CHAPTER II

The Shadow of the Glen--An Experiment in Dramatic Contrast and Reversal

The first production of The Shadow of the Glen in 1903 signified a thorough change in the Irish theatre. "We introduced a new play by an author whose work was later to make the name of the Irish theatre famous all over the world."¹ Maire Nic Shiubhlaigh, the famous actress who played the role of Nora in the first production, records in The Splendid Years:

the plot, strictly speaking, was not original but the treatment was. It was completely different to anything we had known before; the play itself was a masterpiece of dramatic construction. It was, in fact, the first of the Irish "realist" dramas.²

Synge became a controversial playwright with the production of The Shadow of the Glen which was, typically, a peasant play. As a piece of literature The Shadow of the Glen is more noteworthy than as a piece of stagecraft. When Synge wrote this play he was more of a literary dilettante than a perfect craftsman of theatre. Here "we can observe the dramatist in

² Ibid.
the making. In many technical points of writing and staging, The Shadow of the Glen is a representative work of a serious beginner. Synge the poet and the musician can be found dominating the play with an artistic sense of stage production unprecedented in the Irish theatre. The tales and anecdotes and his own personal experiences are woven into beautiful dramatic tapestries, embroidered with the rhythmic language of the Irish peasant. The language is difficult for an actor to learn by heart, but if delivered correctly, it is unusually effective.

Synge's idea of stagecraft and dramatic creation is discernible in a nutshell in the play. His deep and strong attachment to the Irish past, his conviction of the strength of the pure Gaelic speech of the Irish peasants, the indelible and strong influence of nature and its mystic hold on the creative faculty of the playwright, the innate force of the individual sense of freedom, the eternal question of age, death, the loveless human association etc. find powerful expression in this play. It is also an example of personal and lyrical moods creatively dramatized. "In this distinctive use of material drawn from Irish life and legend, in these methods, in these interests and attitudes and in this imaginative synthesis, The Shadow of the Glen is typical of all Synge's dramatic work." All these points in different degrees appear in his later plays also. Here they have a literary and

linguistic predominance, thereby pleasing the ear more than satisfying the eye.

This is not to imply that *The Shadow of the Glen* is not potentially a powerful stage play. On the contrary, it has a perfect structure of stage images invoking their visual dimensions together with a strong sense of characterization. The first actress in the role of Nora herself comments on the quality of the play: "Each of the four characters offered ample scope to whoever would be chosen to play them." This is to suggest that the play has an inner vitality because of the characters, especially those of Nora and the tramp.

The play is based on a story Synge heard in the Aran Islands. It relates to an old man who wanted to detect the immoral ways of his young wife. So he feigned death. The woman went out after entrusting the dead body to a stranger.

In half an hour his wife came back and a young man along with her. Well, she gave him his tea and she told him he was tired and he would do right to go and lie down in the bedroom.

The young man went in and the woman sat down to watch by the dead man. A while after she got up and "Stranger," says she, "I'm going in to get the candle out of the room; I'm thinking the young man will be asleep by this time." She went into the bedroom, but the devil a bit of her came back.

Then the dead man got up and he took one stick and he gave the other to myself. We went in and we saw them lying together with her head on his arm. The dead man hit him a blow with the stick

5 Maire Nic Shiubhlaigh, *The Splendid Years*, p. 42.
so that the blood out of him leaped up and hit the gallery. That is my story.  

The story, like many other pieces, appeared to be challenging to Synge because of its dramatic potential. The brutal elements of violence and revenge have been carefully, and judiciously weeded out. In their place Synge has brought in a well-developed and properly motivated realistic drama devoid of vulgarity, platitudes and commonplace repetitions. It has become possible because of the poetic language which could easily express the intimate and innate feelings of the peasant folk deep-rooted in the ancient cultural heroism. Synge has also been able to visualize and creditably develop a dramatic idiom for the theatre upsurge in Ireland.

The source material is effectively transformed into a wholesome literary piece with leaning towards commendable stagecraft. The characters have a life of their own because of their intensity and psychological complexity. The idea of dramatic technique displayed by the playwright in synthesizing the diverse elements of Man and Nature is noteworthy:

In it a singular power in the use of words and a mastery of dramatic technique are applied to fuse into a new whole a number of disparate elements: Pat's story; Synge's experience in Wicklow and Aran; Synge's pre-occupation with what he felt was a deep rooted tension between material security and a free full imaginative life; and his keen awareness of the transience of youth and beauty.  

