CHAPTER IV

The Well of the Saints: A Vision of the Environmental Theatre

In *The Shadow of the Glen* the basic problem of passage of time and its indelible effects left on human life triggered off by the loveless marriage between Nora and Dan Burke. Nora is depicted as developing a definite love for the world outside and contempt, and strong criticism against permanently anchored family life. She liberates herself, going out into the wide open in search of the music and movement of nature. *Riders to the Sea* presents a wider world than the small cottage of Maurya. There is also a serious attempt at bringing the small domestic world closer to the universal. *The Tinker's Wedding*, on the contrary, represents a break from this pattern. There is no settled family unit to be broken. The attempt is to form a nucleus of the family with great expectations. The characters are drawn on fresh nature with all its innocence, joviality, humour, sarcasm and pungent criticism. Their background is nature itself. The audience expect here the life and relations of the people in harmony with nature. By the time we come to *The Well of the Saints* confines of the external family relations in a small domestic circle are broken. Synge's awareness of folklore, its imaginative, poetic and dramatic qualities has become deeper. The two central characters in the play, being
blind, build up their dramatic identity by means of conversation and daydream rather than by action. Hence it is more psychological, expressing Synge's belief in individualism and its rhythmic and poetic expression in theatre. "It presents, instead of the ordinary dualism of truth and illusion, appearance and reality, a serio-comic view of the world which is deeply committed and yet austerely detached."¹ The play takes place in a lonely mountainous district in the east of Ireland, one or more centuries ago. The environment is not an embellishment externally juxtaposed. It is the very life of the play and its production demands an environmental setting and an audience of that mental make-up.

Here the lonely mountainous district in the east of Ireland may be the area in Wicklow. The setting is intrinsic to the character of the events. When the play opens we see the "roadside with big stones etc. on the right; low loose wall at back with gap near centre; at left, ruined doorway of church with bushes beside it" (Plays, I, p. 71). The main point of interest of the audience is emphasized here. The audience watch the bare stage with curiosity and the meaning becomes clear to them when "Martin Doul and Mary Doul grope in" (Plays, I, p. 71).

Martin Doul and Mary Doul sit and talk. The very idea of two characters entering and sitting, talking to each other

for a long time is not dramatic enough. Moreover, they are quite similar, both in quality and in general appearance. They are man and wife, not very much opposed to each other. No "drama" can emerge out of this situation.

This only serves to deceive the audience who are immediately alerted by the suggestion of a new world of imagination. They gradually come to understand two characters blind and beggarly, helpless and homeless finding comfort in mutual dependence and adoration. The first response of the audience to these characters is that of sympathy and a sort of compassion. They may also relish the relative joy enjoyed by these characters. The writer attracts the attention of the audience without much physical happening on the stage. Mary Doul's apprehensive reference to their passing the gap includes both the fear and joy of existence. "The length of that! Well, the sun's coming warm this day if it's late autumn itself" (Plays, I, p. 71). Thus besides the physical movements of blindness, there are references to the inner experience of blindness. Now the audience see something happening not on the stage but in the imaginary world created by the blind beggars. Here Synge displays his sense of stagecraft in depth. In the following events also what is more important is the drama that takes place in the inner world of the blind husband and wife. Their counterparts on stage live in a different reality. The conflict of the play issues out of the clash between these two worlds: the world of imagination of the
blind and the world of reality of the seeing. From the point
of view of the audience whom Synge always keeps in mind, this
clash or conflict has a value of irony.

Concept of Space-Actor-Audience

In this play every important aspect of stagecraft has
been effectively utilized by Synge. That pertains mainly to
the concept of space. The space-relationship is marvellous
in terms of the different areas of experience and points of
contact suggested. Mainly it is the physical proximity to, or
distance from other characters, objects, properties, etc.
The entire area of the stage, whether it is a small stage
of 30' x 20' or proportionately a bigger one, is taken care
of by a good dramatist. Its length, width and breadth and
also the vertical and horizontal area left ordinarily
unengaged in an enclosed proscenium stage is the space the
actors and audience can see when the action develops in
a play. Especially, in The Well of the Saints, they are
made aware of another level of space transcending the physical
barriers. This space the actors and audience can feel. A
playwright's mastery over stagecraft depends upon the deft
touches with which he can make them feel it. In the plays
of Sophocles, especially the Theban plays, this idea
of space changes and grows to the extent of placing the
individual--actor or the audience--against the unlimited space
of the cosmos. Some plays of Shakespeare, especially the four
great tragedies, provide this feeling of transcending spatial
limit. Synge \textit{in this play}. Here the idea of space definitely develops. It is not merely the acting area but much more than that. Within the first twenty lines of the play we are transported into a different world which is limitless. This is the anchor of space and Synge shows "the endless ways space can be transformed, articulated, animated."\(^2\)

Richard Schechner in \textit{Environmental Theatre}, elaborates the different creative techniques to be used for establishing a relationship between the actors and the audience and with the invisible cosmic energy:

> there are actual relationships between the body and spaces the body moves through . . . literally spheres of spaces, spaces within spaces, spaces which contain, or envelop, or relate, or touch all the areas where the audience is and/or the performers perform. All the spaces are actively involved in all the aspects of the performance.\(^3\)

Thus this idea of space gets the audience thoroughly involved in the action on the stage. In some environmental theatre productions in Europe and America, the audience also change their places and can move individually or collectively on to a different place in the auditorium. The auditorium itself may not be strictly divided into two distant places for performance and for audience. The audience may be very close, or distant as the case may be, with each other, depending upon the objective of the performance.


