . It is not a small thing to be rid of grey hairs and the loosening of the teeth [With a sort of triumph]. . . . It was the choice of lives we had in the clear woods, and in the grave we’re safe surely. (Plays, II, pp. 267-69)

This idea of uniting stoicism, asceticism and ecstasy in practical theatre through visual images is a rare and significant contribution of Synge to modern drama. There is an astringent joy and hardness in everything that Synge did.

It is this hardness, affirming the contradictions of experience, that gives us moments of authentic drama: Maurya accepting the death of Bartley, Pegeen burning her lover's leg, Deirdre and Naisi quarrelling by the open grave. 27

27 Ronald Gaskell, Drama and Reality: The European Theatre Since Ibsen, p. 100.
Thus *Deirdre of the Sorrows* is a testimony to the playwright's practical awareness of drama as a visual art. Synge has conceived of the whole plot as eventful scenes on the stage. Naturally it has a number of "spectacular scenes which would give the play its impact. The great set-pieces--Deirdre receiving Naisi in state, the 'strong climax' in Alban, the 'final summing up'--are planned almost as tableaux or as operatic arias."28 Synge has "reworked a motif from the ancient literature in his modern play"29 and consequently established a semiotic rapport with his audience. The nature and animal imageries, the "motif of blood-on-snow,"30 the grave, the red flames swallowing Emain in the dark night and many other iterative visual metaphors and auditory suggestions make the play an exciting piece of stagecraft. Considering the literary qualities, "the language lacks the rage and dignity the stage directions suggest."31 Quite often it falls into rhetoric and becomes repetitive. It may be due to Synge's own lack of awareness of the everyday existence of the Saga characters he has portrayed. His own design that Molly Allgood, his love, should have a 'star role' in the play must also have reduced its tension.


30 Ibid.