7 Alan Price, Synge and Anglo-Irish Drama, p. 126.
From the point of view of the spectator, there are two levels of experience enacted on the stage. One is a mock-wake and the other, Nora's pilgrimage to freedom. The wake proves itself to be mocking only when Dara Burke gets up to reveal himself to the tramp in the absence of Nora. When the play begins in the "cottage kitchen; turf fire on the right; a bed near it against the wall, with a body lying on it covered with a sheet" (Plays, I, p. 33), the audience take it for a real situation. "There are a couple of glasses on the table, and a bottle of whisky, as if for a wake, with two cups, a tea pot and a home-made cake" (Plays, I, p. 33). Synge expresses through these stage directions, a thorough sense of creating a theatrical atmosphere. The details are delineated with the utmost care suggesting the background of a wake and the single figure of a young lady moving about arranging things in proper order. The stage direction "Nora Burke is moving about the room, setting a few things, and lighting candles on the table, looking now and then at the bed with an uneasy look" (Plays, I, p. 33) implies that at the outset a keen interest in the character of the young lady is initiated. The lighting of candles also suggests an interesting use of stage-lighting which, if effectively executed, can lend the scenic unit a poetic, sculptural and three-dimensional quality. By this time he has also given the audience scope for ample doubts, questions and suppositions thereby making the opening scene striking, sound and gripping.
Thus the audience see two images: one static, dead and still, and the other moving, dynamic, uneasy, and changing. The dead body covered with a sheet is lying on a bed near the turf fire against the wall of the cottage kitchen, indicating something close to a ritual related to the dead. When the scene of the dead person and the contrasting moving picture of the uneasy Nora is established properly, there is a knock at the door. Now, as Daniel Corkery points out, the main interests which Synge's stage-craft evokes in us through the event are in "curiosity and swift action." Later we come to understand the irony of the situation--the dead man is actively "alive" in the given surroundings while the actively moving Nora is "desperate." This is the general pattern of the structure of Synge's plays: the dark irony built up with twisted dramatic situations.

Synge is very careful about the opening unit of the play. One may be prompted to think of the opening scenes of Macbeth or Hamlet. In both these, the supernatural is brought to the attention of the audience and the element has a vital role in communicating the total purpose of the writer. The opening scene of Hamlet refers to the ghost and it begins in a mysterious atmosphere, when, according to Bernard: "it is now struck-twelve." In the night, Francisco's remark is also important, "it is bitter cold, and I am sick at heart." Before long the ghost appears well armed. It is enough to awaken any

audience to be spiritually involved with all their senses alert. This method of awakening the audience is the theatre practice of Shakespeare who does so with the initial suggestions and meaning integrated in the plot. The first scene of Macbeth opens in "an open place, thunder and lightning. Enter three witches." These supernatural beings in their own strange ways and ironic expressions plunge into the fate of Macbeth in the eighth line itself. The Shadow does not have the exuberance and turbulence seen in Macbeth or Hamlet. But the opening impact created on the audience is unmistakably similar, at least for some time.

Since we take some time to identify the persons—the dead and the moving—we may be curious and eagerly waiting for the next unit of action. This is the first step of Synge's success in creating an arresting situation for the audience to be thoroughly engaged in the visual impact of the play. Within a short span of time "someone knocked softly at the door" (Plays, I, p. 33). That aural drama leaves us startled for a moment and then comes the unexpected sight of the lady of the house welcoming the tramp. In this context an experienced theatre-goer can make a beautiful visual picture in his mind connecting the dead man, the lady and the visitor in relation to their spirit and movement: The dead man has ceased movement; his wife Nora is on the threshold of excited movements while the tramp is movement personified. It is no wonder that Nora goes out into a world of strange experiences at the end of the
addition to the dramatic function of suggesting the time of action, the expression takes us far deep into the mind of the lady strengthened by her reference to the "wild night" and "the rain falling." These words suggest sprightly movement, vigorous action and to and fro or forward and backward motion pointing out the "desirable relation between Man and Nature." "Wild night" also brings in a picture of diabolically motivated spirits with some superhuman presence working within its own structure. As the play develops, one finds that these expressions gather greater force and relevance with the reference to the past, the wild dead Darcy, or to the pregnant woman. . . . As Howe has rightly pointed out, in this retrospective method of exposition, "Synge has surpassed even Ibsen." It may also foresee the would-be wild life they are going to lead together in future. The sensual connotations also have to be taken into account because of her unsatisfactory and loveless married life with an old man. Especially the image expressed in the words of a woman placed against the background of dry inanimate waste, has strong associations with barren life possessing providential plurality of meaning ranging from creation (fertility) and growth to destruction (deluge-flood). These levels are connected with different moods and approaches of the character. This is not to be taken as a forbidding aspect of nature because later Nora


herself goes out with the tramp into the wild night of "rain falling."