\(^3\) Ibid., p. 2.
In *The Well of the Saints*, Synge's experiment with the space relationship is expressive and unique. At the beginning of the play, the playwright clearly wants to leave the stage empty for some time. During this time it is revealed in all its silence with some stray objects on the roadside. The gap near the centre and a ruined door-way of the church with bushes beside it are suggestive signals pointing out a passage (road), with no beginning and end. The door-way of church (though ruined), could represent a settled source of inspiration on the way-side. The space is limited by the physical measurements of the stage but in a different sense unlimited by the gap at the back wall. From this point of empty space, Synge creates an active and involved relationship of various levels. The characters now appearing on the stage are not outwardly very contrasting. At the same time they seem to fill the emptiness of the stage and its space. Their appearance and demeanour take or push the audience's first impressions forward. Physically only in this deep and large space the presence of two characters makes a vivid image and in no time the audience feel themselves to be one with them. The positions of the two blind characters on the stage must also be properly balanced. If these dimly sighted figures walking hand-in-hand and in mutual dependence sit either on the extreme right or upstage left or if they unreasonably come down stage, it will not be impressive nor will it help us sustain the initial impressions to be connected and developed with the later ones. The playwright has, with a sure
sense of the stage, made them appear from one direction and pass over to the stones on right where they sit. It may not mean much for a literary appraisal but to a theatre artist, this is of immense importance. Martin Doul and Mary Doul grope in, thereby suggesting a search and they are made perfectly visible by being made to pass over to the stones on right and this single unit of silence, blindness and search is amply visualized in the first section of dialogue.

In Martin Doul's second sentence we understand their desire expressed to go south. When the play ends, Martin Doul tells the crowd, "we're going on, the two of us to the towns of the south, where the people will have kind voices maybe, and we won't know their bad looks or their villainy at all" (Plays, I, p. 149). The play is Martin's and Mary's groping towards the south and the unexpected achievements and frustrations in between the beginning and the end of their attempt to go south. Naturally it has a movement already envisaged. It is the movement towards better people with kind gestures and voices. What happens on the way is the drama that the audience see.

Synge's idea of space-actor-audience relationship manifests itself in the multiple levels of reality experienced and expounded by the different groups of characters. Some aspects of the reality are basically mundane and others sublime. Martin and Mary Doul themselves differ in their visions in minute details. Martin appears to be a poet when roused and Mary is complacent in the comfortable security offered by blindness
and the companionship of Martin. The saint holds a distinct vision of life, clean, pure, dignified, though dogmatic. The ideal of real experience cherished by the villagers including Timmy the smith and Molly Byrne is distinguished from other views of reality. They are the embodiment of force, hard work and material results, enchanting but with no imaginative fountain to sustain them. These different visions meet at cross purposes and clash with each other causing conflict at least to those whose existence will be void when the world of imagination or dream is snatched away.

The play has externally a very simple plot and direct movement. It goes straight on to denouement like a parable or a folk tale which Synge came across in a French farce. This story is reproduced by Greene and Stephens in their Biography of J. M. Synge:

A blind man agrees to carry a crippled man on his back so that each can compensate for the other. The arrangement is completely successful until they are both cured by passing a procession in which the remains of St. Martin are displayed. The blind man is delighted, but the cripple curses the saint for destroying an easy life on the back of his companion.  

The dramatization of this simple story takes on a wide variety of meanings, examining social strata, religion, economic superiority, and a human betrayal. It also pinpoints the


5 W. B. Yeats also used this story in The Cat and the Moon. Incidentally, it has also been dramatized by Dario Fo, the Italian playwright.
creative energy left in the lonely vagrants who are suppressed and prohibited from expressing themselves in an instinctive manner. These different threads of the story and their relative spatial association among the characters and with the audience are linked up. The spatial distinctions are correlated with the multiple realities in terms of audience recognition and response. The multiple levels of reality either experienced or imagined by the characters bring them, to that extent, closer to the audience. The playwright has discovered a proper language for this type of powerful communication. The theme may appear to be the same as those of his other plays. According to Alan Price it is the tension between dream and actuality; and *The Well of the Saints*, in combining four versions of this theme,

each different yet complementary, provides the fullest and most direct treatment of it. The theme is considered in relation to Mary Doul, to Martin Doul, to the villagers and to the saint; for all, whether they know it or not, have the same problem and need, in their varying ways, to construct something upon which to rejoice.  

The dramatic contrast is to be seen in the polarization of dream and actuality. This polarization springs from a basic view of life which reveals the perspective of the playwright. Synge has very clearly distinguished the individual characters, which dramatically and theatrically helps us to place them in relative spatial significance.

Contrast between characters can be asserted in vocal tone, pitch, and strength; in their appearance by stance, gesture and facial expression; in their costume and its cut and colour; in what they say and the style of their words; and in other less predictable ways, like the quality and presence of the actors.7

These are the distinctions delineated by the playwright in the text but on the stage what is seen by the audience is the creation of the director who is inspired by the signs, symbols and images of the textual expressions. continues contrasting the quality of the characters in relation to the space. "A powerful way of enforcing such a contrast lies in the management of the physical space separating them. The changing distance between players can with all immediacy point the distinctions which other details of characterization may define."8

Synge's sense of stagecraft provides distancing space profusely. Here the distance, as has already been pointed out, is not the physical one alone. The words of the saint in the third act are strewn with grace of Martin Doul who is physically quite close but mentally far away. The contradiction between blessings and their futility makes the whole dramatic action inescapably ironic. The audience who can see the spatial distinction and distance between the characters and then their closeness to the audience can easily appreciate and experience the dramatic expression.

8 Ibid.
Space and time in the play

The concept of space in theatre production is inextricably linked with the progress of time. That is to say, as the play progresses, the idea of space also changes. Coming back to the first question of Mary Doul in the play, "What place are we now, Martin Doul?" (Plays, I, p. 71) and its answer by Martin Doul, "passing the gap," the nucleus of time-space relationship can be discerned. Play production is conventionally deemed to be a spatio-temporal design. The play is produced for the audience who are a live group watching the development of an action taking place in front of them. "Here" and "Now" are the two unchangeable conditions of theatre. The rise and fall of the Douls and their friends or foes must happen 'here' and 'now' in front of the audience. No reporting or narration is required unless it is incidentally entwined. The space and time are referred to in the first piece of dialogue between Martin and Mary Doul as well as in the stage directions given in the beginning. The action takes place in front of a church. The reference to this space is associated with an idea of movement or progress or continuity by a reference to the road-side which, we are sure, is an image of onward movement and passage of time. The space in the play changes as the action develops. In the second act it is another part of the road near the forge of Timmy the smith. In the third act the locale is the same as in the first act with a slight change that the "gap in centre has been filled with briars, or branches of some sort" (Plays, I, p. 125). When the
play closes we find that the main characters walk to the south where as Timmy reports, "there's power of deep rivers with floods in them where you do have to be lepping the stones and you going to the south, so I'm thinking the two of them will be drowned together in a short while, surely" (Plays, I, p.151).