The tramp and Nora watch the queer look on the dead man's face. But their closeness with the dead body and all reference to it die out with their remarks about Patch Darcy who is another dead man but now raised to a heroic level. It seems that he and Nora were good friends and their association was something more than being friendly. Nora is quite eloquent talking about him. Even though he is physically absent on the stage the playwright has described his wonders in such a way as to prompt anybody to assign him a place on the stage. His memories recollected by Nora take her away from the dead body and the tramp. She must be at this time moving down stage near the entrance looking out on the mighty hills. Her reminiscences could be almost like a soliloquy or an aside. She could even forget completely the presence of the other two persons on the stage. Synge has suggested movement of this kind in the soft unlocking of Nora's mind.

Nora:— (speaking sorrowfully and slowly)
God spare Darcy, he'd always look in here and he passing up or passing down, and it's very lonesome I was after him a long while (she looks over at the bed and lowers her voice, speaking very clearly), and then I got happy again--if it's ever happy we are, stranger--for I got used to being lonesome. (A short pause; then she stands up.) Was there any one on the last bit of the road, stranger, and you coming from Aughrim? (Plays, I, p. 39)

Towards the end of this recollection Nora could turn to the tramp, which again will mark a turning point in the stage composition and thematic development. The tramp, by way of
answering her question, says that "there was a young man with a drift of mountain ewes and he running after them this way and that" (Plays, I, p. 39). The visual quality of this passage cannot be overlooked. Nora smiles to herself on listening to the reference to Michael who is running after the ewes this way and that. The expression "ewe" also might suggest sexual nuances to an Irish audience and Michael running after them is a pleasing thought to Nora and she immediately goes in search of him.

The theme takes on a different turn at the next movement. The auditory and visual suggestions already given are intensified and the images properly linked together. Immediately after Nora's exit Dan Burke sits up with the tramp uneasily looking up and springing to his feet with a movement of terror and comforts his companion who is really and visibly trembling. This is a feast to the eyes of the audience who are now masters of the situation with the motives of the characters gradually revealed one after another. Then is heard from outside a long whistle made by Nora to attract the attention of the young man at a distance. Old Dan cannot tolerate this and he speaks fiercely of it:

Ah, the devil mend her. . . . Do you hear that stranger? Did ever you hear another woman could whistle the like of that with two fingers in her mouth? (Plays, I, pp. 41-43)

"The incompatibility between husband and wife is finely brought out at this point."¹² Here the auditory experience of the

¹² Alan Price, Synge and Anglo-Irish Drama, p. 121.
audience is completed with the visual descriptions. The following developments explain the stage devices Synge was quite aware of. After a long conversation between them the tramp agrees to be helpful to the old man. Once again the dead man goes under the sheet hurriedly and the tramp starts stitching his coat.

As the play progresses there are more groupings and compositions required on the stage. Now Nora comes back with Michael. The audience must be more attentive and excited eagerly waiting for the consequences. Michael and Nora do not mind the presence of the tramp very much. Nora says to Michael in a low voice, "let you not mind him at all, Michael Dara. He has a drop taken, and it's soon he'll be falling asleep" (Plays, I, p. 47). Nora's sensual and sensuous talk to Michael reveals her latent desires. Nora confesses her unfulfilled desires and her passion for strong men:

If it's a power of men I'm after knowing they were fine men, for I was a hard child to please, and a hard girl to please (she looks at him a little sternly) and it's a hard woman I am to please this day, Michael Dara, and it's no lie I'm telling you. (Plays, I, p. 49)

This piece of dialogue has a dominant motivational force in the build up of the play and the mutual relationship of the characters. The audience can see with their own eyes and feel with their own mind the vibrant and burning mind of Nora.

Michael Dara's timid statement, "I will not, Nora, I do be afeard of the dead", provokes laughter in the audience because of their discrepant awareness. Besides, the spectator was waiting for a strong young man with real masculine force
and due dignity, who could easily protect Nora from her fears of all kinds. Then comes an effeminate, selfish creature, embodiment of timidity, stealth and secretiveness. This type of contrast and reversal is a basic pattern followed in the deep structure of the play. Dan and Michael "represent the complacent male materialism against which Synge set restless female idealism in several of his plays. It is not, indeed, Irish womanhood that is being attacked here, but Irish manhood."  

The beginning, for instance, is indicative of the contrasting behaviour in death and life, stillness and movement. Later the very same contrast is reversed and revealed to have a different motive when Dan Burke wakes up. Similarly the tramp who just drops in for shelter out of the wilderness in the open, is entrusted with the duty of taking care of the "dead" till Nora brings home the young man of the neighbourhood for help. As time passes the "dead" himself takes the tramp into his confidence and suggests that he might keep an eye on Nora's wanton ways. Eventually, the refugee becomes the master of the situation, making the reversal complete.  

The playwright projects a dramatic context in which some characters are placed as if they are trapped. They expect themselves to be released from the given circumstance. Seeing the characters' predicament and the fate undeservedly inflicted upon them, the spectators also hope that they might be let out

---

of that painful prison. The dramatist with a sense of stagecraft lets the characters as well as the spectators believe in a certain course of action through a particular means of escape or salvation. The characters "act" accordingly while the next trap in store for them is kept hidden at a reasonable distance. They struggle hard to escape; they fight, fret, argue, break the chains, wound and kill, to finally slip out of their trap quite victoriously into a new one neatly kept ready for them. They are then shocked and the audience surprised. The shock will gradually develop itself into suffocation and a search for the foe within the frame or trap. It will surge into growling, casting aspersion, detecting the nature of the forces surrounding them. The failure that one is inescapably destined to fall into is an enigma. The potential antagonists will manifest themselves in human, supernatural or elemental forms. They may also present themselves as chances, accidents, unconscious references etc. which will ultimately assume an invincible quality. The protagonists again try their best to find a way out and the audience co-operate by their expectant and sympathetic mood. This idea of trap and escape which is quite conspicuous in The Shadow of the Glen has been repeatedly used by Synge in all his plays.

The refugee (tramp) becomes the master and wins the heart of both Nora and Dan Burke. Dan Burke is all the more happy to have trusted the tramp because he proves himself to be honest. When questioned by Nora on her return with Michael, "There was
no sign from himself?" (Plays, I, p. 45). Dan and the spectators are probably straining their ears to hear his comments. "No sign at all, lady of the house" (Plays, I, p. 45). It is a lie. The audience know it but they love him for it because it sounds proper and endearing. Moreover, in this lie lies the inner action of the play, tense and kinetic waiting for development. The audience are now absorbed in it and await the result.

The play develops sequentially with different motives at work. Dan is feigning death to detect his wife's suspicious character; the tramp is vaguely aligning himself with it. But Nora's motives are deeper and more definite. When she asks the tramp more persuasively, "Will you go into the little room and stretch yourself a short while on the bed? I'm thinking it's destroyed you are walking the length of that way in the great rain" (Plays, I, p. 45), we are sure that what she is interested in is not his calmness, rest or his comfort but his absence from there. She must be left alone with Michael Dara to plan her future life. It is not even the wake or such other ceremonies associated with the dead. The tramp's answer is equally interesting. "Is it go away and leave you, and you having a wake, lady of the house? I will not, surely" (Plays, I, p. 45).

The play of cross-purposes and sufficiently motivated action continues. The talk between Nora and Michael Dara is a good example: "We are not told explicitly that she is adulterous or promiscuous. It is, however, beautifully implied." With

all the circumstances and background of her loveless married life introduced and explained to him, she hopes, he will be enamoured of her and they will have a fruitful life on the income left by old Dan. But he wants to know more about the problems and worries that torment her. "What is it ails you this night, Nora Burke?" (Plays, I, p. 49). Even when he asks this question his eyes are fixed on the little piles of money she has put on the table. Their motives are clear. They are in extreme contrast to each other. She is contemplating a world far far away from his reach. It is free from being sick, old and grey. She ponders over the questions of life getting old and grey; she is a victim capsized in this flux of time. Even if she is young there is no joy of a new life.

The most important and interesting unit of the play is the action of Dan Burke who sits up noiselessly from under the sheet with his hand to his face. He is there almost like a sculpture with his white hair sticking out round his head. Without knowing or seeing the figure in the bed, Nora and Michael with their backs to the bed go on talking of their dreams. As far as the audience are concerned this is the central picture provided on the stage and the composition of the characters must be made in a way which must highlight the old man when he sits up upstage. Nora explains to Michael the fate of Michael himself getting old and sitting up in his bed like her own husband. This is quite obviously a conscious description of an image visibly presented on the stage. This seems to be a
favourite theatre practice of Synge where he blends the visual
and the auditory quite organically.

From this moment onwards, the attention of the audience
changes from one character to another. First it is Dan Burke
himself. He assumes significance because the audience suppose
many possible ways in which he may react. The curiosity of
the audience is aroused very much. It sits up like the old
man, listening and waiting. The important point of dramatic
development is the clash of contrasting interests at a major
turning point. In all the previous contrasts and reversals the
results were at minor turning points; all these minor turning
points have now a cumulative effect. Dan Burke orders his wife
to get out of the house for a life on the road. He heard her
praising freedom, sunlight, morning, young men etc. and he also
saw Michael Dara putting his hand around Nora. The tramp reminds
him of his hard and unkind action. Here the motives are at
loggerheads. Michael cannot take her for a wife on the road;
nor is she willing very much to be with him in the wild open.
Then the unexpected happens as in all the great plays of world
theatre: the tramp himself walks out with Nora who doubts for a
moment, "What good is a grand morning when I am destroyed surely,
and I going out to get my death walking the roads?" (Plays, I,
p. 55). The tramp assures her of a happy life with him because
he knows all the ways of the world to make a decent living. The
drama of Nora does not conclude here; it continues with fiercer
intensity. The audience may remember at this juncture her name...
in Ibsen. "Since human relationships are eternally inconclusive, one should finish a work with an indication of further continuation, as Ibsen does in _A Doll's House._"¹⁵