The suggestion of deep rivers emphasizes another space where the final action will take place or can even continue. The reference is to fluidity which changes and moves without being broken. The road and the deep rivers are two powerful images suggestive of a vast (long) and never ending expanse. Both these accept and embrace all. They can even bring about commendable changes in the lives of those who take to them. "It is, I think, something different from the combination, found from the Greeks to the Elizabethans, of dramatic poetry with an awareness and love of outdoor nature." Martin Doul and Mary Doul, like the tramp in The Shadow of the Glen or Christy Mahon in The Playboy of the Western World undergo tremendous changes. This change is an integral part of their movement and progress and it is caused by the indelible influence of time. The passage of time is dramatically mentioned by Synge himself. In the opening scene Mary Doul feels the warmth of the late autumn. She comments on it: "Well, the sun's coming warm this day if it's late autumn itself" (Plays, I, p. 71). In Act Three the playwright himself suggests the time. "It is an early spring day" (Plays, I, p.125).

The audience understand and enjoy the play generally as involved spectators. A vital fact in participation or involvement is the feeling that we, the audience, are in the same auditorium where the action takes place. The action may be on the proscenium stage or in the round or in different places of the auditorium with the audience seated at different points.

**Theatre as a digestive tract**

Anyhow the feeling of psychological oneness with the entire human race develops. In Act Three of the play Martin and Mary Doul seem to be afraid of the saint with his holy water to cure their blindness. Here is a definite shift of interest. The first incident of the saint and holy water appearing with all the blessings of heaven was jubilantly welcomed by the blind couple. But its result proved to be fatal. Sight meant starvation, suffering, jealousy, hatred, competition, violence, brutality and villainy. Now they don't want to be cured of their blindness. The audience at this stage feel impelled to sympathize with them because it appears that they have been undeservedly victimized under the pretext of holy water opening their eyes. Moreover, there is an element of empathy in the approach of the audience who have been prepared by the playwright to watch the whole incident on the stage with a sense of involvement. Unlike most of the plays of Synge's contemporaries, *The Well of the Saints* visualizes a very special kind of actor-audience relationship. This organic relationship
can be likened to a human body which holds together the
different parts which have definite entities. The actor-
audience relationship also suggests something very close to
this body. Donald M. Kaplan studied this idea to the extent
where one is made to logically believe that "all theatre,
architecture is an expression of infant body states."\(^{10}\)

According to Donald M. Kaplan "the proscenium perfected
form where audience in the digestive guts seated in the darkened
auditorium hungrily await the "food" chewed and fed from the
brilliantly illuminated stage (mouth)."\(^{11}\)

Knowing the structure and pattern of *The Well of
the Saints*, a serious student of theatre can extend the metaphor
of proscenium theatre as a body to a further idea of a vast
environmental theatre production. The play particularly demands
a production of that kind. Here the theatre must, as Kaplan
says, remind us of a dynamic condition. The dynamics of actor,
space, audience relationship suggested here is internal. That
is true of any theatre production where the dynamic condition
is the "digestive tract from mouth to stomach."\(^{12}\) Kaplan
elaborates the idea of the distinct parts of theatre organically
held together. According to him,

\(^{10}\) Donald M. Kaplan, "Theatre Architecture: A Derivation
of the Primal Cavity," *The Drama Review*, Vol. 12, No. 3,
pp. 105-16.

\(^{11}\) Ibid., p. 116.

\(^{12}\) Ibid.
as the theatre fills up and the performers prepare to go on, a voracity in the auditorium is about to be shaped and regulated from the stage by an active exercise of some kind of prescribed skill. At this point we can begin to answer the question of what a theatre does kinesthetically by observing that its geometrics and functions favour a juxtaposition of a visceral and executive experience.  

In a production of The Well of the Saints in theatre other than the proscenium the space dimension changes and the static audience have to be in tune with the progress of the action. This means movement on the part of the audience also. Naturally the dynamic condition of theatre assumes a literal significance.

The moving audience and their experience

The Well of the Saints has an actively moving group of villagers. This is a special feature of the play. In no other play of Synge's can we witness a big crowd moving in perfect rhythm. The saint comes with a crowd which moves on with him. And this crowd can be presented as a part of the audience or vice versa. So in an experimental production, it will add to the meaning and beauty of the work to have the audience also slightly moving in a pattern and system, standing up, changing their seats, going a little forward with the crowd led by the saint and coming back to occupy their seats watching the loneliness of the blind couple. If the "moving" concept of the audience is accepted, then naturally the architectural

pattern of proscenium also has to change because the audience are not permanently seated in the darkened auditorium.