The last grouping must be made with Michael and Dan Burke leisurely drinking and smoking. In the plays of Synge, most of the characters are cut off from all social institutions either by nature or by design. Nora is one among them struggling to wriggle out of the lonely trap. What is the nature of Nora's loneliness? Will it be solved when she has children? Or is it a feeling of unfulfilled desires ranging from intimate physical pleasures to the remote spiritual quest? Is it not actually intertwined with a sense of freedom beyond the domestic happiness of a settled family life? But is she clear and certain about that world of freedom with no barriers? Has it not got something to do with the spirits of Darcy moving outside or the sun and moon shining and the birds flying and singing? Nora herself is trying to fathom her mind:

> What good is a bit of a farm with cows on it, and sheep on the back hills, when you do be sitting looking out from a door the like of that door, and seeing nothing but the mists rolling down the bog, and the mists again and they rolling up the bog and hearing nothing but the wind crying out in the bits of broken trees were left from the great storm, and the streams roaring with the rain? (_Plays, I_, p. 49)

Michael looking at her uneasily cannot grasp the seriousness of her fate. "I've heard tell it is the like of the talk you do

hear from men, and they after being a great while on the back hills" (Plays, I, p. 49). Nora is trying to answer his questions in different ways suggesting her fruitless married life with Dan Burke and her awareness of getting old. Mary Brien is referred to in comparison, who is blessed with two children.

This process of life analysed with subjective involvement and day-dreaming brings out Nora's approach to life, birth, growth, death, morning, evening etc. An individual placed against a wild force of natural loneliness involving the destructive phases of all charms is Nora's personal concern. She is here the subject of her own contemplation, the victim of a long process of irreparable frustration in the shadow of the glen. "She also feels herself trapped by time itself." 16 She has no children or companion to share the loneliness or to dispel the gloom cast over her.

Isn't it a long while I am sitting here in the winter and the summer, and the fine spring, with the young growing behind me and the old passing, saying to myself one time to look on Mary Brien, who wasn't that height (holding out her hand), and I am a fine girl growing up, and there she is now with two children, and another coming on her in three months or four? (Plays, I, p. 51)

This poetic outburst of her utter helplessness owing to reasons beyond her grasp cannot be shared and understood even at the simplest level of co-existence by the worldly and dull Michael Dara who interrupts her by "moving over three of the piles and saying 'That's three pounds we have now, Nora Burke'" (Plays.

Thus she is really in a dilemma. The unquenchable thirst for something inaccessible pervades her total being making her restless at the root of her existence.

Nora Burke is terribly frightened of the passage of time and its impact on all human beings. Her awareness manifests itself in her assessment of a dream in which she marries somebody like Michael. "God forgive me, Michael Dara, we'll all be getting old, but it's a queer thing surely" (Plays, I, p. 53). This dilemma suggests that Nora herself cannot find a way out of this labyrinth of the given situation. This is the complexity and the essential femininity of Nora's character which is explained by Yeats in his assessment of the play. He is actually raising the spectator's own doubts:

Why does this woman go out of her house? Is it because she cannot help herself, or is she content to go? Why is it not all made clearer? And yet, like everybody when caught up into great events, she does many things without being quite certain why she does them. . . . She feels an emotion that she does not understand. She is driven by desires that need for their expression, not "I admire this man," or "I must go, whether I will or no," but words full of suggestion, rhythms of voice, movements that escape analysis. . . . She is intoxicated by a dream which is hardly understood by herself, but possesses her like something half remembered on a sudden wakening.17

The "emotion that she does not understand" is interwoven with the theme of the play. It is this feeling of electric movement from the bottommost part of the structure that drives it forward. The propelling force of motion is innate in the play because it

appears to be born in the very conceptual stage. The active movements seen on the stage are thus justified and required by the source centre of the whole play. Here visuals of death and life are trapped together, each struggling to escape at the expense of the other. The writer's imagination has enlivened that of the protagonist of the play thereby the tramp and Nora Burke envisage a romantic life of creative freedom.

This idea of freedom is dramatically brought to the forefront with the art of a peasant speech form in which the expressions have been compressed, selected artistically and applied with utmost appropriateness. "It is the relation of the language to the action; and this can vary from simple decoration through an added dimension to new kinds of imaginative control." 18 This rhythmic infrastructure of a new theatre language was recognized by at least a few of his own contemporaries in the Abbey Theatre. For instance, W. B. Yeats commented upon this:

When he brought The Shadow of the Glen, his first play, to the Irish National Theatre Society, the players were puzzled by the rhythm but gradually they became certain that his woman of the Glens, as melancholy as a curlew driven to distraction by her own sensitiveness, her own fineness, could not speak with any other tongue, that all his people would change their life if the rhythm changed. 19


19 W. B. Yeats, Essays and Introductions, p. 300.
Synge has successfully dovetailed the language and the atmosphere of the play. In fact, success depends to a large extent on the proper atmosphere in which the whole incident is placed. The atmosphere brings together the force and strength of a good comedy in *The Shadow of the Glen*. These two elements may appear to be contrasted; comedy and the shadow of a glen. Most of the artists in the Irish National Theatre Society looked upon the play as "an exceptionally well written comedy." Comedy requires a bright atmosphere of love, ridicule, playfulness and hilariousness. The shadow of the glen suggests something gloomy and forlorn. The loneliness suggested against the wilderness of Nature is cut deep into the comic trait of the play because Nora Burke walks out of the house with the tramp owing to the insufferable loneliness of the life in the house with her old and sickly husband. Marriage for them has not solved the problem of loneliness. Usually among the peasant folk in Ireland women are married after thirty or thirty-five. Nora also remained unmarried till she was sufficiently old. Even after marriage her life was imperfect, sterile and lonely.

Dan Burke had the selfish motive of feeding his young wife for the sake of driving away his loneliness, both physical and spiritual. He was terribly disappointed to find his "young wife" looking for other sources of comfort and inspiration. He tried to subdue her with all the masculine forces he could.

command, to no avail. Consequently he turned out to be malicious, plotting and conspiring against her, of course, all within himself. "Her spiritual longings are as real as her physical needs. She easily ascends higher than your philistine can, just as she gladly descends lower than he thinks he ought to." So the central point of attraction is Nora's plight which, of course, decides the development of the plot.

A careful stage production of The Shadow of the Glen will show that from start to finish the play is gathering momentum for onward movement. The first unit discloses Nora's moving about within the room in silence. As it advances, the silences and stillness vanish. The suppressed desires and urgency are expressed with a vengeance. Nora cannot stop at any point. Whether it is with Michael or with the tramp she has to move on. The progressive movement is the source of life and strength of the play which can be physicalized by a trained and powerful actress.

The play begins in silence and ends in the dream of sounds and songs. The tramp reminds Nora: "You will be hearing the herons crying out over the black lakes, and you'll be hearing the grouse, and the owls with them, and the larks and the big thrushes when the days are warm" (Plays, I, p. 57). It is not overdoing it if a director creates a beautiful and harmonious sound pattern copied from nature. It could include the cries and songs of birds, the soft flow of breeze, the

gurgling sound of water flowing and the suggestions of notes tangential to the inner world of the being, and the passing shadows of lonely glens. In contrast to this musical exhilaration the beginning could be slow, silent and quiet except for the soft sound produced by Nora's movement, things handled and her long sighs subdued and suppressed.

The play has only four characters on the stage thereby emphasizing the loneliness of the people. But the audience get a colourful impression of an active world outside this small cottage. Patch Darcy's figure is memorable. He has assumed a supernatural greatness. We also feel compelled to believe that he is a strong force now working within Nora who has also two contrasting figures of life and age. Mary Brien is young with two children while Peggy Cavanagh is old and grey haired. Dan Burke's sister living nearby is also referred to. Nora has a longing for the world outside, for the exciting experience which quite accidentally the tramp brings in, symbolizing and signifying everything strong, sturdy, hard, dynamic, challenging, fruitful and creative. It seems that he may not even be subjected to the wild passage of time. "The Tramp," says David H. Greene, "is not flesh and blood; he is a password to happiness."²²

Synge's stagecraft and dramatic quality lie in the visual beauty of the language. He has distilled out of the real speeches he heard in real life an idiom for the modern

theatre. He has claimed truly that he has not used any expression which he did not come across in his childhood or in different walks of life. In his preface to The Playboy of the Western World he says:

> When I was writing The Shadow of the Glen some years ago, I got more aid than any learning could have given me from a chink in the floor of the old Wicklow house where I was staying, that let me hear what was being said by the servant girls in the kitchen. This matter, I think, is of importance for in countries where the imagination of the people, and the language they use, is rich and living, it is possible for a writer to be rich and copious in his words, and at the same time to give the reality which is the root of all poetry, in a comprehensive and natural form.\(^2\)\(^3\)

This explains the imaginative and judicious nature of Synge's language which is at bottom poetic in spirit. It is real and true to life. The reality must be judged here on the plane of pure sense of theatre.