Open wild nature is an actor recognized by the other human actors, "sometimes (as in The Well of the Saints) as a constant familiar companion, sometimes (as in The Shadow of the Glen and Riders to the Sea) as a presence or even an agent who forms their moods or draws down their falls."\(^{14}\) The audience of such a production will be looking at the whole surrounding. The vastness and expanse of the nature and sky themselves have a telling influence on their mind. They embrace the whole landscape around them. They accept the actions of the play in relation to the entire unit of cosmos they are in touch with. They can easily and unconsciously make comparisons of what they directly see with what they feel in harmony with nature. When Martin Doul and Mary Doul sit together and take delight in their strength and beauty talking of so many things of the past and their youth, the audience instinctively feel sympathy for them. At the same time they try to have a world view integrated into their understanding of the ironic situations of these poor beggars. When Mary Doul says, "the seeing is a queer lot, and you'd never know the thing they'd do" (Plays, I, p. 75), the audience come back to themselves because it is a direct reference to those who can see. During this time it is not perfect sympathy that is expected of the

audience. It is a different experience of coming out of the inner world of actions of the play. The audience may instinctively look at one another disapprovingly because no one wants to be described as deceitful in his face. They smile because they know that the blind accuse them as they themselves have a feeling of inferiority. This type of analytical approach to the happening on the stage is made possible because of their occasional escape from the interior motives and day-dreaming of the characters. This is an in-and-out experience which the audience are privileged to have. This is "a sometimes dizzyingly rapid alternation of empathy and distance."\(^\text{15}\)

The role-play also gives an in-and-out experience. Mary Doul and Bride bring the Saint's cloak and bell entrusted to them by the holy man himself. Since he has gone to say his prayers in the wood the girls play with his sacred objects. Bride gives Martin the saint's bell which, when rung, produces a "sweet beautiful sound." Molly at the same time unfolds the saint's cloak for Martin. She asks Martin: "let you stand up now, Martin Doul, till I put his big cloak on you, the way we'd see how you'd look, and you a saint of the Almighty God" (Plays, I, p. 85). This scene has a preparatory function in the play, "for Molly's character, her vulgarity and her vacant insensitivity, is deftly established. The orthodox Timmy is made uneasy by her irreverence as she tries the cloak on Martin."\(^\text{16}\)

\(^{15}\) Richard Schechner, Environmental Theatre, p. 18.

\(^{16}\) Nicholas Grene, Synge: A Critical Study of the Plays, p. 114.
This is a very striking scene in which elements of gravity, satire, farce and tragedy are deftly fused. The very picture of the ugly, dark, lean and weak beggar in the beautiful cloak of a saint strikes a contrasting picture. The "seeing lot" like Molly and Bride make use of the poor beggars as their puppets. It lends the situation a gruesome and grotesque image. From the point of view of Martin who is unaware of his own projection as a saint the situation is a little serious. It can assume a metaphysical meaning with the interrelation that the lowest and the humblest will one day be received by the Almighty. Here the cloak is a symbol of sacredness, purity, and austerity. In this First Act before the entry of the saint the cloak is an eloquent symbol of God and Light coming in search of the homeless beggars on the road. It is also to be noted that the young girls, "the cleanest holy people you'd see walking the world" (Plays, I, p. 83) are the ones who dress him up that way. Ironically enough, when the saint comes in the Third Act everything about him, the cloak and the bell, has a dictatorial tone and colour, maybe, like the imperial nations in a colony. The poor ones who do not welcome the saint and his followers are driven out of this village. "Go on from this," say the people who voice the desire of the saint. The men around the saint repeat, "go on now. Go on from this place" (Plays, I, p. 151).

Coming back to the saint's role-playing by Martin, the experience of the audience, as has already been explained, is
They become very much attached to the characters at one point and separated at a different point. This is also to link up the different sequences in space in association with the progression in time.

**Patterns of movement**

The play develops and progresses in definite patterns of movement. From a spectator's point of view watching the whole incident in an open environmental theatre against a natural setting, embellished by the bushes, trees, the blue sky, a river, or an ocean beyond, the play provides a vision of human destiny. The meaning communicated through action depends upon the circumstances and theatre environments. Man set against society and the world or even against the entire universe is the idea projected when the play is seen in an environmental production. Martin and Mary Doul have a contented life with no complaints or regrets till they happen to hear of the cure to be effected by the saint with his holy water from the well of the saints. All the imaginations, wishful thinking and dreamings of the blind couple till they hear there is someone coming on the road, form a finished sequence which is completed as a movement in space. Like the Greek watching dances in completed figures the modern audience can see *The Well of the Saints* in finished movements of destiny in space.

The second movement of that kind can be noticed from Timmy's reference to the saint to the moment preceding the saint's entry. In this movement the characters act out roles
different from the ones assigned to them. Molly Byrne and Bride bring on to the stage something (saint's cloak and bell) with which they are not generally associated. Martin Doul to be found in the saint's cloak is again another anomaly. It can be explained as an extended experience of their vision in the first movement. This second unit provides a mood of festival without breaking the illusion of the blind beggars. We, the audience, have spiritually moved forward along with the joy and jubilation of the characters. At the same time we are very well aware of the destiny of the leading characters. There is a ray of hope for the characters that they will be cured of their blindness and life will be different. What Molly Byrne and Bride have performed is a mock ceremony of sacerdotal seriousness. It is in effect a circular progress in time because the attributes are immediately taken away from Martin. "The cruelty of the basic joke is brought home to us," says Nicholas Grene, and "we move steadily away from the detachment of comedy towards an uncomfortable region where pain and suffering are no longer anaesthetised." 17 It is their destiny to be played with and to be trapped, maybe, temporarily. But they can wait for a different twist of destiny which might prove brighter.

In the third spatial movement in destiny Martin Doul and Mary Doul are cured of their blindness. But instead of

brightening their prospects the cure brings them agony, suffering, shame and jealousy. Synge has intended this scene to be "tragic" in the analytical plan of the play, and Nicholas Grene calls it "a peculiar form of tragedy. What we see on the stage is a psychological reaction which is like the reverse of Aristotelian Catharsis." This is quite unexpected and hence the temporal move now finished in a small circle determines the identity. They want to know their own persons in relation to others in their imagination. Martin Doul assuming himself to be fine is also in search of Mary Doul, the finest woman, the beautiful dark woman of Ballinatone. He desired: "It'd be a grand thing if we could see ourselves for one hour or a minute itself, the way we'd know surely we were the finest man, and finest woman of the seven countries of the east" (Plays, I, p. 116). When refused brutally and mercilessly by Molly, Martin Doul dejectedly recoils into a burning point of suffering. The audience are also elevated with Martin's progress and will be brought down with his downfall. But their decline at this stage is one of the most dramatic peaks in Synge's works.