The language of The Shadow of the Glen evokes poetic images one after another thereby giving the audience as well as the reader a series of connected visual images with distinctive qualities of theatrical validity. For instance, Nora's reply to Michael's question, "I'm thinking it's power of men---you're after knowing if it's in a lonesome place you live itself," is very striking with a central idea projecting the totality of her character. This oral picture of a powerful turbulent woman who has not been pleased or sexually satisfied at any age is

continued with the physical and visual images suggesting the deeper poetic design of dissatisfaction. It is this quality in Nora that provoked many critics to categorize her as a representative of the new woman concept: "Nora Burke is indeed something of the new Woman, in spite of the fact that she has probably never been out of the long glen in Co.Wicklow which symbolizes the isolation of the Irish mind." Thus the aural, verbal and visual images are effectively and organically linked together.

What is analytically accessible in terms of dramatic literature in Synge is perfectly perceptible on the stage in terms of stage-craft. The dramatic dialogue here gives an idea for the ear; at the same time it presents a picture for the eye as well. This type of dramatic dialogue evoking visuals helps an actor in identifying himself with the role he is playing. It goes beyond the ordinary levels of conversation and naturally the effects created on the mental arena of the audience solely depend upon this. It helps the audience towards a full and more satisfying appreciation of the play. J. L. Styan wholeheartedly argues for this type of visual and auditory pattern:

We must look first to the structure of idea and emotion in the dialogue itself, how the actor is to embody it in speech and action, and the sort of work the audience must do before the play is created in their minds. An understanding of the processes of the theatrical experience is necessary for the full appreciation of the play.24


In *The Shadow of the Glen* Synge makes us feel the three-dimensional movements and figures in action. The words they speak can be heard and the suggested pictures immediately made visible. Here is an example of Nora's description of "an old man sitting up there in his bed with no teeth in him and rough word in his mouth . . ." followed by her own villainous husband, old and weak, sitting up in the bed behind. Then Dan Burke describes the whistle as if we see the picture of Nora with two fingers in her mouth whistling aloud. Here the words appeal to our ears as well as to the eyes. It is almost "spoken action." These dialogues have a definite design giving the audience moving pictures of a "pattern of movement of the Glen." What Peter Brook says about Jean Anouilh is applicable to J. M. Synge also with respect to the picturesque conversations of *The Shadow of the Glen.* He, according to Peter Brook, is

in the tradition of the commedia dell'arte. His plays are recorded improvisations. Like Chopin, he preconceives the accidental and calls it an impromptu. He is a poet, but not a poet of words: he is a poet of words-acted, of scenes-set, of players-performing.26

The action-oriented dialogues have another perceptive quality. They reveal the innermost state of mind of the characters. They also introduce quite suggestively the character spoken to and help to further the plot and suggest actions of the future and sum up those of the past. The conversation

between the tramp and Nora and Michael and Nora clearly reveals this multi-functional nature of Synge's dramatic language. It also has the rare quality of poetic rhythm, tone and tempo required by the personal and particular touch of the central theme:

It was neither verse nor prose. The speeches had a musical lilt, absolutely different to anything I had heard before. . . . His prose highly musical and with flashes of the most beautiful poetry, he devised simply by transcribing direct from the Gaelic of the islands.27

Most of the time, particularly in the first part of the play, the characters whisper or speak in a very low voice because it presents the situation of a wake. Moreover, Nora's desires and attitudes are secrets unlocked to us only towards the end. On many occasions the audience may feel that the characters speak out their private thoughts to them. Thus the emotional rhythm of subdued expressions and the play's unusual pattern of music are deeply felt. It is a melancholy music raised to the mad level of ecstasy and this ecstatic musical exuberance can be heard towards the end of the play when Nora rushes out to join the company of wild birds outside.

Stage and hand properties

The Shadow of the Glen gains a very high dramatic score with the sense of stage-craft displayed at different levels. The most important of them may be the properties used in the play. Synge has here used very consciously some particular

properties other than the ones used for set design. The special properties used with a dramatic purpose deserve our attention and close analysis. The set is that of an ordinary cottage kitchen and the essentials befitting the place are all mentioned. Besides them, there are properties like "a couple of glasses on the table and a bottle of whisky as if for a wake, with two cups, a tea-pot and a home made cake." As we go further we find Nora taking up a stocking with money from the table and putting it in her pocket. There is a pipe and tobacco also kept in the room. The bed is naturally referred to with a special mention of the white sheet.

In a play by a good and experienced theatre artist the properties used will also have different incremental functions. The dress and the properties of a character can reveal something hidden in its nature. Here, for instance, the use of the black stick is very striking. Dan wants the tramp "to bring me a black stick you'll see in the west corner by the wall" (Plays, I, p. 43). The colour recalls something dark in the old man's mind as well as something diabolical and inauspicious about the incident or action intended by him. Then some practical questions come up: Was there already a blackstick in the west corner by the wall? If so, was it used quite often? Why should it be black at all? The answers may be found in the old man's character and from this it must be guessed that he was in the habit of teasing and taunting his young wife. In Ireland a black stick would almost certainly be made from bog-oak, a tree that grows in the peat, which is very ancient and a very hard wood.
can be source and centre of authority. Nora might have been afraid of the black stick. It has something to do with ill-omen and ill-luck as was believed by the natives. This belief can be found in another property used in the play. The tramp says (moving uneasily to Nora),

maybe if you'd a piece of a grey thread and a sharp needle—there's great safety in a needle, lady of the house. I'd be putting a little stitch here and there in my old coat, the time I'll be praying for his soul and it going up naked to the saints of god. (Plays, I, p. 41)

The needle may be a means of warding off the evil forces. It is only in the fitness of his character to have thought of the ghastly spirit to be driven away. It is also proper when one thinks of the tramp driving away the spirit of the dead (man) and going out with young Nora.