From the point of view of literary quality, Martin's musical language has created a wonderful world. The language is potent and poetic to communicate a stage image of vibrant and illuminating dreams which are suddenly shattered. And this shattering is internal as well as external. Martin's face

shining with creative ideas, his hands and body stretching themselves and expanding with great expectations, his feet gradually advancing towards Molly in a rhythmic move—all shrink into themselves, feeling very small and dejected, recoiling into an insignificant point in the presence of the revengeful and jealous Mary Doul who, when approached by him for help and shelter, snatches her arm away and hits him with an empty sack across the face. With this his dejection, failure and fall are complete. Spatially, he is to move away from Molly and Mary with a helpless cry. At the same time the audience are given suggestions of sounds reverberating in the distant sky. Synge has artistically combined the ideas of sight and hearing with his rare sense of theatre. In this confused stage Martin is made to ask with a frantic movement "Is it the darkness of thunder is coming, Mary Doul?". (Plays, I, p. 119). Darkness is to be seen and experienced and thunder to be heard and felt.

In this context it is Martin's inner experience which the playwright translates into stage language. Martin feels that he is gradually losing his eyesight. The whole world seems to be enveloped in darkness. The golden light is vanishing.

The loss of sight is a complex dramatic image. The Biblical echo—'and your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams'—may be accidental, but the apocalyptic overtones of the passage are intentional.19

He thinks that it is his personal experience. That is why he asks Mary Doul, "Do you see me clearly with your eyes?" (Plays, I, p. 119). It is a moment of spiritual conflict. The "fine" man and wife desired to see each other. Their expectation came true and then their life became dark thereby finishing, from the point of view of stagecraft, a circular move in space suggesting a circular progression in time. This is a situation of great confusion and spiritual dilemma for Martin Doul to hear Molly Byrne call Timmy for timely help. The advent of the weighty, stout, middle-aged and vigorous figure of Timmy, the smith, itself suggests to the audience physically the emergence of a naturalistic, vulgar and dark force. This can be the darkness shattering the shining visions of Martin Doul about Molly Byrne. Along with this there are indications of Martin's eyesight gradually dimming. Hence, the visual stage pictures dramatically blend with the aural images suggested. Both these point to the inner and spiritual dilemma of light and beauty gone with the emergence of darkness and thunder. Synge has with an unusual sense of stage and audience-relationship brought out the circular progress of action in a meaningful sequence of space. The stage direction itself is significant. When Timmy appears in response to Molly's cry for help "Martin Doul recoils towards centre, with his hand to his eyes; Mary Doul is seen on left coming forward softly" (Plays, I, p. 119).

The spatial awareness of the playwright is to be particularly noticed in The Well of the Saints. Unlike other
plays of Synge it has a greater and subtler quality of painting, sculpture and music. These branches of fine arts are incorporated into the stage images, in so natural a way that their presence is felt in the spiritual enjoyment of the spectator, not obtrusively but in a subservient and subdued way. In the beginning of the play Martin Doul and his wife Mary, two old beggars, appear to be part of a beautiful painting for a short while, with its church-door and gap on the stone wall behind with some bushes on the road side. This picture has a three dimensional quality. The presence of the saint with a large crowd around and Martin and Mary Doul standing at a distance in respectful spatial poses, of course, is connected with a unifying idea. This is repeated till the end of the play to the extent "The heavens is closing, I'm thinking, with darkness and great trouble passing in the sky" (Plays, I, p. 119). As far as the audience are concerned the question remains to be answered: Which is heaven and which is light? Martin's eyesight and the related experiences of this worldly life have not proved worthy of his action or admiration. On the contrary, it was more suffocating and strenuous. It meant cruelty, hard labour, big competition and fatal jealousy. It was really darkness for Martin, which he expressed without mincing words. The answer may be found in his awakened and poetic interest in the romantic and charming appearance of Molly Byrne. She seems to present herself as his heaven and light. Martin has become very eloquent and explicit in lavishly showering upon her the
images of his divine praises. "And it is few sees the like of yourself (he bends over her), though it's shining you are, like a high lamp, would drag in the ships out of the sea" (Plays, I, p. 117). He goes on with high spirits, referring to Timmy:

What way would the like of him have fit eyes to look on yourself, when you rise up in the morning and come out of the little door you have above in the lane, the time it'd be a fine thing if a man would be seeing and losing his sight... (Plays, I, p. 117)

When Molly seems to be attracted by this, Martin becomes more enthusiastic:

Put down your can now, and come along with myself, for I am seeing you this day, seeing you, may be, the way no man has seen you in the world. (He takes her by the arm and tries to pull her away softly to the right.) Let you come on now, I’m saying, to the lands of Iveragh and the Reeks of Cork, where you won't set down the width of your two feet and not be crushing fine flowers and making sweet smells in the air... (Plays, I, p. 117)

As Nicholas Grene rightly sees, "The scene between Molly and Martin is more sexual than anything else in Synge."

This is the real heaven for Martin and not the one praised by saints in the scriptures. The spectator feels that the play is a series of lively pictures painted and strung together with a moving motive. Martin's recoiling towards the centre with his hand to his eyes and Mary seen on left coming forward softly supplies ample evidence of the sculptural conclusion of the unit.

The progress of the action is carried further from this moment of despondence. Martin Doul masters himself and clings on to the lingering imagination of beauty embodied in Molly. He is a poet whose faculties have now awakened. His eyes are hovering over the wonder, that is, Molly, like a great artist. His function is the awakening the mind's attention to the lethargy of custom, and directing it to the loveliness and the wonders of the world before us; an inexhaustible treasure, but for which, in consequent of the film of familiarity and selfish solicitude, we have eyes, yet see not, ears that hear not, and hearts that neither feel nor understand.21

Martin sees what other people seem to fail to appreciate. This nascent hope of reaching the stars is also broken when he is driven out of the forge by Timmy, thereby completing another circular movement in action.

**Encounter with Saint**

In the third act of the play the action progresses very fast with the entry of the saint. Here two direct and opposite forces are taking shape. Martin and Mary Doul on one side and the saint and the villagers on the other. Practically Martin is a lone fighter, because Mary Doul, his wife, does not express herself as independently and sharply as Martin who can take the initiative in critical situations. Towards the end of the play the dramatic force is released in direct and straight encounter.

with the saint. Here the order of attitudes and events is reversed, which is the expression of the pure dramatic. Formerly, the order was that the blind couple to be helped by the kind society led by the saint. The blind people also considered it a privilege to be blessed by the saint and cured of their blindness. But those who gave them light and sight appeared to be horrible monsters and fierce devils. Now they naturally oppose the saint and his group. The people point out Martin's mistake. This is almost an oppressive society "correcting" and dictating to an individual.

Martin for the first time in the play, emerges as a strong and definite character who can take decisions in spite of his physical blindness. He says to the saint: "We're not asking our sight, holy father . . ." (Plays, I, p. 139). The fight is deeper and internal. There are two forces equally powerful and one of them has to express itself more completely and convincingly. Martin Doul has to struggle more than the saint to make himself heard. He is in touch with his inner self and is drawing on the greatest energy possible from within. The saint wants him to "kneel down for I must be hastening with the marriage" (Plays, I, p. 143). "Martin is not of this persuasion; nor is Synge," who shows individuals asserting their right to be blind to the worldly realities.

Martin Doul does not succumb; he is still the master of the world of imagination. He becomes eloquent projecting his own inner vision to be challenged if possible by the superficial customs and rules of society:

Isn't it finer sights ourselves had a while since and we sitting dark smelling the sweet beautiful smells do be rising in the warm nights and hearing the swift flying things racing in the air (saint draws back from him), till we'd be looking up in our own minds into a grand sky, and seeing lakes, and broadening rivers, and hills are waiting for the spade and plough. (Plays, I, p. 141)

The society's concrete ideas and customs are here at loggerheads with Martin's visions which are changing qualitatively day by day. "It's songs he's making now, holy father" (Plays, I, p. 141). That means Martin is a poet. According to Patch, "It's mad he is." According to Molly, "it's not, but lazy he is, holy father and not wishing to work, for a while since he was all times longing and screening for the light of day" (Plays, I, p. 141).

It may be that the indolent nature and the attributes of a lover, lunatic, and poet are showered upon Martin by the group in a derisive sense. The irony of the situation is that these attributes are perfectly applicable to Martin. The real conflict that Martin undergoes is due to these divine felicities. The society is not sensible enough to understand a highly gifted and sensitive artist. Keats was perfectly right when he said:

Health and spirits can only belong unalloyed to the selfish man. The man who thinks much of his fellows can never be in spirits . . . lord, a man
should have the fine point of his soul taken off to become fit for this world. 23

Thus Martin is a misfit in an "orderly" society, the values and rules of which are conditioned and created by superior and selfish men of the world now rallying round the saint. Synge has presented the elements of conflict in so poetic and suggestive a way that it never appears to be ephemeral. In an ordinary dramatic conflict there is always a solution which can be sought out through either eternal or internal means. Here no solution is possible for the conflict. Alan Price says:

One of the great problems for the artist with this outlook is to secure and retain the incentives and attitudes making for a purposeful and not unhappy life, without blunting the fine edge, and without ignoring what he apprehends as actuality, intolerably harsh though he feels that actuality to be. And here, as the life and work of men such as Keats and Synge demonstrate, the imagination is of supreme value. 24

In the conflict between Martin's creative imagination and the practical wisdom of the world, the former succeeds. Martin proves himself to be a real and energetic force to be reckoned with. He becomes bold enough to strike the can off the saint's hand and send it rocketing across the stage. The holy water is thus splashed on the road and finally Martin Doul stands up triumphantly and declares his independence. "Go on


now, holy father, for if you are a fine saint itself, it is
more sense is in a blind man, and more power maybe than you're
thinking at all" (Plays, I, p. 149).

Martin is not afraid of the mob. He chooses his own
way:

We're going surely, for if it's a right some of you
have to be working and sweating the like of Timmy
the smith, and a right some of you have to be
fasting and praying and talking holy talk the like
of yourself, I am thinking it's a good right
ourselves have to be sitting blind, hearing a
soft wind turning round the little leaves of the
spring and feeling the sun, and we not tormenting
our souls with the sight of the grey days, and the
holy men, and the dirty feet is trampling the world.
(Plays, I, p. 149)

Martin, like an artist, tries to awaken the villagers into a
richer and fuller life. But "ironically enough, and in harmony
with the main theme of the play, that naked actuality is
intolerable, the villagers are the most blind, and the most
content."25

Thus at this point a movement is finished, not like the
earlier ones. Here Martin Doul has not come back to finish a
cyclic point in destiny. On the contrary, it is a sharp strong
and forward leaping movement, maybe, to end up in death in the
deep rivers beyond as envisaged by Timmy, or to land up in the
towns of the south where the Douls will meet kind people, as
is expected jubilantly by Martin himself.

25 Alan Price, Synge and Anglo-Irish Drama (London:
Two roads

The end of the play epitomises the total meaning and dramatic impact. Here the whole group of characters (actors) are divided into two separate entities. One is led by Martin. He has just one companion to go with him facing destiny. The acting area may be filled with performers, now to be divided into two equally powerful warring forces. Martin's group, as is very obvious, is numerically very small, but they carry away the prize of their effort and the sympathy of the spectators is also with them. This is not to mean that the other group, larger, stronger, and more powerful for anything worldly, led by the saint does not win the sympathy of the spectators. The character of the saint is depicted as infallible and as spotless as possible. In terms of movement in space, this unit of the play is particularly to be designed and choreographed. The entire space of the acting area is used for diverse and diagonal movements. Both groups move far out into the open beyond the visibility, finally leaving the entire stage empty as in the beginning.