If the black stick and the needle are characteristic hand properties of the old man and the nomadic tramp respectively, money is an appropriate property that is used by Michael Dara. As Nora is ruminating over her futile life in loneliness, Michael is avariciously moving over the piles of the money put on the table from Nora's stocking. In this context the money signifies a meaningful symbol of the relationship among Dan Burke, Nora, Tramp and Michael. Money is a decisive factor in the institution of marriage in most countries, especially in Ireland. To quote T. R. Henn, "the country [Ireland] is one of loveless marriages, arranged by the matchmakers, dowry balanced against land and cattle."29 This emphasizes the role money played in

the system of arranged marriages especially among the poor people. Nora is also a victim of this system. The money that she counts must have been left by the old man or it could be her own personal and secret savings. Her entire life in this closed system which is faulty and rotten depends upon that. When Michael comes, she puts it on the table. He is greedy for money, "a bit of farm and cows on it and sheep on the back hills." Gradually the dignity of the individual rises and that of the money dwindles. Nora gives up everything and runs out of the house with the tramp who cares little for the money. So when the play closes the picture left on the stage is very clear: two men quietly drinking and chatting behind three or four piles of money on the table.

The costume suggested by the situation, which, in turn, helps to identify the nature of the characters is also worthy of close study. The playwright opens the scene with an atmosphere of a wake. There is a dead body neatly covered in white clothes. Nora's dress could be ordinary, revealing her peasant and forlorn life. The tramp can wear torn and tattered clothes. Michael's must be a little colourful. The colour combinations and contrasts help us to follow the inner "structure of feelings" in different situations. Against this black and white, grey and torn, there is the kitchen fire ablaze which gives a radical change of visual patterns now and then. At the same time beyond the physical circumstance of the kitchen there is an unending

30 Raymond Williams, Drama from Ibsen to Brecht (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1968), p. 10.
expanse of green vastness into which Nora goes. With all this
Synge "appeals, like the great dramatists, to the histrionic
sensibility, i.e., our direct sense of the changing life of
the psyche." 31

Structurally The Shadow of the Glen is a one-act play.
The creative force of action once started does not stop but it
goes on developing, mustering more strength till it pushes Nora
out into the open wildness. In between the beginning and the
end we get some serious and well-defined dramatic situations,
impacting the total and compact dramatic experience of a one-
actor. The entrances and exits of characters are distinctly
planned to make the timing of dramatic units sharp. The tramp
once welcomed to the house does not leave it until his final
victorious exit with the lady of the house. Nora goes out and
comes back with Michael. Between these two moments the theme
develops through the intricate and conspiring conversations of
Dan Burke with the tramp. After Nora's entrance with Michael
the privacy of desires is gone and at every moment we see the
inner action pushing the plot. It is very interesting to note
that the tramp makes his exit with the rounding up of the action
in the given circumstances while in our imagination it continues.
For Dan Burke there is no particular entrance and exit in the
conventional dramatic sense. He has been lying down and at the
exact striking moment he pops up from behind the white clothes.

31 Francis Fergusson, The Idea of a Theatre (1949; rpt.
Michael's entrance is not very strong. He does not go out at all. The exit of the tramp with Nora can be considered to be one of the best in the whole of English speaking theatre.

Ibsen's Nora may be remembered in this context. The tramp's exit with Nora is startling as well as very much revealing. It concludes the plot in a way but the actual drama for Nora begins only in that moment.

The Shadow of the Glen, like other plays of J. M. Synge, is a serious work of stagecraft demanding different types of theatrical response from the audience. Even a modern and alien audience, unaware of the folklore and old-world customs, superstitions and beliefs which form a part of the plot, can enjoy it thoroughly, "for in it Synge had achieved his major aim of transmuting ancient folk beliefs into modern dramatic art." The play projects a distinct experiment in dramatic contrast and reversal suggesting a ritualistic atmosphere of the wake, involving a role-playing (of the dead) in wild and superb reality against a mystic environment calling for an ecstatic embrace of Nature. As Alan Price has aptly said, "these elements are central in each of his five other plays."


34 Alan Price, Synge and Anglo-Irish Drama, p. 126.