The saint rings his bell saying, "and let the two of you come up now into the church, Molly Byrne and Timmy the smith, till I make your marriage and put my blessing on you all" (Plays, I, p. 151).

Naturally the two groups turn in two different directions: one supposedly to death and the other obviously to marriage and birth. The spatial association is established in relation to
these movements of spiritual and ritualistic dimension.

The spiritual and ritualistic depth can be traced to the very beginning of the play. The whole idea and meaning of *The Well of the Saints* actually revolves round the spiritual and the distorted traditional value of the theme. The saint curing the blind with holy water from the well of the saints is a befitting idea of ritualistic theatre. The source of the play also supports this argument. It is a French morality play of the medieval period (*Andriev De La Vigne, Moralite de l'aveugle et du boiteux* (1456)). Synge has taken this European form of folk art and tried to induce a native and creative energy into the ideas received. The folk and poetic tradition effectively executed in the theatre by Synge has a strong and prominent ritualistic apex. It can work very well in the modern theatre. Taking elements from all folk and native conventions and literary, lyrical, and Gaelic traditions Synge has created a new perspective.

The ritualistic content of the play rests mostly with the attitudes of the saint and Martin Doul. The saint is a symbol of the Saviour who had spent days of passion, suffered death and consequent resurrection. In him the saint carried this message. The holy water has some effect only when the saint applies it on the sick. His cloak, bell and the water can are the external paraphernalia for effective communication of the inner man. Martin Doul is on the other side, to be a witness to the will of God working through the saint. The
saint's spiritual duty of curing the blind is deep rooted in ritualistic and sacerdotal function. Martin Doul is equally roused spiritually and humbled himself to approach the saint for his sight. At the exhortations of the saint, Martin takes off his hat saying, "I am ready now, holy father" (Plays, I, p. 91). Since the saint and Martin are mentally prepared to give and accept sacrament the audience are spiritually awakened and the performance has their full participation. The participation or involvement is at two levels: the spiritual and the aesthetic. The spiritual participation is due to a peculiar phenomenon of the psychological condition of the audience. It is also due to a tacit agreement reached between the actors and the audience. The audience agree to attend and listen to the actions or their performance. The individual events of the play are comparatively insignificant. The personal quarrels between Martin and Mary Doul, the mutual dependence of Timmy and Molly Byrne etc. can be cited as examples. The events related to Martin's regaining of eyesight, his negation of the blessings of the saint in the third act and his encounter with the villagers etc. are social events. Naturally the playwright has evolved a definite form demanding audience participation:

Audience participation expands the field of what a performance is, because audience participation takes place precisely at the point where the performance breaks down and becomes a social event. In other words participation is incompatible with the idea of a self-contained autonomous beginning-middle-and-end artwork.26

The idea of participation of the audience is reiterated through the response of the group on the stage to what happens to Martin with the holy water sprinkled on him by the saint inside the church. Timmy, Bride and Molly are all watching the curing ceremony and making comments. Bride who is looking in at door from right cannot but comment, "look at the great trembling Martin has shaking him, and he on his knees" (Plays, I, p. 91).

Later she cries out "whisht whisht . . . I'm thinking, he's cured" (Plays, I, p. 93).

And then he hears Martin's words in great jubilation in the church, "Oh, glory be to God" (Plays, I, p. 93).

The space-movement relationship of the play is at bottom interlinked with the ritualistic progress. Once his sight is regained, Martin confronts a life quite contrary to his expectations. In the first instance, after having praised God for all the blessings and benediction, he comes out and touches Molly Byrne, the beauty of the group, taking her for his wife. He is laughed at and made fun of by all. And later he is made to work hard without being given proper food or wages or rest. The comforts of imagination and love are denied to him and he is shamed into a mean insignificant thing by Molly and Timmy in the presence of his wife. This hard experience of actuality changes him completely and the green memories of the fine things of the world are all gone. His experience and thinking become dry and sterile: this is a moment of action in progress from
the poetic imagination to the banality of mundane realities. This can be compared to a ritualistic movement from a lavishly enriched village of luxuriant vegetation to a heath, barren and banal.

Eternal pilgrimage of the blind

The next move is towards the source of all life—the rivers. Even the much feared drowning in the rivers is not a calamity for the poor blind couple. It may be far better than the cruelty of Timmy the smith and the villainy of Molly Byrne. The rivers need not mean death. They could actually take a very refreshing bath in the river and cross it for a new turn of life. They could sit quiet on the bank and ruminate on the waves of life preceding and following the present turbulent one. The water of the river flooding the banks, flowing endlessly and evoking all sensuous experiences of life, can mean the wholesomeness of life. In comparison with the "holy" water in the can held by the saint, the water of the river is life in all its depth and beauty. It is sight, light and love, refreshing and rekindling the spirit of the poor ones.

One is forced to think of the creative ingenuity and the practical stage sense of Synge who has made Martin strike the holy water-can from the saint's hand and send it rocketing across the road, and then finally approach the natural source of water, the deep rivers watering and washing the whole land and people on either sides with no kind of distinction. The
main point here is the wide range of space the audience are expected to be in touch with. The space is created here quite fluidly. It can change during the performance because the structure of the play encompasses the spatial and temporal movement presenting a finished sequence of action in a given unit—all controlled by a ritualistic vision of passion, death, and resurrection in varied styles and moods of "tragedy, comedy and lyricism combining to give us a play with all the light and shade of the human condition."\(^{27}\)

The play's progress and movement can be visualized by a discerning spectator at two levels. The first is that of the realistic pattern at which characters are seen involved in their struggle for existence. Timmy the smith, Molly, Bride, Martin, and Mary after regaining their sight and the villagers are drawn into the day-to-day events in general and their personal problems in particular. What they communicate at this level is prosaic, external, and ephemeral related to time present. The play's sustaining quality depends upon the essential moral issues of some of the characters. This is poetic, deeper and inner and related to time eternal. The spectator must be alert to this moral point. He must be able to distinguish these two structural lines of the play, which demands a sort of heightened awareness.

The deeper pattern of the play comes from the native, lyrical, meditative and philosophical ideas of the work and

the vision of the characters. It may be no accident that Mary Doul calls herself the wonder of the western world, for she is, in her struggle to assert her dignity and in her fantasies of pride, kin to the playboy of the western world who also had a vision of his dignity and found it conflicting with the actual. There at the deepest level what Martin says can be found not very much different from what the saint says. Both of them believe in the Almighty who blesses the world with beauty. Martin Doul, the blind beggar believes that the world as well as themselves, is kind and beautiful. The saint also projects the beauty or the divine quality of nature. He pities them who have to go on "not seeing sun or moon, or the holy priests itself praying to the lord" (Plays, I, p. 89). Martin Doul coming out of the church after recovering sight also praises God for giving him sight to see the beauty of the world. Both characters—the saint and Martin Doul—who lead the plot at some points appear to be transcending the ordinary traits of mortals and living in an eternal movement in time. This is due to the conception of the characters in touch with the mythical and archetypal awareness of the spectator. This awareness is deep-rooted in the parables, tales and primitive instincts which will speak for the holy, the strong and the good. There is an element of the divine working at this inner or deeper pattern.

The audience try to resolve the problems of the worldly characters in terms of an ideal spiritual design always pointed
out by the saint. Far from resolving the problems they find that they capsize in whirlpools. This is what is communicated in the inner pattern. The more they get involved in this pattern, the deeper they go down thinking that they will see another way of untangling the Gordian knot. As they go down they find life is expressed in spiritual terms which manifest themselves through powerful imagery and metaphors. This means that the audience and the actors are on the same line of communication. The spectators are gradually mesmerized into this inner experience.

Poetic fountain of the Environmental Theatre

In the case of Synge and the Irish theatre he had to struggle hard to make himself heard from this level of poetic depth because most of the theatre-goers were attuned to the conventional realistic "tricks" of the stage traditionally followed by the English in their superficial and prosaic presentation of life on the stage. Synge is poetic at heart even though his plays are not in verse. The language of these plays is condensed poetry distilled from the native peasant faith and life. What the saint, the villagers and the Douls say, expresses this poetic association of feeling which is spiritually felt by the audience when the inner or the second pattern of the play is revealed to them. Here movement also assumes a spiritual dimension which is beautiful and holy.

This double pattern is generally the life blood of poetic drama which will yield two-fold qualities: one is that of drama and the other is the mythical, archetypal and poetic
force which sustains the dramatic. All great dramatists in European and American theatre have been trying to bypass the limitations of the prosaic in theatre. Most of them who turned to the classical periods in Greece and England were naturally great poets in the theatre. The poetic fountain dried up since then.

Ibsen, Strindberg and Chekhov had recourse to symbolism, Pirandello explored the nature of theatrical reality, using shock-tactics to pierce the barrier between actors and audience postulated by naturalism; Giraudoux and Anouilh followed Cocteau in seeking to achieve a more universal and permanent significance by building upon ancient myths by creating their own quasi-mythical worlds; Synge distilled the power and glory of uncontaminated peasant speech.28

Even among these playwrights a very small number stands out. Theirs is poetic drama which is an extension of a deeper sensibility trying to combine space, movement and time.

Synge has been able to dovetail these two patterns into one because of the poetic language he has chosen. His language is sensuous and logical within the given circumstances of drama, psychological when required and instinctively spiritual at the same time, blocking the imperialistic intrusion of the religious domination in any guise. The language suits situations and characters and the theme and vision they communicate. The actors may find it difficult to pronounce without serious training. It has a musical quality which is to be digested by the actors.

Ann Saddlemyer quotes Synge's idea of the musical rendering in his plays; the concepts expressed in the 1909 Preface to Poems and Translations were formed even before he wrote his major plays:

I have often thought of a collection of pressed flowers, when listening to ordinary reading dealing with poetry. The flower is there but its perspective and perfume are lost . . . Sometimes in my MS I have marked all the intonations ff. rall. etc. but it has a certain affectation and what is worse would become mechanical with the reader . . . perhaps in a few years a perfected science will render the poet's voice again immortal. 29

As far as the actors of his troupes were concerned it was really difficult to learn by heart the distilled poetry of the peasants which sounded strange and ethereal. Willie Fay felt he "had what I call a balance of their own and went with a kind of lilt." 30

The dreams and the visions of the characters could not be expressed effectively in a language other than poetic. Especially in The Well of the Saints the blind couple and the saint have an inner harmony within themselves which requires a primitive mode of poetic expression. For instance, Martin's dream of Molly cannot be expressed in realistic and prosaic language. He says: "I'm thinking by the mercy of God it's few sees anything but them is blind for a space.  With excitement."


It's few sees the old women rotting for the grave" (Plays, I p. 117).

It is purely a metaphysical vision expressed through an imagery of involved love. The audience at this time enjoy the poetry and see the poetic visions and designs enacted in movement even though they feel that "the balance between the poetic drama of the interior and the overt realism of the characters and of the physical action, is easily upset."31

As was stated in the beginning, the audience is fully drawn into the onward movement of action by the encompassing spatial association. The Well of the Saints seen as a folk play demands an integration of poetic quality and rhythmic movement presenting a modern vision of the Environmental Theatre. The character of Martin is the pivotal point of a magnetic force of this poetic movement made possible by his invincible creative energy, dynamism and eclectic initiative. As he acts, the energy produced binds all the theatre elements together in action, movement, time and space. Alan Price's analysis is justified when he aptly points out:

The Well of the Saints, perhaps Synge's most profound and sombre work, is related closely to that kind of play--so far without a name--of which The Wild Duck and The Three Sisters are example: the kind that, barely tickled by the comic spirit and mainly unpurged by purely tragic exaltation, deals searchingly with serious issues, and, unblurred by morbidity, reflects, with some compassion, a melancholy vision of the human condition.31
